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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Bill Lair
Conducted by Steve Maxner
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Transcribed by Tammi Mikel Lyon

NOTE: Any text included in brackets [] is information that was added by the narrator after reviewing the original transcript. Therefore, this information is not included in the audio version of the interview.

1 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Lair on the 12th
2 of December. What were the first operations in Laos that you remember?

3 BL: Well, it would be hard to say. The very first thing we did when we went to
4 Laos, I think this would be worth saying, when the Kong Le coup occurred, I was still
5 with the PARU. In fact, the day that happened, word came out, I was flying one of the C-
6 47s and we were dropping two paratroop teams along the border in Thailand. But when I
7 flew up there, the radio operator always let me sit in his seat and listen to...he could get
8 the short wave. He had several radios, and on the short wave we listened to broadcasts
9 from the BBC. Then, that's where I heard that Kong Le had the coup in Laos and all that
10 stuff was going on, and I said to myself, "You know, if we're ever going to go into big
11 operations, this is it. This is the one we have to go on." So we finished our day and I had
12 him drop me in Bangkok. I went to the embassy and stayed and went there every day for
13 several days because at this point nobody knew what to do, right, so the embassy in
14 Bangkok was in close contact with the embassy in Vientiane and in contact with the
15 headquarters in Washington and there was all kinds of messages going back and forth.
16 Nobody knew exactly what to do. Vientiane said, "Don't do anything," because what
17 Kong Le said, he was a neutralist and he wanted to bring Souvanna Phouma back as
18 Prime Minister. Souvanna Phouma was in France. He had been Prime Minister before,
19 member of the royal family, been around, and everybody liked him. He was more of a

1 Frenchman than he was a Lao, really. In Bangkok, being close to the Thais, Sarit who
2 was actually related to Phoumi was the head of the group. He was in the government
3 when Kong Le took over. The government officials, most of them were in Luang
4 Prabang at a meeting and somehow Phoumi got word, because the others were clued into
5 Vientiane. He captured them right away. So, Phoumi over flew and went on to
6 Savannakhet and southern Laos remained loyal to him. He had about five battalions
7 down there in the South. So I thought, "This is our chance, we've got to get in there
8 somewhere," so I was up there listening to all this, and the first thing that happened,
9 several days went on, and the money for the Lao government was all in the banks in
10 Bangkok. So, the US decided, and the embassy in Vientiane agreed, that they should pay
11 those five battalions in the South. So, they said, "We have to get the money up there
12 somehow." I immediately said, "Here's your volunteer. Let me take the money," and
13 they said, "Okay, you can fly. You've got a small airplane in Vientiane." It was a helio
14 courier, I'd never even seen one before. Ron Suffin was the pilot. I went to the airport
15 and I had this real big load of money. The Lao kip, it took a lot of money from all of
16 that. So, we packed all that money in the back of the airplane. It was all behind the seat.
17 Everything else was packed full of money, and he and I sat on this seat. We got to
18 talking on the way up. He'd been up there before. I'd asked him what the airplane would
19 do and all this sort of thing and he told me, "You can land it so slow and anywhere you
20 can do this," and we were up in the clouds there and all of a sudden I said, "Hey Ron,
21 what the hell would you do if the engine quit right now?" and he just reached over and
22 turned off the engine and then we started going down real slow. He said, "You see how
23 slow we're going? I can always see before we hit. Even if it's a mountain, I can put this
24 in a tree and we'll survive," and all this. Anyway, we went on up there and we landed on
25 a soccer field right by the Army camp and the station had a guy down there, he was down
26 there, and he's kind of like a liaison with Phoumi and he had a radio operator with him,
27 so he was up in the air to headquarters, too. So, they immediately got the money and
28 they introduced me to Phoumi. I figured he'd be glad to get the money. So, then we got
29 to talking with Phoumi and I asked him, "What do you plan to do now?" and he said that
30 he was going to take his five battalions and he was going to retake Vientiane. I said, "I
31 work with this organization in Thailand and we have these teams, and each team has got

1 a radio operator and a good radio and a medical technician and all. If you could put a
2 team in each one of your battalions, I think it would be a lot of help.” His
3 communications were very poor, and we’d give him medical help. I didn’t talk about
4 tactical anything. Phoumi said, “Oh, that would be a good idea. I would like that.” I
5 flew back to Bangkok, and I went over and told the chief of station that we talked about it
6 and so they started bouncing things, they still bounced things back and forth of whether
7 they could do this or not. Then he went and talked to Sarit who was big chief of the
8 Army and everything. He was running Thailand. He raised it for me to go and talked to
9 Sarit. Of course Sarit was the guy who made the coup against power and police and all.
10 He didn’t like PARU, but me – and Pranet went with me - we went over to talk to him.
11 He had these four Army officers and he said, “Okay, we’re going to let you all go up and
12 talk to Phoumi again, these four Army officer, they’re going to be in charge,” and then
13 Pranet and I would go. We always had teams waiting at the airport in Hoi Anh. We had
14 a ready alert, so we could go anytime. Anyway, Pranet and I went up and we got there
15 and we met Phoumi, and Sarit told us he wanted to use Army teams, not police, so we
16 talked to Phoumi and Phoumi brought up the team idea himself out of what I had told
17 him before. So, the Army colonel said that he didn’t want to use those PARU people, he
18 wants to use Army people. Then, Phoumi said, “How long would it take you to get your
19 teams here?” and the colonel said, “About 30 days.” Phoumi said, “The war will be over
20 in 30 days. We can’t wait 30 days for anything,” so Phoumi asked Pranet, he said, “How
21 long will it take you to get your teams here?” and he said, “Sir, you let me go across the
22 river, I have a team right across the river here. I’ll send a message to Wa Hin and we can
23 pick them up at the airport at daylight in the morning. They can be here tomorrow.” He
24 turned to me and finally the colonel agreed. That’s how we got there, you see. The next
25 day we had them in there. And see, that was our nose under the tent, and then they went
26 ahead and a lot of things went on, they went ahead and took Vientiane. Then of course
27 our mission was to get in touch with Vang Pao, we knew that from the beginning, but it
28 took a while to work that out. I finally found that nobody, nobody seemed to know where
29 he was. The same pilot that flew me to Savannakhet the first time, he was flying out of
30 Luang Prabang and they had sent him to pick up some of VP’s family at a place called
31 Thai Tom, it was a little place, but they had knocked down a little helo strip in the rice

1 paddy. So, I immediately...I was out at the airport and a pilot told me, he had just come
2 in, and he told me, so I immediately went to the embassy and they had four H-34
3 helicopters that had just flown in and landed in Vientiane. Before that they had a
4 different kind of helicopter that wasn't much good, but these had just come in and these
5 pilots I'm sure had just come out of the Marines, but they stayed with Air America. They
6 were definitely somehow out of the Marines. So, I went to the embassy and said, "Could
7 I use one of those choppers to go and find VP? I know where he is," and they said,
8 "Okay." The first thing when I got there, the pilot said, "Jeez," he said, "I've never been
9 here before. I don't know nothing about this country. I have no maps. How can I fly up
10 there?" and I said, "Look, I know this country like the back of my hand," [laughing] "if I
11 had a map," and I said, "I'll sit right up here and I'll guide you right in there and it'll be
12 okay," so he finally agreed reluctantly to go. What I did was we flew right down the
13 river, the Mekong, and out there the Sanh River takes off and goes right to the village
14 where VP was supposed to be. So, I didn't tell him, I just said, "Just follow that river and
15 then turn and follow...you can't miss it. You're going to be there." It was already late
16 when we got off so by the time we got there it was getting dark. I saw this little H'mong
17 guy - I knew he was a H'mong because the way he was dressed - in the field right there
18 by us where they had made this place where the helio would land. But anyway, so I had
19 the chopper land there and I jumped out and got Pranet. I had him go with me with one
20 of the PARU teams and we ran over and talked to the H'mong guy and said, "Is Vang
21 Pao here?" and he said, "Oh yes, he's around here somewhere," but you couldn't see him
22 or anything, he was probably off in the village or something. The pilot was screaming to
23 take off, so I said to Pranet, I said, "Okay, we've got to get out of here with that chopper,
24 but are you willing to stay here with the team?" "Oh sure! I'm fine," and he didn't have
25 any idea where in the hell he was, and off we went! Of course Pranet sent me that
26 message the next morning saying, "This is the guy we've been looking for, come on back
27 whenever you can," and so I went right back and that's when he told me, "If you've got
28 the arms, we'll fight. If you give us the arms, we'll fight. Otherwise, we've got to leave
29 Laos. We can't live with the communists." So then I happened to go back and Fitzgerald
30 was there so I sold him on that, right. Okay, then we dropped those first 300 weapons
31 and I knew from our location that the enemy was right down there on the plain not very

1 far away, that they're going to come up there. They're going to know when you dropped
2 those and those three big airplanes come in and drop all that stuff. So, we got them all
3 trained and then they said, "Okay," they knew that they were coming up. So we
4 immediately went out with those three companies and set up an ambush and they came
5 up and they just, they got them all, I think everybody I saw coming up that hill. Some of
6 them probably I guess ran away but we hadn't moved anybody, nobody got killed. It was
7 a tremendous success, and it's exactly what you need on the first one. Man, they were
8 happy. I had the old village chief of that one village, that fat guy, he was so happy about
9 that, he was telling all these stories about how the bullets were flying all around this way
10 and he was jumping and doing this and I knew we were off to a good start here. Now
11 that was the first big operation, and I was on that. It was nothing, but basically for the
12 Americans and the Thais, we were training *them* to do the operations and we didn't
13 know...unless we were badly needed for some particular reason, we didn't actually go on
14 that combat. But, many times we were caught in the thing because we were just there.

15 SM: What were the rules about CIA personnel?

16 BL: They didn't put out really strongly, but they just said they didn't want us
17 getting captured. Everybody was deathly afraid of somebody getting captured because
18 what they would do with American involvement because at that time there was American
19 involvement, and we did a good job of keeping it extremely quiet because there were
20 very few Americans in it. Up country, none all the time really until we actually sent
21 some, a few, but we never had more than five or six, mostly by themselves in different
22 locations. That was the first major operation. Then we got into all sorts of...and we
23 would help plan that. We would help plan new CIA...another big operation is that they
24 came up and real early they said, "Alright," they had some kind of intercept stuff. They
25 believed a Vietnamese, a large Vietnamese unit was going to be moving into the Plain de
26 Jars area from North Vietnam and coming over on Route 7. So, they said, "What could
27 be done?" I suggested that we go in and crater that road, destroy it in a lot of places, and
28 this was going to be an exciting operation. We had to go into an area that we really
29 didn't have people in, so we had to put in a force to make sure we were alright. I thought
30 everything was alright there. Then we dropped most of them in, what they call these
31 cratering charges. It's a can about I'd say about that big around and it's got chromium

1 nitrate I think, it's a material that will move a lot of – if you put it in a confined area – it
2 will move a lot of stuff. That's what they're for is cratering. Then of course we had to
3 dig holes to get them in the ground and it's rock hard, very hard. So, it took some time.
4 We had all the PARUs in on that, too, we were all out there. We had a little shooting
5 here and there from this and that, running into small groups and so forth, and we stayed
6 after it long enough. It took several days to dig all those holes and everything. Then we
7 blew it up and moved out. It worked very good. We saw the first big column came in
8 and they got an aerial photo of it out of one of our airplanes that had a photo thing in it
9 and it showed the column had come up and stopped and the big craters are there and
10 there's a guy up there staring down! [laughing]

11 SM: How deep of a crater was it? How deep?

12 BL: No single one wasn't deep, but it was because what it had done was sort of
13 slid the road because it was cut into the side of the mountain.

14 SM: So it was a precipice now?

15 BL: Yeah, so you'd have to dig in again.

16 SM: Yeah, a lot more work.

17 BL: So it would take a long time and hardware.

18 SM: Were there any other techniques employed in that respect as far as ways
19 of...since the terrain was so mountainous, you'd be able to create a lot of choke points
20 very easily, and of course...

21 BL: Mines.

22 SM: Yeah, mines. Anything else that you're aware of? Any other techniques?

23 BL: No, that's about it.

24 SM: Okay.

25 BL: But, there was fighting going on everyday. This time we had more units out.
26 They had the radios, they'd already trained the radio operators, so the messages came in
27 everyday. There were little fights going on everywhere. It seemed, when you'd have a
28 big operation VP could go in and plan it, but in each area they all did their own. The
29 enemy, the bad guys got in their area, they'd shoot them up. I think sometimes they just
30 decided to go out and shoot them up for a while.

31 SM: Now were these other H'mong groups led by CIA personnel?

1 BL: Oh yeah, these were all VP's people but what I mean is everybody in there,
2 it wasn't like a well oiled machine and you pushed a button and everybody did it. I
3 mean, each group was kind of responsible for their area and if the enemy came in the
4 area, if they needed help, they'd ask and send other people in to help. We developed
5 these H'mong teams who would go all over and gather information, but at the same time
6 every once in a while they'd get in a little scrap here and there, too.

7 SM: Now are these the teams that were modeled on the PARU?

8 BL: Yeah, as far as going everywhere, having a radio, and all that kind of stuff,
9 yeah.

10 SM: Did any of the H'mong come to Thailand to get trained, in your training
11 facility?

12 BL: Oh yeah, we trained them, we even trained them in parachute jumping and
13 everything. I'll show you a picture, that's Wa Hin.

14 SM: Yes, the SGU.

15 BL: I don't know how many SGUs we trained, we trained several.

16 SM: These are the special guerilla units?

17 BL: Yeah, but then eventually we were able to open a place in Laos where we
18 could train them, too, but they liked to go to Wa Hin and it was good because we had it
19 completely controlled. They didn't go home at night and all that so you didn't have...you
20 could do a little better job there.

21 SM: How well did VP and Phoumi get along?

22 BL: Pretty good, because the reason VP got along, once we started arming the
23 Hmong he got the force. VP became very quickly a major player because he had a force,
24 and it was probably better than the regular Lao Army. Now, it was more confined to an
25 area, but him and Phoumi always got along; I don't think personal friends at all, but
26 politically. So, he got along pretty well with him, and once Phoumi needed him then he
27 began to get promoted and all sorts of things.

28 SM: And VP was loyal to Phoumi?

29 BL: Yeah, to an extent, you know. I think his options were always opened
30 because I think one thing he controlled his area, and he didn't care too much about what
31 area they controlled as long as they...but he knew that he had to be...I preached to him

1 constantly from the time I got there that we never wanted any kind of autonomy for the
2 H'mong, that they were Lao as far as we were concerned. They were fighting for Laos,
3 and he took that very much and he really set out. For example, on the first big New
4 Year's up there he invited the king to come and he came and it was a very good deal.
5 The king was extremely impressed. Like the radio operators, we trained the radio
6 operators. When I went to Laos, all the Laotian military radio operators sent all their
7 messages in French. They didn't know how to send Laotian in Morse Code. We trained,
8 we beat us in...in other words, because the PARU used Thai in the Morse Code so it was
9 very easy to use Lao. We put Lao into the Morse Code and those H'mong operators, they
10 were all sending the Lao language by Morse Code. When the king went into the radio
11 room and they showed him the messages he'd never seen it. He was absolutely
12 astounded and pleased that they were using the Lao language. He said it was great.
13 They'd just gotten rid of the French and it was a big point. He liked it, and VP really did
14 his best to get along with the king, and the king of Laos was a good guy. He wasn't
15 really a strong influence, but he didn't try to be. He was nobody's enemy. It's
16 unfortunate that the Vietnamese killed him. I think that was one of their big mistakes, I
17 mean, not the Vietnamese but the Pathet Lao, whoever it is.

18 SM: The Pathet Lao.

19 BL: The communist side. They know that now. I think they wish they had a
20 king back simply because it gives them some credibility with the people.

21 SM: It's a unifying force.

22 BL: Yeah, those kind of people, it was just like it was in Thailand. A king means
23 something. You've always had a king and all the other people are meaningless, and
24 especially if the king is the right kind of person. The king of Laos, he didn't do an awful
25 lot but he was a good guy so it was easy for people to like him.

26 SM: When VP would go out on major operations, how much guidance would you
27 give him or other people who worked for the CIA?

28 BL: Overall, whenever somebody went and we would be on the planning, and
29 say "This is what you're going to do," but once the operation really started running he
30 was basically running it, and you know because he knew his own people, what they
31 would do, better than we did. I think this is just like you've got in Afghanistan now and

1 it looks like to me we're using those guys to do a big part of the favor because even then
2 we don't know who the hell who is who! So, you've got to use them. There's many
3 cases you've got. Now let's say now over there, these guys have all been with the
4 Taliban so we should not treat them good with the Taliban gone because they were
5 certainly in, even though they weren't the foreign fighters, they were the Afghanistan
6 people. So, you don't know what kind of tribal loyalties and things that go in there that
7 got them into this. You're actually wrong just to say...not only that, you'll never make a
8 success out of it. The Afghans themselves know that these people who are with the
9 Taliban for some...they weren't really tied to them that close. They were with them
10 because of some tribal loyalty to this other tribe or this and that, so that's all you've got
11 in Afghanistan and all over. So, there's no reason why those guys can't come over and
12 be with you. You see what I'm trying to say?

13 SM: Yes sir. The Laotian equivalent, would that be what you were talking about
14 with regard to some of the superstitions and how he could manipulate them?

15 BL: In other words, in the Laotian, you take the H'mong for example, you had all
16 these different clans, and VP had to unite all these clans together and there was only one
17 real clan that worked with the communists. They weren't really communists. The reason
18 they had worked with the communists is because they were really...the guy who was the
19 leader of that clan was supposed to be the overall leader of the H'mong. That wasn't VP.
20 VP was more junior on the military side but at the top they had a guy named Tuby
21 Lyfoung. Tuby never did much towards where the war was concerned, but the other guy
22 was supposed to be the leader but Tuby got it. He was upset. That's why he joined the
23 communists. But, he wasn't really...to the communists, he was like a figurehead. They
24 just used him for what they wanted to use him, so there would be no reason why later that
25 clan couldn't move back and join with you because they weren't really loyal to the
26 communists. The reason they were over there was because of the...and the reason the
27 communists never really used them anyway. They just wanted them over there for
28 propaganda purposes. I'm sure there's a lot of that in a place like Afghanistan. Do you
29 see what I'm trying to say?

30 SM: Oh, yes sir. When you're talking about clans in Laos, do you mean like the
31 Rhade or are you talking about the different ethnic groups of the H'mong?

1 BL: No, these are mostly tied to family groups and they had the clans, and they
2 were still H'mong, but they dressed a little bit differently, particularly the women. You
3 could always tell all the clans by the...because they had what they called the Blue
4 H'mong, the White H'mong, the Striped H'mong, and there were two or three others, I
5 don't remember exactly what they were, and you could always tell by the way the women
6 dressed. But they were clans tied to certain families, and even today in the H'mong here
7 there's still a lot of them. If you look in one area, it would be mostly one clan that will be
8 there. That's all inter-family stuff, you see.

9 SM: You mention that dress had something to do with the distinguishing aspects
10 of it. Was that tied to the name as far as the blue, the red, the striped?

11 BL: I don't know what they called themselves. That's what we called them, what
12 the [?] called them.

13 SM: Oh, okay.

14 BL: Maybe that's what it was. The Blue H'mong, the women all wear a lot of
15 blue in the skirt or the pants, whatever they wear. The Stripped H'mong wear these little
16 short skirts and they're kind of embroidery type work all the stripes across this way. The
17 men are all pretty much the same.

18 SM: What was, as far as you witnessed, what was their social structure like?
19 Was it a highly striated culture; that is, a lot of different layers of where people fit in, or
20 was it either you were a member of the elite clans, the families that led the clans, or you
21 were a member of the lower families?

22 BL: I think it was just that family thing the way I could see it. So much of it was
23 tied...of course you had the clan and the village of course was the people in the same
24 clan, and they would live in a certain area. But you'd have...the structure was you had
25 the village chief and then above the village chief you had the guy who was the chief of a
26 number of the villages. They always used the word Kamnan, and that's the same word
27 they used in Thailand because they wanted to control the number of villages, and most of
28 that control came because they gave it to him, it wasn't a government thing. But then the
29 government took advantage of that structure and they made that, so they paid a minimum,
30 the minister of interior would pay a very minimum salary to even the village chief. It was
31 just a thing of him being part... because that was part of the government organization, the

1 village chief to the Kam Nan into the district, and the district was the first of them who
2 was a real government guy. But, they all paid them so were part of the structure, and of
3 course when we went in we organized among all of that structure that's what you had.
4 But, then we realized this wouldn't do the whole thing so then we started coming up with
5 the SGUs and all this stuff.

6 SM: How did they work, the special guerilla units?

7 BL: Well, what it was, what it basically was, the way it all came about is for most
8 of these people you trained them and they went back and they were defending their own
9 area and they would go and fight somewhere else for a few days but they didn't want to
10 stay much longer because they had their family, they had their fields, they had all that to
11 do. Basically they wanted to defend their area, right, so we needed the unit and they were
12 paid almost nothing. They made their own living all together. We needed units that you
13 could move from this if you had a big thing going over in this area and there was not
14 enough people there, you had to move units in to help, you needed units that were ready
15 to go anywhere, but if you were going to do that you had to pay them something because
16 they could no longer be a farmer. They had to be paid enough to take care of them and
17 their family, and that's where the SGU came from. We gave them more training and
18 everything else, but then they were, from the time of that war, then they were giving
19 100% working on that military stuff.

20 SM: Now the SGU training, was that the same as the PARU training as far as the
21 length of time, the emphasis?

22 BL: No, we catered it pretty much and we wrote the training programs as to what
23 we thought the H'mong needed. PARU was really good at that because we had done all
24 this training for all those years in Thailand, so we had gotten... McCorn was supreme
25 staff officer of the PARU and he's the one who wrote all these training plans and he was
26 really, really good at it. VP trusted him 100%, so VP had this staff, and VPs staff sat at
27 their desk and did absolutely nothing. The guy who ran that whole thing was McCorn.
28 But, VP trusted him completely and he was doing it for them. America's never realized
29 how much he was doing, McCorn, of helping VP plan all the operations. He was just a
30 good guy and he was very good at doing that, and he knew how to do it in such a way
31 that VP looked like...it looked like VP was still the guy that was doing everything.

1 That's one of the things they taught him. You don't ever want to do anything that makes
2 your local leader look bad, because you're going to lose his confidence and he'll be afraid
3 to let you do anything.

4 SM: How much experience had McCorn had before going to Laos?

5 BL: Oh, just all the things we did in Thailand, and he became the planning officer
6 for all the training in Thailand for the PARU.

7 SM: How long had he done that?

8 BL: He was one of the original 50 that we had from [?], McCorn was usually the
9 chief of training. In other words, he ran the training program. McCorn was the planner
10 and wrote up all the training plans. Then HR was the actual training officer who did this.

11 SM: So really from PARUs standpoint, he was there from the beginning of the
12 PARU?

13 BL: Oh yeah. 50 guys, the 50 original, that's the old corps, the first of the old
14 corps.

15 SM: The corps that you trained?

16 BL: The guy who wrote that letter, he's one of them. I wonder how many there
17 are left alive.

18 SM: Is McCorn still alive?

19 BL: No, McCorn's dead.

20 SM: What changed significantly or changed as all as far as the training between
21 the PARU training and the H'mong training in terms of tactics? Was it more defensive
22 oriented versus offensive oriented?

23 BL: It was always...there was a certain amount of defense but also he was very
24 strong on the offensive side because we always were that in PARU because we weren't
25 defending an area. You see, I think when you talk about guerilla warfare, if you talk
26 about defending, that's not guerilla warfare, and the H'mong were the best at guerilla
27 warfare. Now if we could have done exactly what we needed to do in Laos we would
28 have never defended anything. But, you know, you can't do that because you've always
29 got the families. The family's got to go somewhere. The way things were, it was very
30 hard for the family to stay completely undefended somewhere. So, all of the armed men,
31 the first thing they had to think about was how to defend their family. That's completely

1 against what you want to do tactically. You have to have meeting ground there
2 somewhere, there's no other way you can do it. Also, their whole motivation is their
3 family and the family welfare.

4 SM: It does sound similar to what some of the special forces teams were doing in
5 Vietnam or eventually did in Vietnam.

6 BL: Oh sure, absolutely, absolutely.

7 SM: And also, the RF/PF, the Regional Force/Popular Force concept for
8 Vietnam, where they trained people to...but that was more defensive oriented than what
9 you're talking about.

10 BL: I think the special forces in Vietnam learned a hell of a lot, so they changed a
11 lot of their not just thinking but acting. I'm sure now that special forces are a completely
12 different organization than they were before, and what I mean by that is that if you go
13 into an area, you don't go in there to be the leader. You go in there to help those leaders
14 do what you want them to do. I bet you that's what we're doing right now in
15 Afghanistan. I'd like to listen in. I'd like to go and talk to a lot of the special forces after
16 that's over because I think that's...I don't know. The Marines, I know the Marines, kind
17 of what they call the SEALs, they're trained in a lot of that kind of stuff. Of course a lot
18 of theirs is tied to ocean, but they also do a lot of land stuff. I believe that's my...

19 SM: The Force Recon in particular?

20 BL: Yeah.

21 SM: Now when you were in Laos, had you heard at all about the Marine program
22 called Combined Action Platoons? Did you hear about that, when they would put a
23 platoon in the vicinity of a village and they were a little more active in terms of defending
24 and working in the village area, but it was an attempt to get away from the large unit
25 operations that were standard in the military, and it was an attempt instead to get to a
26 smaller unit?

27 BL: Yeah, that's the way it should have been going, but I didn't really know
28 about that.

29 SM: It was not very popular with the chain of command as far as General
30 Westmoreland and some of the other commanders.

1 BL: But see, that's the trouble with Westmoreland and Momeyer in the Air
2 Force, they were still too tied...I think every one of the big things that happened in
3 Vietnam, they were still too tied to the old conventional forces. I was always saying, I
4 think conventional forces are fine if you've got the right target. If you're going into
5 Vietnam with a conventional force in that time frame, the place to put the conventional
6 force is on the beach up next to Hanoi and take Hanoi the first thing you do, because
7 that's the proper use of your military force. You use it somewhere else, they don't ever
8 see the enemy. There, we go take Hanoi. Now they would have ran away in the jungle
9 somewhere and that would have hurt the hell out of them. I think one of the reasons we
10 probably didn't do that was because we didn't know what the Chinese were doing. If we
11 knew what we know now, we knew damn well the Chinese wouldn't have done nothing.
12 The Chinese didn't like the Vietnamese all that well. They've fought a war with them
13 since then, since Vietnam.

14 SM: That raises a question about why we tried to keep things so secretive in
15 Laos. It was obvious with Air America, with CAT and then Air America, with the CIA
16 operations that were occurring in Thailand, then in Laos, it was obvious we had a
17 presence there, but why was it so important to keep that presence so secretive.

18 BL: All right, there's one factor here that I think was very important to that
19 effect. See, when we first went in there, because this was my idea of operation. What we
20 were supposed to be doing in Laos was we were supposed to go in there and run this
21 operation and be as invisible as possible, and that's why I wanted to use the PARU with
22 no Americans up country, because you're still invisible. Even the newspaper guys go up
23 there, they don't know nothing. But, the use of airplanes, you could use that. I think that
24 would have done it to Air America to a certain extent because long before that war ever
25 started they had Air America in those days like that flying all over. Now we could have,
26 see, but another thing I did was I started really talking to Air America, trying to get them
27 to hire Thai pilots so they could have airplanes flying up there with Thai pilots instead of
28 regular American, and then you could put any kind of marking on that airplane you
29 wanted. But, okay the idea then was to keep that secret because at the time we went in
30 there, we didn't have no idea in the long range what the US was going to do. They didn't
31 tell us. But, by using this system, putting the PARU in, if you decided all of a sudden

1 you wanted to just step out of Laos at that early point, there's no Americans up there. All
2 you've got to do is let the Thais go home. That's the end of it, you're out; just pick up
3 your bags and walk out the door and you're out of Laos.

4 SM: So secrecy as an exit strategy?

5 BL: Yeah, because nobody knew. I certainly didn't know how long we were
6 going to stay there, that we were going to carry this through to those lengths. When you
7 start something like we finally got into Vietnam, the act of getting out, it's like getting
8 into a fight with a tiger; pretty hard to get away from! You see what I'm getting at?

9 SM: Yes, sir.

10 BL: So, that was my idea, the use of PARU everything, the fact that we could go
11 in and do something and step away anytime we wanted to.

12 SM: How about after say...

13 BL: The Americans, once you got started, they just kept wanting you to do more
14 and do more and do more and more. So, pretty soon then the whole thing has changed.
15 Then, I think the secrecy part, we probably carried it further than it should have been.
16 But, I think another big thing here is that the State Department and the CIA both, they
17 wanted to keep the military out of Laos because they wanted to keep running it
18 themselves.

19 SM: So we maintain the illusion of secrecy, even though it's no longer a secret,
20 everybody knows we're doing it, at least the military – because we're trying to keep it
21 secret – we can still keep the military out.

22 BL: That's one of the constant fighting back and forth in Udorn between General
23 Westmoreland and Sutherland and all that stuff. I'm sure that was a lot of it. But, I think
24 it was still right in a lot of ways in the fact that we never put really ground forces in Laos.
25 But, you had little raids and stuff like that, which is what we should have done in
26 Vietnam. So, that part, because if the military had taken over Laos they would have
27 filled it up with ground forces, too. That would have been wrong.

28 SM: Now could you explain why you think that would have been wrong?

29 BL: The same reason; because I don't think you would ever come to a conclusion
30 that you ever defeated the enemy, as we didn't in Vietnam. We couldn't...I mean, the
31 ground force in Vietnam, they couldn't locate the targets, and it would have been the

1 same in Laos. In fact, a lot of the terrain was even more formidable. The Vietnamese
2 would have went in there strong.

3 SM: Do you think anything at all was effected by our lack of understanding or
4 misunderstanding of what the Chinese or the Soviets might do if we, for instance, had
5 declared that yeah, we are definitely in Laos and we are here. Do you think there was
6 concern over that response?

7 BL: I think once they got started on this tactic of keeping it secret, it's pretty hard
8 to change it. Hell, I didn't really want to change it myself because the military would
9 have just come in and taken the whole damn thing over. But to me, I was already not in
10 very good spirits because it came to the real reason that I left Laos is because they
11 seemed to me like they lost the real concept of guerilla warfare way back there
12 somewhere. We were trying to get the local Laotian forces really to fight as conventional
13 against the North Vietnamese infantry, which they did not have the capability of doing.
14 But they were much more effective fighting as your guerilla force. The Vietnamese, see,
15 the first days of Laos the North Vietnamese were in the same position that our troops
16 were in in South Vietnam. They were fighting as a conventional force against the
17 guerillas and then they were frustrated badly because they'd lose a lot of men, attack a
18 big place, capture that mountain top, and they'd all be gone. A week later they'd all be
19 back again.

20 SM: In terms of the operations in Laos, though, there seemed to be more of an
21 emphasis on, again, as you've already said, the units, the SGUs, would work outside their
22 villages but more importantly they did work in their villages. So, there was some
23 protection there for the local villages?

24 BL: See, what happened though is once you got into all of this stuff, right, let's
25 say wherever VP had his headquarters, the SGU people began to, if they're from some
26 big area, they began to move their families there. So the first thing you know you've got
27 a city where you're used to having jungle. So, it becomes a target itself because where
28 else, if they're going to be fighting on it, where are they going to put the family for some
29 sort of security. Then, it begins to change from guerilla warfare to conventional warfare
30 no matter what you do.

1 SM: Well, in Vietnam it became a war of attrition, and the focus became the
2 body counts. If we kill more of them than they kill of us, then eventually we're going to
3 win. So, we don't hold terrain, we don't protect villages, that is with our forces, we try to
4 develop ruff-puffs or whatever, and obviously the strategy was not as effective as we had
5 hoped. What was the corollary for Laos? What was the strategy? What was the bigger
6 picture as far as what we were going to accomplish with VP, his forces, besides just the
7 notion of guerilla war, or was that it? Was that supposed to be it?

8 BL: I think you still wanted to deny the North Vietnamese the control of the
9 country. I think they did that very well.

10 SM: Was that principally deny them access to the trail network?

11 BL: Setting up, that's right. Most of it, the Ho Chi Minh Trail was actually South
12 of that area. So, in the beginning that wasn't it. It was just to hold that area.

13 SM: So just to hold Laos, protect it?

14 BL: Yeah, to keep the North Vietnamese out. But then once you left the trail,
15 then of course then we concentrate on trying to interdict the trail. This was in a very back
16 area where there were very few people, very rough terrain, and you didn't have the
17 Hmong down there. We had people down there who did very well. You didn't have the
18 size of units to go out. I mean, that's where if you were going to use the American
19 conventional force you could put them in there and just drop that. But, there were
20 theories just saying put a force in and lock the whole area so there's no way for them to
21 go down.

22 SM: Do you think that might have worked?

23 BL: I don't know. They were pretty clever people.

24 SM: Well I guess the CIA case officers that evolved and came into your unit and
25 came into work with you in Laos, what would you say were some of the more important
26 characteristics they brought with them that made them successful young case officers
27 working in that environment?

28 BL: The single most important was their ability to get along with the other
29 people, get them to do what you wanted them to do. I think that's the secret of any CIA
30 case officer today because whoever they are, they deal with agents or whoever it is, it's
31 the same when you're trying to get and you've got control...you have different levels of

1 control you have over the agents and the other people. In a lot of cases we pay them,
2 which as I say, that's okay and sometimes you'll get people like that, but there are not too
3 many people that would risk their life for just money. So, I think we find a lot of agents
4 because they're motivated politically or some other way to get into it I see, some of the
5 most important we have. That guy, Pencosky, he walked in and recruited himself and
6 he's one of the most important we ever had. He had his own motivation built in. I guess
7 you read that book?

8 SM: That book by Oleg Penkosky?

9 BL: A lot of the really great agents have been like that.

10 SM: Did you find that the officers that came and worked in Laos, if they had
11 some military training that was good, or was it immaterial?

12 BL: It was good. It wasn't as necessary as their ability to...we could put that
13 training into them pretty quick, on their own, but it was still their ability to get along with
14 the people they had to work with, to get the most out of them. It was I think the most
15 important thing. Yeah, and military knowledge was good, but how did you get all that
16 military knowledge down to the locals? It was only a limited amount that you could get
17 down. I don't think any of our Lao operations suffered from the fact that they didn't
18 know how to do anything. I think that part we did very well with... But, a lot of it was
19 our abilities to...and I think we did a very good job of that, even in the South. They
20 planned Operation [?] but they got a lot out of a lot of people and ran some awfully good
21 operations, like the prison break. We never got any Americans out of it. I remember the
22 first prison break. One of the guys, he was an old PARU but he'd quit PARU long before
23 we went to Laos and went back to school and then went down. When the war in Laos
24 started he went up there and went to work for Air America as one of the...we called them
25 the Kickers, they worked on the plane. His plane was shot down in the South down there,
26 and he got out, he parachuted out with I think there were three Thais that parachuted out
27 of the plane and Americans. He said he ran up and tried to get the pilots to jump but they
28 wouldn't do it. They said, "Oh hell no, we're too old to be running around in the jungle.
29 We might as well end it," and they jumped out and they [?] and he spent over three years
30 in the prisons in Laos. They were terrible places. He escaped twice. First he was with
31 an American, an Air America guy who worked on the airplanes from Montana. What

1 was his name, I'm sure you've heard it. Anyway, he was a prisoner with him and they
2 had the Chinese radio operator on the airplane, worked for Air America. They had him
3 and they had two other Thais and the Americans. There was five of them. They put them
4 in a cage, a bamboo cage, and they stayed there forever. They were chained and
5 everything inside that. He said the food they gave them, they gave them one ball of
6 Lutinous rice and maybe a little something else once a day. He said they were always
7 hungry. He said, "We also ate everything that crawled through our cage!" [laughing] He
8 said, "We ate some awful stuff." He said after he'd been in there a long time like that, so
9 close together, that he got to the point where if any one of those guys opened their mouth
10 to say something, he knew exactly what was going to come out of that guy. There was
11 nothing new, because they were right there all the time. But, he said finally to overcome
12 that they started teaching...he had the Chinese guy, he had the two Thais and the
13 American, they all started teaching a language. They taught English, and Chinese, and
14 Thai. That took up a good time, every day they would teach. The guy who spoke it
15 would teach his language. Then finally they decided to try to escape. See, the first time
16 they escaped they were very careful not to kill any of the guards or anything like that
17 because they said Geneva Convention and all that stuff. They got away, and then he was
18 eventually...oh yeah, he went with the American, and they were eventually recaptured.
19 But the people who captured them never knew they'd been in prison before. See what I
20 mean? They were so separated, which was good; otherwise, they'd have probably shot
21 him. He said they hung him upside down for a couple of days until they just passed out.
22 Then the next time...they got back, and then the next time they escaped, they planned it.
23 These guards would go in and eat with themselves. They'd get pretty careless, and
24 they'd set their weapons down. He discovered a way that he made a little key out of a
25 little piece of metal where he could open his chains. He kept it a long time, you see, and
26 he decided where these guards would put their guns, he could get to where he could reach
27 the guns. They shot all the guards and got a way out of there. See, he finally got...he
28 almost got down to the Mekong River but he didn't quite make it and he finally got
29 captured again and went back to another prison. The American got...that was the big
30 thing, because there were two Americans in that second one. One of them was the Air
31 America guy and another guy was a US Navy pilot who was actually a German, and boy

1 they hated this German. He was so one-way about everything. But, they decided to
2 escape this time and he told them right away he was not going with anybody. Once they
3 got out, he was going to be by himself because every time he'd escaped before they got
4 into arguments about what to do and he thought that had led them to capture, so he was
5 going by himself. The Americans, the two Americans, said they would go together. He
6 said he stayed up on top of this hill and he watched the Americans and he said they'd all
7 agreed that , "We will not go through the villages or we'll get recaptured," but everybody
8 was starving to death. He said those two Americans decided to go to that village and try
9 to get food. They had guns, see, they got them from the guards. So, the Air America guy
10 could speak language pretty well by this time. So, that Navy guy stayed out and had the
11 guns. So, then the people came out of the village and then they started beating the hell
12 out of the Air America guy and the Navy guy just took off and left him. He should have
13 opened fire with his gun and helped the guy. Then, the Navy guy got away. I remember
14 this, eventually he was picked up. He got to a place and they spotted him on a rock in the
15 middle of a stream and the helicopters picked him up. He never said all of this stuff. He
16 told them all these other things he had done and he became a great hero. They
17 recommended him for the Navy Cross and all sorts of things. But, then finally he got out
18 of this prison. The last prison he was in there were no Americans or anything in there,
19 but one of our groups, [?] was the leader of that unit, they heard about this prison and
20 they raided it and got the people out so he got out at that time. After he told all of his
21 story about this Navy guy, the Navy stopped the order. They didn't give him that, and
22 there is still a big controversy today in the Navy about it because he said that that guy
23 actually came...after the guy finally got free, the German, he came to see him in Udorn
24 but he just never talked about any of that stuff. He wanted to know why he ran away and
25 didn't help the American, and of course he always denies that that happened. So, what
26 the real true story is, I don't really...it would make a hell of a good...I think if you talk to
27 [Pieca], he's still around. It would write an awfully good book.

28 SM: Why would the Air America pilot lie?

29 BL: The Navy pilot.

30 SM: Well, the Navy pilot lied because...well, what happened to the Air America
31 pilot?

1 BL: The Air America pilot got killed.

2 SM: He was killed there when they started beating him?

3 BL: Yeah, but the Navy guy took off. He had the gun.

4 SM: Right, he had the gun, he left, and he was going to get awards and
5 everything. So, it was actually the Thai...

6 BL: Who told the story.

7 SM: ...who told the story and prevented him from getting his awards.

8 BL: Now you could say, I'm sure the German guy probably says the Thai wasn't
9 right, I don't know. I think that's the same story he's always told and he loved the Air
10 America American but he detested the German because of those things. He said even in
11 prison, he always would eat more than his share of the food, he would do everything. He
12 was just...and he wasn't in there very long. If you are pinned up like that and you don't
13 get along, you already have enough hardship already. They had a piece of bamboo, and
14 big piece of bamboo about this long and that's where they had to go to the bathroom in
15 that piece of bamboo, once a day they took him out of the chain and took them out in the
16 woods and they could dump their bamboo thing. You just can't see how they could exist
17 under those conditions.

18 SM: Did you know any CIA personnel who had been captured?

19 BL: No. There was Air America. If you read, there's a book. He wrote a book,
20 Ernie Brace?

21 SM: Oh yes.

22 BL: Air America pilot.

23 SM: Code To Keep?

24 BL: Yeah, I knew him. That was a very good story when he was captured. That
25 was an operation that I was involved in. We'd sent a team up with an American advisor
26 to open an...this was in north of Luang Prabang, just off the Mekong, where the Mekong
27 River turns and goes east and west. That was an Army team, we didn't send PARU in.
28 An Army team came up and we sent them with one of our case officers and they had a
29 landing. They had a little helo strip there and all. Old Ernie Brace went in there and
30 worked with his...they were using him for some stuff and he came in with his porter and
31 worked out of there and at night he always flew back to Chiang Mai. Chiang Mai was

1 closer than Udorn and he lived in Chiang Mai anyway. So, then the next morning he
2 came back, he would come back. So he came in that morning and he just flew in. I think
3 he just came down that river, made a turn, and went right straight into that little strip. He
4 didn't fly over and look around. But, the enemy had taken it during the night and the
5 American escaped. The Thai team got away, but the enemy was there. So, nobody heard
6 from this plane so everybody was worried about it and was looking and finally somebody
7 over flew the area and they said, "Oh, we see the porter sitting on the strip there, he's
8 about 2/3 of the way down the strip sitting there askew." So then they started saying,
9 "What the hell is going to happen here?" and then they immediately suspected that
10 they...then by the time we had word that that team had ran away from there, and so we
11 knew the enemy had that thing, and Sutherland was beside himself. He didn't want the
12 American pilot captured because of the things he would say. He called me in Udorn and
13 he said, "I want you..." maybe he talked to the chief of station and the chief of station
14 called me. I think I first talked directly to the ambassador but they said that they wanted
15 me to go up there and I could have anything I wanted as far as assets were concerned, but
16 they wanted 100% to find out before dark whether that pilot had been captured or not.
17 That's a pretty tall order as far as I'm concerned, so I got old Bob Hammond with his
18 plane and we flew up and landed. We over flew it, I looked at it, and I told them to send
19 me...okay, I wanted to have a helicopter and I wanted an overhead airplane that we could
20 talk to. So, he sent a Caribou for overhead and they said, "You can have the Air America
21 flown T-28s." They flew as an Air America pilot flew little things. They sent them up
22 there. Oh, they said also there'd be a flight of jets up there overhead somewhere. So, I
23 flew over and I said, "It looks to me like the only thing we can do here is that we've got
24 to land there and let somebody go in and look in that porters," because you find if there's
25 blood in there and bullet holes and all this sort of thing, maybe there's a body in there.
26 We don't know what it is. I think that's the first thing, we've got to look in there.
27 Daychau [?] was with me. I didn't even think about that then, but then I'd asked for the
28 helicopter, the helicopter came in, the Caribou came over and he was flying overhead,
29 and he said, "Anytime you want it," in minutes they could have the Air America T-28s
30 there. So, I said, "Okay, what we're going to do here is I'm going to let those T-28s,
31 there's six of them, three on each side, and just strafe down the side of the airfield, one

1 right after another,” so you’ve got somebody there at every time. Then the helicopter
2 will go down between that and land by the porter and somebody would get out and look
3 in the porter. So I asked, “Daychau [?], are you willing to do that?” “Yes, no problem,
4 sir!” he said! Oh he was good. Then the pilot came up, the American, he’s still around, I
5 see him. He’s a good guy, too. When I told him what I wanted to do he said, “Why in
6 the hell do I always get this kind of stuff?” [laughing] He screamed and he cried, but he
7 did it. That’s the big thing, he did it. But, he didn’t like it at all because it sounded like
8 pretty hairy stuff. So, they did. They went in. Of course HR got out and looked in it and
9 he saw there were some bullet holes in there, but no blood. He didn’t see any blood. He
10 got back in the chopper and of course HR’s such a good guy in his own ingenuity, which
11 all the PARU guys had, because when he took out he saw a guy out in the good sized
12 field by himself, dressed in that black that most of the Lao peasantry wore. So, he told
13 the chopper, “Just land right near that guy,” and he ran over and got that guy into the
14 chopper. I don’t know if he talked him into it or drug him in and brought him out not too
15 far from that village, see, which in fact we got him out there and talked to him he had
16 seen the whole thing, so he told us, yeah, they shot at that airplane and stopped and they
17 captured everybody in the airplane and then they took the American and the Thais, two of
18 them were Thais that were going to work there or something and they headed North, to
19 North Vietnam with them.

20 SM: And these were North Vietnamese forces that attacked it?

21 BL: I’m sure they were because they took them right into North Vietnam. You
22 know, it took them several days to get up there and we were able...we had enough little
23 teams here and there that we were able to kind of follow where they were going, but you
24 couldn’t do a hell of a lot about it. But anyway, I found out that he had been captured.
25 They still kept reminding me that we had those jets up there, that we ought to do
26 something with them. So, I finally...the guy in the Caribou was directing me so I told
27 him, I said, “Okay, yeah,” before we started the T-28s, I said, “Okay, if you’ve got to use
28 those jets, let them drop their ordinance well off of the airfield on either side, well off,”
29 because it will maybe just scare the enemy and help keep their heads down. I knew he
30 never even saw the enemy. I could hear an explosion or something that went off. Then,
31 once it was all over and I was already back in Udorn I found out one of those jets had

1 somehow dropped all its ordinance on a village, a friendly village in a completely
2 different valley. Of course Sullivan blamed me for that. I didn't have nothing to do with
3 it, but anyway he immediately sent a message back to the director of the CIA asking him
4 to reprimand me for that, but he sent a message back to Sullivan and he said, "This sort of
5 thing happens in warfare, I'm not going to reprimand him."

6 SM: Good for him. Who was the director at that point, do you remember?

7 BL: I think it may have been McCone, but I was pleased!

8 SM: Yes, sir!

9 BL: [?]

10 SM: One of the major battles and operations that occurred fairly early on was the
11 Battle at Nam Bac and I was wondering if you could explain what that was, what the
12 purpose of the battle was, and what happened?

13 BL: Nam Bac was North and East of Luang Prabang and very near the North
14 Vietnamese border, way up there that had been taken by the North Vietnamese. The
15 local guys just pulled out or something. Anyway, they'd had it for a long time, the Lao
16 government presence up there. Then suddenly some Lao unit that was up in that area just
17 walked into that Nam Bac and there was really no military there. They took over the
18 place. There was an airfield there so there were discussions what to do about that
19 because this was pretty far north and next to North Vietnam. The embassy I think
20 decided that it would be a plus if the Lao could hold there, that they ought to back that.
21 So, they were going to recommend that the Lao put – I think the Lao were thinking about
22 doing it anyway – they were going to put several Laotian battalions, infantry battalions in
23 there to hold it. So, I was called over to Vientiane and the chief of station was Ted
24 Shackley at the time asked me what I thought about that, this operation. They thought it
25 would be a good thing if you could hold that, it would be a big plus for the Laos and the
26 US at home to show this and that. I said, "I don't believe we ought to do this operation
27 simply because it's close to the North Vietnamese border and you're going to be putting a
28 very inviting target where they can send in a regular North Vietnamese unit and really do
29 the most damage they've ever done to the Laotian Army because they've got them pinned
30 right there where they can do it." Okay, you can resupply, you can drop ammunition and
31 food in there, but I don't believe there's any general in the Lao Army who is capable of

1 running...they're capable of running the tactical end of it, the fighting part, to plan the
2 logistics. Even though you drop the stuff at the airfield, you've got to plan to get that
3 stuff in the heat of battle up to the troops on the front line and that'll break down and
4 eventually it will be lost. Since it's way up there, they'll be surrounded; they're going to
5 lose it all. He listened to me, and he didn't really comment on it. They went ahead with
6 the operation and I believe from everything I know that...and it was a country team thing,
7 it wasn't just Shackley, you know, it wasn't just the team. The ambassador and
8 everybody were hoping they would hold that, they could hold that. So, they did. I think
9 they put in six battalions; they didn't have very many battalions. They had about ten
10 maybe, ten or twelve. They put in six battalions and then of course it started and just like
11 that the North Vietnamese sure came in and started attacking. Then, I knew it wasn't any
12 good. Then they called again, they contacted me and asked me to go talk to Vang Pao to
13 see if he couldn't move a force to help relieve pressure on them. They were far away
14 from his operating area. It would be awfully hard to do. I talked to VP about it but I
15 more or less...he knew I didn't think much of it, and he said he just didn't believe they
16 could do that. It would be impossible to get anything over there that far to do that. So, it
17 went on and Nam Bac fell and they lost the whole six battalions, were gone. It was the
18 biggest loss of the Lao Army ever, and I was very upset about it. Pat was there, my
19 deputy, so I wrote this all up on a piece of paper and I put it in the safe, everything that
20 had happened, what I'd done, what I'd said, all this I put in the safe, and then when I got
21 ready to leave I took it out of the safe and burned it. It was no use, it wasn't no use to me
22 to incriminate. It just happened. But, to me it was a prime example of them not asking
23 the people who had the experience and all that and not taking the advice, because the
24 advice was there.

25 SM: Would these be considered Phoumi's forces?

26 BL: Yeah, they were the regular Lao Army.

27 SM: Regular Lao? Why do you think he supported it?

28 BL: I don't know all of that. I'm sure the Lao would like to have held it. It
29 would have looked good if they could have held it. But, I don't believe they'd have done
30 it without very strong American encouragement, I don't believe.

31 SM: Do you think he was hoping for additional American support?

1 BL: I don't know. I don't know about that.

2 SM: And when you talked to Vang Pao about him diverting some of his forces to
3 relieve pressure, did he indicate that he also thought that the whole notion was a bad idea
4 or just moving his forces?

5 BL: I'd talked to him about it in the beginning and he agreed with me that it
6 wasn't a good idea. But, when I talked to him about putting a force over there I didn't
7 make it very strong.

8 SM: And just out of curiosity, do you think that if you had tried to make it a
9 strong argument, he would have seen through it, and would that have jeopardized your
10 relationship?

11 BL: I don't think he could have done it anyway.

12 SM: But do you think, knowing that it was a bad idea, knowing that he knew it
13 was a bad idea, if you had made a stronger appeal to him, do you think that might have
14 jeopardized your relationship at all?

15 BL: Oh, I don't think it would have jeopardized our relationship. He might have
16 even tried. I don't think it would have jeopardized the relationship, no.

17 SM: And the reason why you drew up that memo to put in the safe, was that kind
18 of an extension of when the...

19 BL: When it happened you could say, "See, I told you so anyway."

20 SM: This operation happened after that operation where the Navy jet had
21 accidentally dropped ordinance on a friendly village?

22 BL: Yeah. No, wait a minute, did it or not? I'm not positive. May have,
23 probably did. I'm not positive about that.

24 SM: It's a very conventional move, trying to hold a piece of terrain.

25 BL: That was the Lao Army, too, doing it. But it was just like the French and a
26 lot of the things we did in the early days of Vietnam of making the big firebases and all
27 this sort of thing. It probably never was a good idea because you abandon everything
28 else to the other side. You could tell, like even Cambodia, I went to Cambodia after I
29 was back in the embassy in Vientiane, after the Lao thing, Cambodia. Lon Nol was still
30 hanging on there and we had a station there with Shackley. He had gotten some job in
31 Washington and he came out.... In talking to all those guys, I knew that Cambodia was

1 gone because they still had the forces holding major towns, but they had perimeters
2 around all of those towns; same with Phnom Penh. So, the countryside belonged to the
3 enemy. With that, you're going to lose in the long run.

4 SM: What do you think were the repercussions of that battle besides the loss of
5 those Lao battalions? What effect did it have on the country team, for instance?

6 BL: Well I don't think they denied any blame for it. I mean, they never said the
7 Lao did it because we wanted them to. I don't know exactly what took place between
8 them and the Lao but it didn't look characteristic of what the Lao would do to me.

9 SM: But did the country team become a little more cautious of that kind of a
10 conventional move after that defeat?

11 BL: I think so. But, I mean, they immediately made steps to say that they had
12 nothing to do with it.

13 SM: Plausible deniability.

14 BL: Right.

15 SM: Well thank you.

16 BL: It would have been very good to see all of the traffic that went back and forth
17 [?].

18 SM: You're talking about cable traffic?

19 BL: Yeah, the State Department as well as the...it was a long time ago and
20 there's no use for it. It would be interesting just to know what role the US Embassy
21 really played in that thing. But, of course, we're the ones that did all the airdrops and all
22 that. But, that's what really happened.

23 SM: So did Air America pilots make drops?

24 BL: Sure.

25 SM: A lot of drops to Nam Bac?

26 BL: Sure.

27 SM: How long did that last, do you know about how long the battle or the siege
28 lasted?

29 BL: I don't remember exactly but it was at least a month or so.

30 SM: And there just weren't any other Lao forces that could be used to reinforce
31 them?

1 BL: It was too far away from everything else. It wasn't a really big Army, either.

2 SM: Was there ever any talk about diverting some of the PARU, some of the
3 Thai forces?

4 BL: No, not that far. Later, before I left, I think I told you about that, they put in
5 two Thai battalions and they did what they did and then pulled them out. But then from
6 then on when they put the Thai forces to fight, they used what they called the Thai
7 Volunteers. But, what they were was they were the conscripts that had served in the Thai
8 Army already and they stay on the rolls as reserve, and so they recruited. They got them
9 to volunteer to go. I don't know exactly how they did that. It was all the Thais, and it
10 was all done through the Thais. The Thais paid them and did everything, but the US
11 government I'm sure reimbursed the Thais money. But, it gave a little more and they
12 used regular Thai Army officers. But, I think it gave them more plausible denial of any
13 direct Thai involvement.

14 SM: I guess what while we're talking about the Thai, one of the expressions used
15 to describe Thai forces serving in Laos is Thai mercenary. We talked about this before
16 and I was wondering if you could give your opinion of the use of that expression?

17 BL: Well I believe that with the PARU that's untrue because we didn't pay the
18 PARU but I don't think it was true of anybody, even with those Thais that went to fight
19 in what they call the Volunteer Force. I mean, hell, they weren't fighting for...they were
20 fighting for Thailand. They were doing that for Thailand. They were never mercenaries.
21 You get paid to have mercenaries. Mercenaries implies that you're getting paid pretty
22 well. They were cheap mercenaries, I'll tell you that!

23 SM: Were the Thais always there at the behest of their government?

24 BL: Yeah.

25 SM: Which also negates the idea of being a mercenary, because they were always
26 fighting for Thailand?

27 BL: Yeah. I think the whole Thai effort was for Thailand because their long-
28 range policy was to keep the war out of Thailand. They were certainly doing it, and I
29 think it was extremely successful because even when the war ended and you ended up
30 with all those refugees coming out of Laos and Cambodia and every place else just
31 flooding into Thailand, I mean, there's none of them ever had anything good to say about

1 communists. The Thai people got a message real early, and right after that the whole
2 Thai...there was a communist movement in Thailand and they just collapsed. They
3 surrendered. I don't think there's any question that the Thai involvement in Laos and
4 Vietnam was a part of that, so I think the Thais were extremely successful in their foreign
5 policy in those days.

6 SM: The people, the Thai people who did serve in Laos, to your knowledge were
7 any of them not either members of the police or members of the Thai military?

8 BL: There was actually a few Thais right along the river. You're talking about
9 the same amount of people who joined the Lao Army. There was quite a few people who
10 were actually born in Thailand who were in the Lao Army. But, the two sides of the
11 Mekong River, there were relatives and everything else across the river. If they can't get
12 a job in Thailand they go over and join the Army in Laos.

13 SM: Okay. So, just cross-border?

14 BL: The River, the Mekong River, the border, they all had all kinds of
15 intercourse across that river with each other; your relatives, they're related and family-
16 wise and everything else.

17 SM: The River, of course, is a political boundary. Did the people who lived on
18 the river, did they actually necessarily perceive themselves as being Thai or were they
19 just kind of there?

20 BL: I think the ones on the Thai side are Thai but they still get along well with
21 the people on the other side and in some cases they were. They were the same people,
22 because the Northeast Thai, the sort of dialect of the language, if you want to call it, is
23 just like Lao, the diet and everything. Most of the Northeast Thailand eats glutinous rice
24 like Laos. The Thai and the Lao are the same people, but the H'mong, the H'mong are
25 very different. I mean, the hill tribes are more originated more later out of China. But,
26 all of that, the Thai-Lao, that's all the same. The other groups, the other groups they had
27 there called the Black Thai in Vietnam, they had quite a few in Vietnam and all.

28 SM: I'm not familiar with that. They were Thais that were living in Vietnam,
29 they called them Black Thai?

30 BL: They were ethnic, Thais from out of...the Thai race originated in China.
31 They migrated south. The Black Thai is one of those, still part of that same...probably

1 when they were back there they were kind of tribal groups themselves and the Black Thai
2 was probably one. They probably had the Black Thai and the White Thai and this and
3 that.

4 SM: And the Black Thai migrated to Vietnam?

5 BL: Yeah, or at least they still called them Black Thai in Vietnam, I don't know
6 what...but see Thai is such an old monarchy, they became more unified long ago. For a
7 long time, if you go back in history, Laos was a part of...you had the King of Thailand,
8 he's the central king, but you had these other kings all over the place. You had two in
9 Laos that I know of, in the South and in the North, but they were both at different times
10 beholdng to the central king in Thailand. Like north Thailand, you've got the old royal
11 families that were from those. I know Prah, [Ching Mai], [Ching Rai], and there's
12 probably two or three others that were separate kingdoms but under the central king, and
13 every once in a while they'd have wars where they'd say, "We're not under you
14 anymore," and they'd come up and fight them and say, "You are!" Then, they fought
15 with the Vietnamese and that's why pretty universally the Vietnamese weren't very well
16 liked by the Lao and Thai, even though you ended up with a lot of Vietnamese. A lot of
17 Vietnamese was living in Thailand already when I went there because when the French
18 came back after World War II, a lot of the Vietnamese ran away and went to Thailand, to
19 northeast Thailand, and they were still Vietnamese, they weren't Thais, saying I was born
20 there. If you go up there and they had the Vietnamese restaurants and they were very
21 hard-working, industrious people, but the Viet Cong, while the French were still there
22 and everything, they began to make inroads into that population and by force get them
23 under their control. If you go into the Vietnamese house or a Vietnamese shop, if you
24 look way back in the back somewhere you'll see these little sign deals and you open it up
25 and there's Ho Chi Minh. The Thais know that, see. But, I think they always mistrusted
26 them and they weren't ever Thai citizens. Now finally in very recent years all the ones
27 that were born in Thailand they granted Thai citizenship because they don't ever want to
28 go back to Vietnam either because they're better off in Thailand.

29 SM: It's time to stop. Thank you, sir. This ends this for this evening.

30 BL: How about tomorrow?

1 SM: This is Steve Maxner continuing the interview with Mr. Bill Lair on the 13th
2 of December at approximately 9:45. We are in his home in Meridian, Texas. Sir, why
3 don't we go ahead and pick up a little bit more discussion on the buildup of the Lao
4 forces and what was called Operation Momentum, and I guess if you would just describe
5 how it came from this one small force of about 1,000 as you just said before I started
6 recording to about 35,000 total. What were the major challenges in building up that force
7 to that size?

8 BL: Well it happened but basically in a gradual way. In other words, when we
9 armed the first Thais, when we armed the first 300, what we did we trained that first 300
10 in one place and they were from pretty close around [Padong] where we were actually
11 doing the training. Okay, so as soon as we finished them and we were going on up to the
12 1,000, people would come from other areas around the PDJ, a little further away, but the
13 first couple of hundred came there and we trained them. But, then we'd say this area, like
14 [Phou Fao] was one of the first ones, that was on the North side of the PDJ and it was a
15 very high mountain, one of the highest mountains in Laos, but we sent a PARU team over
16 there and we did the same thing. We trained them there and then we went around to
17 different places around the PDJ, off the PDJ but around it where the first 1,000...but we
18 put the PARU teams out and did the training there. We didn't do all the training back at
19 the [Padong] area again. Then once you trained the 1,000 you still had others. Other
20 people were coming in constantly and wanting to be armed, the same security spread to
21 different places. I don't remember exactly. They suddenly said, "Well, you didn't go
22 above 1,000, you came up..." and we said we'd give them some justification why we
23 wanted to go into these other areas and it just started gradually increasing, and that's the
24 way we did it. We'd send a PARU team and they'd get the weapons and the training
25 would be in each of these places. So the effect was you had the communists held the PDJ
26 itself and all of a sudden I think before they even realized what happened we had...well, I
27 remember the first...it seemed like almost suddenly we had almost 12,000, I would say
28 within two or three months at the most. We had 12,000. So, we had all of the high
29 ground around the PDJ and I think this was probably a great shock to the communist side
30 to suddenly realize you had all that up there, and if they tried to go anywhere off of the
31 roads, the H'mong would start ambushing along the roads. If they ventured anywhere off

1 of there it was hostile country all of a sudden; I mean, just overnight, and that's what we
2 hoped to do because I realized that's what was happening is that the communist only held
3 the PDJ and they could travel on the roads, Route 7 and then there's a road going up to
4 Sam Neua and of course they had Sam Neua. They thought they had everything because
5 they thought the Lao had all retreated to Vientiane for that area, and all of a sudden they
6 didn't have very much. It was in the hands of these other people. You didn't have to
7 fight and take it; all you needed to do then was to make it awfully tough to...and they
8 didn't know how to regain control of the area because, okay, they might concentrate a
9 force and go up and attack one of these places and then the H'mong would run away but
10 they couldn't keep their force up there because it's too hard to supply and all that, so they
11 would pull back and maybe keep it very small. Of course the H'mong just came right
12 back. So, the countryside became ours and that's what we were thinking from the
13 beginning. That's what I was thinking from the beginning, the countryside is ours and
14 they've still got that...and then we can make it pretty tough for them even down there.

15 SM: Although the countryside was under the control of Vang Pao and his forces
16 and the Lao forces, when the North Vietnamese came into the PDJ, as the fighting went
17 back and forth, eventually it became kind of a see-saw war between who controlled the
18 PDJ and it would flip back and forth. What did you think about that aspect of the
19 fighting?

20 BL: Yeah, it was like see-saw and also controlling some of the other area. So,
21 what you fell into was the communists, one of the big advantages we had was that in fact
22 during the rainy season the communists couldn't hardly operate at all off of the areas that
23 they held like the PDJ and so forth because they couldn't resupply, they couldn't get stuff
24 over the roads, they couldn't do anything. But, we, with the air that we had, air support,
25 we could continue to operate in the rainy season with no problem. So, we would
26 generally mount our operations in the rainy season. Whatever the communists had taken
27 during the dry season, we would go push them back during the rainy season so they
28 couldn't get their supplies, so we would push it all back. So, it fell into that sort of a
29 thing. Then they would go in a big offensive when the dry season came along so it's kind
30 of a back and forth thing. But basically what I believed that our job was, we were still
31 maintaining control of much more of north Laos than they had. They could never

1 consolidate their control of north Laos. I think that's what they wanted to do, so then
2 they could just concentrate their effort on the Ho Chi Minh Trail because north Laos was
3 too close to the real heartland of Vietnam. What we did then was once we pretty well
4 had Xieng Quang Province covered and the H'mong began to come in from Sam Neua
5 Province, so we began to arm people in Sam Neua. It spread pretty much over both of
6 those provinces. Sam Neua is right up...you take the northeastern part of Sam Neua, it's
7 not that far from Hanoi. We were able to operate in Sam Neua, too, for the same reason
8 they couldn't get to us.

9 SM: As a part of the larger US strategy in Southeast Asia, how much do you
10 think the desire to keep the North Vietnamese on a defensive posture – that is, keeping
11 pressure on the PDJ, keeping pressure on Sam Neua, diverting some North Vietnamese
12 assets then from the Ho Chi Minh Trail and diverting them from South Vietnam – was
13 that part of the overall strategy, do you think?

14 BL: Yeah. They thought the more the North Vietnamese had to commit in Laos,
15 it would detract to a certain extent from what they were doing in the South. I think they
16 did have to commit a lot more troops in Laos than they thought they would have to.

17 SM: Do you have any idea about how many divisions they had to divert into
18 Laos?

19 BL: If you looked at the old intel, we had all kinds of figures, I'm not really sure
20 how much it was. It was the size of a mile, and a lot of material. I remember we
21 captured one...we found out this was a big headquarters in Sam Neua where they had
22 North Vietnamese and where they had supply and there was a big cave system and we
23 captured that and those caves were really packed with every kind of thing you could think
24 of; ammunition, food, everything. It was a real treasure trove. We got all kinds of
25 interesting...like diaries of North Vietnamese soldiers.

26 SM: Do you remember what time period that was?

27 BL: Geez... somewhere I've got a lot of pictures of that because I went up there
28 myself and went through the caves.... I can't remember... It would have been '65, mid
29 '66, somewhere right in there.

30 SM: Now when you captured a large cache of enemy supplies like that, would
31 you then distribute them to your forces? What would you do?

1 BL: We didn't really...some of it we took back to Vientiane and some of it we
2 just destroyed. We didn't really use it because we didn't have those kind of weapons. It
3 wouldn't have been...and we weren't hurting for the weapons side or ammunitions side,
4 so they wouldn't have been very useful. You could have used them for a while, but they
5 couldn't have resupplied with them and we didn't need to. We had everything. We had
6 enough of that sort of thing. Now the local people used all the food stuff because there
7 was a lot of foods in there, too.

8 SM: Was a lot of the stuff of Soviet origin?

9 BL: Yeah, the weapons are all Soviet.

10 SM: Do you remember Soviet air resupply missions from North Vietnamese
11 forces in Laos?

12 BL: No. I don't think they had...if there was any, it was very few. I don't think
13 the North Vietnamese ever depended on that. We never saw it. The North Vietnamese,
14 once in a great while you would see a North Vietnamese jet fighter, but only on the very
15 fringe way up in the Sam Neua area. They never really came into Laos at all because
16 they would be shot down pretty quickly.

17 SM: Did the Lao have an anti-air capability as far as .20 millimeter or anything
18 like that or .50 cal?

19 BL: Not much.

20 SM: Because there really wasn't that much air power?

21 BL: Didn't need it.

22 SM: Yes, sir.

23 BL: The Vietnamese had it. The North Vietnamese had plenty. We didn't really
24 need it. We had a few .50 caliber machine guns set up around the area where we could
25 have shot at airplanes. They never came. The only time I remember any enemy aircraft
26 coming in was when those An-2s tried to bomb in Sam Neua, that radar site at [Phu Ba
27 Ty]. That was just a stupid...it wasn't at all...that's always been a real puzzle as to why
28 they did that because they used An-2s, those single-engine biplane, but it has a door and
29 what they were dropping out of it was really big mortar shells.

30 SM: Improvised bombing.

1 BL: That's what you wondered how that happened. Was that just some
2 Vietnamese General cooked that up as his own idea or what, I always wondered. When I
3 got to thinking about it I finally decided that probably what happened was that the Pathet
4 Lao had a few pilots and I'm sure they'd trained them, and so they could have stuck...if
5 it's that kind, it's an An-2 and you do it like that, you could always say it was a Pathet
6 Lao, it wasn't the North Vietnamese. That would be within their capability.

7 SM: So their plausible deniability?

8 BL: Yeah. Oh yeah, they always were trying to say...they never admitted they
9 ever had anybody in Laos, but we antagonized over all that sort of thing. It didn't seem
10 to bother them no matter what you said you had there. They just said...they always
11 maintained they had nothing.

12 SM: Just like we did?

13 BL: Yeah!

14 SM: What was the nature of that site up at...you said it was [Phu Ba Ty]?

15 BL: Yeah.

16 SM: What was the nature of that site? Was it a site that saw into Vietnam, a
17 radar site?

18 BL: I don't know if you know that, but the way that occurred, see, the Air Force
19 came to me and asked me, they said first, "Is there some place up in North Laos that's
20 fairly close to North Vietnam?" First they wanted to put a [TACAN], that's a navigation
21 thing. They said, "It would be a great help for the Air Force planes going up to Hanoi
22 and all that," because they could use it. I'd been up there myself, see, so [Phu Ba Ty]
23 was this huge karst that stuck way, way up in the...it was almost sheer on every side.
24 There was one side where there was a trail that went up, a very steep trail you could walk
25 up there and I had been up there and we built a...there was some H'mong up there that
26 we supported. Now they mostly lived at the bottom, but they even had a few right up at
27 the top of that karst there's a little kind of a valley like deal where there is some soil in
28 there and there was some poppy fields in there and they said it grew really good opium
29 poppies there. So, we put in a helio strip up in that thing and it was the worst...it was
30 only used three or four times because I think very often it had a lot of crashes there where
31 they went in, but you could get helicopters in there. I went up there by helio. So, I told

1 them, "Yeah, we have a place up there where you could do that," but then I told them, I
2 said, "Once you put that in there, eventually the North Vietnamese are going to find out
3 you've got something important there and eventually they're going to know, and once
4 they know they'll come after it because it's not far." Anytime you make a good target
5 that close to North Vietnam, they're going to come after it. "But, you'll have plenty of
6 notice. It won't be a surprise. You'll see, they'll start building a road there and you'll see
7 them building a road. It'll come right on up there." So, they put it in there and I don't
8 know, it must have been something up there, I would think even a couple of years. But
9 see, then the [TACAN] for a while, which is strictly a navigation thing, but later they
10 wanted to put the radar up there because the sky spot radar, something like that where
11 they could actually use it to bomb on Hanoi so I told, "Sure, put it up there, but again,
12 they're going to come. When you know they're coming, then just move out. That's all
13 you've got to do," so they did. But then as time went on we saw them start building the
14 road and then I kept telling the Air Force, "It's time to get the hell out of there," and what
15 I suggested, "Why can't you just move it to another mountain? When they get the road
16 almost up there, just move the thing somewhere else!" "We've got to have it there."
17 They told me that it was saving the lives of at least three pilots a day. "So, we've got to
18 keep it there, because we know they're going to come." So, they knew but one of the
19 troubles with the Air Force, and all the military in Vietnam, was the fact that you keep
20 rotating. Okay, now the guys I originally talked to, they were already rotated and
21 somebody else was there. That's one of the disadvantages. When they put that radar up
22 there they had to put people there so they had these 16 technicians and they were sheep
23 dipped Air Force. They called them sheep dipped. In other words, they were supposed
24 to be civilians and they signed a contract with the company that made the equipment.
25 But they didn't tell their... I mean, their relatives all knew they were still in the Air Force,
26 and because of the rotation the Air Force was so stupid about it, when it finally was
27 overrun the Air Force still tried to stick to that story, even with the families, that these
28 guys weren't really in the Air Force. Well hell, they all knew they were in the Air Force!
29 That was very stupid on the part of the Air Force. The Air Force should have briefed
30 those families from the beginning and said, "If something happens, we'll be in touch with
31 you," and all this sort of thing and there would have been no question then. You could

1 have prevented all of that if they'd done it. But anyway, all of a sudden one day these
2 AN-2s appeared and the road was already being built but the H'mong were hanging on
3 real well and they were giving them hell down along the road and all that sort of thing.
4 So, they came in with these three AN-2s and started dropping and they dropped some of
5 the stuff in there. It didn't really do anything, but then that one helicopter pilot, a
6 helicopter was up there with a pilot and his mechanic, crew chief they called them, had an
7 M-16 and so they took off and shot down one of the AN-2s out of the door of the F-16
8 because they were slow airplanes and they just flew alongside and shot him down; the
9 only time in history that the helicopter has shot down another plane in combat I think
10 [laughs]!

11 SM: Did we recover or did the H'mong recover the aircraft and the dead pilot?

12 BL: Oh yeah. Another one of them crashed, too.

13 SM: Of the AN-2s? So were the documents and anything else...

14 BL: They were North Vietnamese, no question about that.

15 SM: What size of a H'mong contingent was protecting that outpost?

16 BL: At the bottom you had three or four H'mong companies, but they were at the
17 bottom strung out around there and the people who lived there. At the top we had...of
18 course you had a good sized PARU team and then you had a Thai Army group up there,
19 probably more than 12 or 15 people I would say. We always had some of our case
20 officers already up there. One guy came out, the guy I just showed you that's in Pakistan
21 right now, he was there. But see, these Air Force guys, they rotated pretty often, and this
22 guy said he talked to those Air Force guys and he said the trouble was they kind of
23 isolated themselves from the locals. They had their living set up and all that and they
24 made their own plans in case something happened. Off of the one lip of the thing we
25 went down and then there was kind of a cave going right under that, so they had it set up
26 where if they were attacked they were going to go down and get in that cave. But, if I
27 had been one of them, knowing everything I know, what I would always...anytime I was
28 up country I would have stayed with the locals because the locals always get away. Like
29 our state with the PARU, the PARU had been here a long time, they knew what the score
30 was, too. That's what that one guy was, he was down there with the PARU. But what
31 happened, I think the Vietnamese finally decided that they'd had this group of sappers

1 that they'd trained for a long time and they went in and climbed right up the face where
2 nobody expected anybody to come up. They came up and they were all of a sudden right
3 in that radar site before anybody knew they were there. That's how they got in. If I'd
4 have been those Air Force people, I wouldn't have been there. I would have been down
5 there with those locals somewhere.

6 SM: Were all the Air Force people killed?

7 BL: No, I think five of them got away and got down to where that guy was [with
8 the PARU] and they took them out. He stayed there. When it happened, he tried to get
9 up there and find out what was happening because they didn't know really what had
10 happened, and he got shot in the leg getting up there. But, they never left. They stayed
11 there, and VP was trying to get reinforcements. They could have held it if they'd wanted
12 to. When this happened, the embassy got so damn worried about Americans being
13 captured and all this kind of crap, they immediately sent out an order for every American
14 to get off of there and come out of there immediately. When all the Americans left, the
15 locals are going to leave too because they didn't know what's happening. If all the rats
16 are leaving the ship, you better get off!

17 SM: Yeah, and if the Americans are why you're there protecting it in the first
18 place, why stay when they leave. Now did they go and grab the site radar system, or did
19 they just let it get destroyed?

20 BL: I don't think...as soon as that was over, the sappers who weren't killed
21 disappeared. I don't know where the hell they went to. Then immediately after they got
22 the Americans out of there the Air Force came in and just bombed the hell out of it,
23 destroyed the whole thing.

24 SM: Were there other areas, other mountains similar to that in that locale that
25 could have served as an alternative?

26 BL: We could have found something. It might not have been quite as good as
27 that, but we could have found one.

28 SM: Now is this part of Commando Club, that set up?

29 BL: Yeah.

30 SM: What was the role of the H'mong force and the other Lao forces, VP, and
31 the Americans in Laos in support of that Commando Club?

1 BL: The only role at that moment was just to try to secure it, keep it...

2 SM: Defense?

3 BL: Defend it, and we told them from the beginning that the H'mong are not
4 good...the H'mong are guerillas. If you come to a set defense against North Vietnamese
5 infantry, they're not going to do very well. They can't hold it. The Air Force knew
6 everything. If you listen to what they said, if you were saving the lives of three pilots,
7 then the loss of those 16 people, or I guess it ended up as maybe 12 or something, but the
8 loss of those people was justifiable because if you'd have pulled off when we first told
9 them they ought to, there was another 60 days or so, three pilots a day, that would be a lot
10 of pilots if that's true.

11 SM: Right, if it's true. How many other Commando Club sites were there? Do
12 you remember?

13 BL: That's the only... Let's see, it seemed to me like they put one way down
14 South somewhere but we didn't really have much to do with it. It was in a very secure
15 area I think.

16 SM: And this also gets to the issue of rescue...

17 BL: It wasn't important like that one.

18 SM: Yeah, the one in the South wasn't as important as the other one. But, I
19 guess to the issue of recovery; did you play a role at all in assisting and contacting VP
20 and other Lao forces and using PARU to recover downed pilots, downed American pilots
21 in Laos?

22 BL: Oh yeah, we did that so many times from very early. I think the first one,
23 way before all this happened in the very early stages of the war there was a Navy plane
24 that went down up there right off the PDJ somewhere and we got that pilot out, H'mong
25 got him out. Oh yeah, we did that many times.

26 SM: If you were to put an estimate on how many downed American pilots you
27 guys pulled out, what would you say?

28 BL: I don't know.

29 SM: Ten, 20, 50, 100?

30 BL: I would guess maybe 30, but I don't know really for sure. You might be
31 looking at more than that. It could be more than that.

1 SM: That's a lot of pilots.

2 BL: As time went on and you had so many air assets in there it became a lot
3 easier because the thing is then before you could get the H'mong in there if you knew
4 that pilot was down you get in there, the first thing you'd get in there was with an aircraft.
5 So, when they got up you had these two Air America choppers that was on alert
6 constantly for that kind of pick up, and once they brought in the A-2, the Skyraider...

7 SM: Oh, the A-1 Skyraider.

8 BL: The Skyraider could stay on target so long, they had so much armor, that
9 they would get up there and escort the choppers. Now you could escort them with T-28s
10 but they couldn't stay on target that long. They didn't have that much armament. So a lot
11 of times they could pick up those pilots pretty darn quick before the H'mong would even
12 get there because they all had communications and stuff where they could spot them
13 electronically. So, they'd pick up a lot of pilots immediately with that because they
14 always had them on standby later when you had a lot more Air Force up there. Back
15 when you didn't have much, you didn't have all this capability, the H'mong played a big
16 role.

17 SM: Now when pilots were recovered, were they brought back to where you
18 were and I guess one of the major bases so they could be debriefed or anything like that?

19 BL: They brought them to us. By this time you had a buildup. You had a big Air
20 Force base right there in Udorn, so they were always brought right to the air base and we
21 lived... we were on the edge of the same place.

22 SM: At Udorn. But, were they ever brought through your office?

23 BL: No.

24 SM: Or questioned by any other CIA personnel? They just went straight to the
25 Air Force?

26 BL: Yeah.

27 SM: I wanted to take a step back for a moment and talk about another of the
28 major defenses that occurred and that was the defense of [Padong]. Is that pronounced
29 correctly?

30 BL: Yeah.

31 SM: That occurred in May of '61?

1 BL: Yeah.

2 SM: It's an interesting scenario because of not just what happened in Laos but
3 the effects of other things going on in the world and their effects on what happened in
4 Laos, in particular the Bay of Pigs. I was curious if you would talk about how did the
5 Bay of Pigs failure affect what was going on in Laos and I guess the way people looked
6 at the United States?

7 BL: Washington, I mean, I didn't personally notice any effect at all as far as the
8 Bay of Pigs is concerned. As far as [Padong], that was all so damn stupid because in the
9 very beginning I always tried to indoctrinate VP to say we don't try to hold anything, just
10 like I tried all along to get him...as soon as [Padong] was being attacked heavily, just
11 leave! We just go somewhere else. He'd say, "No, it's a symbol. If we lose this, we've
12 lost the whole war. We can't afford to lose it," which I knew was a lot of crap, but that's
13 what they thought. I think that kind of built up into Washington as saying, "Oh yeah, you
14 can't afford to lose [Padong]." We ought to have just moved. Then what happened, we
15 finally lost it, right, moved to Long Tieng, we already had Long Tieng, and it was already
16 a place we could have just moved to without being attacked, you know what I mean? I
17 mean, move there and not a stitch was dropped, nothing happened in Laos, I mean. Our
18 operation went right on just like it always went. I mean, losing [Padong] was no great
19 loss, really. But, I think built up in the minds of Washington, that was a great loss. It
20 should never have been. But, that's the beginning of what probably the biggest problem
21 of this whole thing was the fact that VP always, he set up his headquarters and family
22 would gather and become elaborate, he becomes a target for the enemy, and you don't
23 want to move, you know what I mean, there's resistance to move. It takes away one of
24 your best capabilities of being able to fight and run away and fight again another day.

25 SM: Yes, sir. The effects...

26 BL: He could have done it.

27 SM: He could have left [Padong] and it wouldn't have...

28 BL: He did, he left Padong and nothing really happened.

29 SM: Right. Who helped with the evacuation of Padong to...you said they went
30 to Long Tieng, is that right?

1 BL: Oh, it came pretty quick. They didn't do a lot of evacuation by aircraft or
2 anything, they just walked.

3 SM: Yeah, but Americans were on the ground helping with that.

4 BL: They walked, too. Tony walked out of there.

5 SM: Tony Poe?

6 BL: In fact, he finally got wounded walking out of there because he did
7 something foolish. But yeah, he walked, and carried some little kid. Tony was actually
8 in many ways a very good man, but he was just...I mean, what really got to him is he just
9 became an alcoholic, but he was always a little crazy anyway. He's like one of those
10 guys, I knew him already, I worked with him at times. He was gung-ho. He never
11 stopped being a Marine. He was a Marine in World War II, as a young...he's my age,
12 exactly my age, and he always thought that's the only way, all the troops should look like
13 Marines, and he couldn't make H'mong look like Marines no matter what the hell you
14 did! But, he was a good instructor in a lot of ways and if he wouldn't have got off...he
15 was against drinking. He frowned on the guys who drank too much before that ever
16 started. But in Laos, he became an alcoholic, there's no question about it. A lot of the
17 H'mong liked him even though him and VP never got along. The ordinary grunt, a lot of
18 them liked him pretty well and the pilots all loved Tony Poe because he did all these
19 damn bizarre things. They all liked him. But, he basically...if you really boil it down,
20 Tony became a real problem. All right, what should have happened, if it happened to
21 anybody else I would guess we would have shipped him home, but we didn't because we
22 just hated to do it. Just like my case, I knew if you shipped Tony home he wouldn't last
23 five minutes in the hallways back there. He'd be out of the Agency. But, within the
24 Agency you had a lot of those guys who admired him because they never were close to it,
25 see, and he had done some good things. The big wheels at the Agency all knew exactly
26 what was happening, too, and they didn't say a damn word. So, it was pretty hard to do.
27 So what we did was we just moved him further and further away to keep him out of...so
28 we sent him up to the real northwest up there, way up in that area, and it was so far
29 way... an area that nobody was paying any attention to. We were just, get him a job, get
30 him out of the way, and everything went alright up there until he...I'd already left and
31 they had a visit from the ambassador and Tony made a real ass of himself and the

1 ambassador said, "Get him the hell out of here," so they moved him to Thailand and into
2 the training base we had in Thailand, [?], and he stayed there and they retired him and he
3 went to Udorn and stayed there for the whole time. He finally came back to the States.
4 He's living in California now; he's in very bad health. I don't see how in the world he's
5 ever still alive. When I go up there I always go see Tony because as I say, I like Tony.
6 He did some good things but it's just one of those...I've always wondered. See, what
7 happened is once he got up there in the evening, they'd all worked like hell all day, and
8 the only Americans up there were him and Vin Lawrence but it started even before that.
9 Tony was always the up country guy. He'd work hard all day but in the evening he'd
10 always have a few drinks. Then Tony would start entertaining. He was a smart guy and
11 he knew all kinds of poetry and stuff like this and he'd start performing and everybody
12 would cheer wildly, and he loved it. He just started doing more and more and then all of
13 a sudden he's an alcoholic. He was very entertaining. It's a shame in a lot of ways, but
14 anyway.

15 SM: What did you think about some of his combat actions? He was a very active
16 person in the field.

17 BL: It was all against the rules and no reason to do it. He didn't really I think
18 add to the operation that much, but of course the pilots all liked that too. Here's this very
19 gutty Marine...

20 SM: Do you think it was necessary or do you think it helped at all in the
21 perception and some of the H'mong and other Lao that at least the Americans are willing
22 to fight, too? Americans aren't just sitting back.

23 BL: The Americans got into it on quite a few occasions. No, the H'mong never
24 seemed to think the Americans ought to go into battle. I never heard that anytime and
25 I've never heard it since then when they talked about it. They all know Tony was a big
26 problem.

27 SM: There are some other colorful Americans, or....

28 BL: Tony married one of the H'mong girls. I'll never forget when that happened.
29 A lot of the other Americans were all upset because Tony was marrying down and all that
30 sort of thing and they didn't know Tony as well as I did. It was the girl that was
31 marrying down, not Tony [laughs]! I think nobody else could have gotten along with him

1 at all because she was a tough cookie. She'd been married before and she shot her first
2 husband in the leg when he got out of line. You'd never dream it to look at her. She's a
3 pretty gal, and then he had two daughters.

4 SM: How did the agency look at that?

5 BL: He never said anything about it.

6 SM: To them?

7 BL: No.

8 SM: He just did it? He just got married?

9 BL: He never said anything formal to anybody, he just went ahead and did it.
10 They never did say anything. That's what I'm saying, everybody was involved in the
11 Tony affair!

12 SM: Some other colorful Americans, or pseudo-Americans and I say pseudo
13 because I think it's hard to say that Bill Young, although of American ancestry, he was
14 born and raised in that.

15 BL: Oh I knew Bill. I first met Bill when he was an 18 year old boy in Ching
16 Mai. I met his mother and father. I was up there with the PARU guys way back. This
17 was the first operation I took this first PARU company on, we needed an operation so I
18 talked to Sinay, he was the battalion commander, but he said, "Why don't we go to Ching
19 Mai and operate against the opium smugglers?" The US didn't have no interest in the
20 narcotics, whatever, but they didn't object to us going up there because I thought it would
21 be good experience for this company. We hadn't taken them into any kind of an action. I
22 thought, because there were all kinds of rumors about all the various generals were
23 involved in it and this sort of thing and so I didn't think General Pao would let us go.
24 But, he agreed to go so we took these two platoons and went up. It was a good
25 experience. I loved it. We didn't have any camp or anything, we went right to Ching
26 Mai, so we slept in the Buddhist temple and we stayed there for about three months, a
27 good long time in that Buddhist temple. They built us a camp, a barracks, and there was
28 a house and Sinay and I could live in the house. But it was a month or so before they
29 finished that at least. I don't remember exactly when we moved into that. We started
30 getting information from all the police, the local police, everybody else we could talk to
31 about where all of this was and it turned out there was on top of the mountain...from the

1 top of that mountain you could actually see into Ching Mai but it was a good ways up
2 there, big high mountain. They said that's where the...they called it the [Haw] smugglers
3 came up there with the opium in a big caravan and then all the people who want to buy
4 the opium. I say opium is legal in Thailand but only the opium dens. This opium was all
5 being smuggled somewhere else for the most part. But, they would go up and buy the
6 opium there. According to what they were saying, the smugglers, they always had as
7 much as three or four hundred armed soldiers up there. They were [Haw]; [Haw] was the
8 Chinese type living in the Yunnan who were Muslims and they were the ones that would
9 bring it. So, you'd have numbers would vary how many people you had in that camp,
10 that's what they said. So we figured the best thing to do is just to go up and attack that
11 camp. So, we started getting information and so we knew where it was and all but not
12 really what they had there. I had met Mr. And Mrs. Young, Harold Young and his wife.
13 What they were, they had been missionaries. They had been born in Burma. Their father
14 was a missionary, a lifelong missionary in Burma and they'd married up there and then
15 Bill had been born up there in one of those hill tribe villages, but they were pure
16 Americans. He was about 18 and he was a big, strong, good looking, very innocent guy.
17 So what I decided I would do to try to get intelligence, I went down and talked to the
18 Young's because they knew all of it. Their flock, when they were missionaries, had all
19 been hill tribe people. That's who they always lived with, worked with. They loved all
20 those hill tribe people. Hill tribes would come to their house from everywhere and talk to
21 them. They spoke those languages. So, I talked to them about it and they said there was
22 a H'mong village near where that camp was. So, Bill went out and found this young
23 H'mong guy to talk to and he talked to him and he said yeah, in the H'mong village they
24 always went and sold like chickens and eggs and vegetables and stuff to those Chinese.
25 So they went into the camp and sold them. So, we decided we'd recruit this young guy
26 and get him to find out so we got him and we trained him. Bill could be the interpreter. I
27 trained him when we went in there to look around the camp because he couldn't read and
28 write but I taught him to sketch things. If you see something, just draw a picture of it.
29 Then we showed him all the different kinds of weapons and fix a little symbol, an X or a
30 V and this and that, showed him what kind of weapons was. Then we had him, when we
31 went in there, to come out and draw this sketch so we'd know where the weapons for the

1 troops were located and all that and exactly where the encampment was. Then, they were
2 showing where all the guards were and there was one side where it was very steep to go
3 up to it on that side so they didn't have any guards on that side, so we decided we'd go up
4 on that side and we'd start about two o'clock in the morning, just go up there. We just
5 walked into it. A few shots were fired and they all ran like rabbits. We captured two
6 guys and I think we may have killed one guy and we had no casualties. There was I think
7 like 40 tons of opium – that's a big stash – and lots of weapons.

8 SM: What kind of weapons were they?

9 BL: They had mortars, machine guns. They were regular military. See, what
10 these really were were the remnants of the old 93rd Division of the Chinese Nationalist
11 Army. But, these guys all stayed in Burma. They were the ones that really went on to
12 become the opium smugglers and the big war lords and all that in Burma.

13 SM: How many other operations did you conduct in that area?

14 BL: We stayed there about six months but a lot of smaller operations. Generally
15 we'd get the information that the opium was going to be on a truck or a bus and we'd
16 stop it out in the country, and maybe arrest who was carrying it because they were police
17 and we were working with the police. I don't remember what the total amount was, but
18 the total amount of opium that we managed to come up with was a lot. The Thai
19 government regulations was if the police captured opium... the opium had a resell value
20 because you use a lot of medical stuff. There was always a value on it. So, a certain
21 percentage of that value they would give as a reward to the police that captured it, and
22 that's why we went up there in the first place. Sinay wanted to get married. He said he
23 didn't have enough money, but if we could do that we could make some money on this,
24 see, from the reward. It's always a split according to rank on how much. So, I got
25 money out of it, too, because I never kept any of the things that they ever paid me. What
26 I did was the money that I got out of that I used to buy some mules because I wanted to
27 take them back and experiment and use them in the jungle. They use them a lot in the
28 North. It didn't really work out in the South, the jungles were too dense, too much vines
29 and stuff. In the North we had a lot of mountains and there was more open trails.
30 Anyway, it was a great experience. At least 60 days we slept in that wat, in that temple,

1 because I slept right next to the reclining Buddha, big, beautiful, reclining Buddha. It's
2 still there, it's a beautiful wat.

3 SM: Is it?

4 BL: But see, if you travel the countryside in Thailand, in the old days, I don't
5 know what they do today, but we slept in the temples many times because every place,
6 little villages had temples so you can sleep there. The locals do it, too. If you're
7 traveling and you don't have a place to go you just sleep at the temple because it's got a
8 roof and everything. They welcome it.

9 SM: It's not seen as some kind of sacrilege to sleep in the temple?

10 BL: Oh no, not at all. Now see the temple always has...they call it a [?], it
11 always has a building right next to it that stay roofed and all open on the sides and the
12 floor, and that's where they have all the meetings. A lot of times priests, people come
13 and they sit there and the priest will talk to you.

14 SM: If you stay in a temple at night, were you expected to pay some kind of
15 homage?

16 BL: No, never mentioned it, I'm sure if you wanted to. You could give things
17 too if you want, money to the head priests for things in need. A big thing is to give
18 them...if you're going to the waters just take the items they gave you, like take your soap
19 and towels and things that they can use and give it to the priest. In fact, a lot of shops
20 have a package of stuff that you could get if you're going to the temple. My wife was
21 Buddhist so when she died I had her cremated and I took the ashes to Thailand and put
22 them in the temple with her mother's. What it is is it's on the wall of this temple, inside
23 on the wall. It's all porcelain type squares along this big, long wall, and what they do is
24 they take out...behind that porcelain it's a hollow space, a square, hollow space. They
25 put the ashes in there and then reseal that back up there. Then they've got a picture of
26 her. Well, first of all her mother, then they put hers there, and it's somehow behind the
27 finish. They finish over it so it's a permanent-type. It's pretty nice. It's good to have
28 because if I go and my kids go or something they can go there and pay their respects to
29 their mother.

30 SM: And it's not just your wife, but also her mother and other relatives that are in
31 the same place?

1 BL: Well in the wall...the wall is so long you've got hundreds.

2 SM: Yeah, all kinds of people.

3 BL: You know, some people sprinkle them in the ocean or river or some
4 particular place they like or some of them put them in a little shrine deal, but that's
5 where...her mothers is already there. I talked to her about it.

6 SM: That's what she wanted?

7 BL: She didn't really care that much. The first time I talked to her about that she
8 said, "Well, you know..." this is a long time ahead we talked about this, and she said,
9 "Well if we're in Thailand you can do it like the Thais do. If we're in the US, do it like
10 the Americans do." She wasn't strongly fixed on any certain thing.

11 SM: But did she want cremation herself?

12 BL: Yeah.

13 SM: Because that is part of the Buddhist...

14 BL: They always do that. I don't know. Yeah, that's part of it, all the Buddhists
15 are always cremated because every temple has the big...see, usually when a person dies,
16 right away, as soon as he dies, the very same day if possible they have what they call a
17 bathing ceremony. That's when the close relatives or friends, they go and bathe the body
18 and wrap them in certain things and put them down, and then they put them in a casket
19 type thing. In the temple they have a ceremony. You bring in priests there and the
20 friends all come. That can go on for like three days or a lot of people do them for a week.
21 In fact, I enjoy going to the funerals simply because you see all your old friends. They're
22 not very...you don't have to act like you're real sad or anything. People talk. You stop
23 talking while the priests are chanting, but in between they serve refreshments and
24 everybody has a good time.

25 SM: Wow, more like an Irish wake.

26 BL: It's a nice ceremony, I enjoy it. Then once after that ceremony at the wall,
27 then they have the cremation. The last day they have the cremation right there, and then
28 usually they wait...no, no, that's not right. I don't know exactly, they keep the body
29 somewhere. They seal it in something and then after a certain period of time, it can be up
30 to...it's never usually more than three months, but after a certain period of time they have
31 the cremation. That's another thing, but that don't take long. It's a big ceremony and

1 they go there, like my friend General Pranet, that's why I'm going back to Thailand
2 because he's going to have the cremation on the 28th of February. It's a royally
3 sponsored cremation, and I want to be sure and go to it.

4 SM: Just ran out of record time here, or almost out of record time. Why don't we
5 take a quick break so I can change my CD?

6 SM: This is CD number four of the interview with Mr. Bill Lair on the 13th of
7 December. Sir, I was curious about how the relationship with Bill Young evolved,
8 because he helped with those initial operations?

9 BL: I got to know him and then I went to work in Laos. I was trying to
10 remember, I forget how he approached me but he wanted a job and so I think I talked
11 them into hiring him and letting him come over and work. Bill had a lot of good points,
12 but he's a strange kind of a guy, and to Americans he had a hard time. As long as he
13 worked directly for me and I was his supervisor, he did great; no problems whatever.
14 But you put him under somebody else it just never worked because he looked like a
15 100% American. He talked like 100% American. But, he really was not 100% American
16 because he was born and grew up among those hill tribes and all that stuff, so he's
17 basically a Lao [?] hill tribesman that looked...and he even came back stateside and spent
18 three years in the US Army in the Paratroops. Then he came back to Thailand, and of
19 course he still lives now in Chiang Mai. But, you know, they expected him to act like an
20 American and he was just a strange guy with the Americans. As I say, as long as he
21 worked...it was impossible to have him working directly for me all the time, so wherever
22 you sent him they always came up with some problem that I never had with him, so he
23 ended up eventually he stayed in Laos for a little while and he eventually left because as I
24 said he just never...there was no place I could put him where he worked every day
25 directly under my supervision. But, he had a lot of capabilities in dealing with those
26 kinds of people.

27 SM: Well he spoke all the languages?

28 BL: Yeah, a lot of them, and he just knew how they think and all because he was
29 one. He eventually went back to Chiang Mai, but I think in Chiang Mai I think he's
30 worked for years for the DEA; I think he's still working for them.

31 SM: This is counter narcotics, counter opium?

1 BL: Yes. Actually, what he did was deal with all those hill tribes. The way they
2 were, the H'mong, they lived by the old style. They'd have a house with servant's
3 quarters and that sort of thing, and there was always a stream of those hill people coming
4 in and staying there for a while and talking to them and then going back to the hills.
5 They had lines going back into the hills all the time.

6 SM: Did they use that to collect information, intelligence?

7 BL: Yeah because his father, the DEA worked with him for a while. He's been
8 dead a good while but he built a museum. He was great with animals and stuff like that
9 so he had a zoo in Chiang Mai and eventually the government took over the zoo and he
10 worked with the government to be the curator of the zoo for a long time because he knew
11 the animals and he worked with them. He lived out there where he had all this and he
12 had all kinds of things in there. That was a good job for him. His wife, she had been a
13 missionary too, an American. I think the old man died first. I think she's dead now, I
14 don't think she's still living. I'm pretty sure she is. Bill still is. In fact, Bill, he was a
15 very handsome guy so he was a great ladies man. I'm almost positive old Jane Hamilton-
16 Merritt went head over heels for him; just sort of as an aside, I know it happened.

17 SM: Well, did you treat him...when you interacted with him, did you act with
18 him like you would with a H'mong tribes person, or did you just keep that in the back of
19 your head?

20 BL: I'd just keep it in the back of my head because you talk to him and he's like
21 anybody. But, he's not a very well organized kind of guy. You've got to keep him going
22 down the right track but you've got to do it gently. You can't start yelling at him and
23 things like that, he just can't take it. The Orientals, for the most part that I've run into
24 over there in Southeast Asia, the Thais and everybody, they're a very polite people. If
25 you get really visibly angry and start screaming and shouting, they don't know how to
26 handle it, so they're going to react in the same way, and you don't know what the hell
27 you're going to do. Most of your crime there is so easy to solve. Somebody just stabs
28 the other guy with a knife or something like that because they don't know how to...in
29 other words, they don't know how to handle direct confrontation very well. So the best
30 thing is don't have it with them. You don't have to. Once you get angry, you might as
31 well pack your bag and leave.

1 SM: That must have been difficult for some of the Americans...

2 BL: Oh absolutely.

3 SM: ...not to get angry, not to yell, because it's not something that we feel
4 stigmatized about in our country.

5 BL: No, that's right.

6 SM: Did you have like informal training sessions with case officers, fellow case
7 officers, where you'd talk about these types of issues?

8 BL: I usually...the new guys, I'd always talk to them. The older guys had
9 already been over there before and you couldn't talk to them very well about it and they
10 either handled it right or they didn't. But the young guys, I always talk about that. That's
11 why I got along so well with the Young's. One of the best people we ever had was
12 [Vinton Lawrence]. Vint was from...he'd been born and raised in New York but his
13 family was wealthy, very wealthy. His father was a stockbroker. He's the first guy I
14 chose to work with VP when we had to leave and no American could stay up there. He
15 was so young and Tony, see, him and Tony stayed up there because Tony insisted on
16 staying. Of course Tony was far senior but I put Vint in charge and it worked. Vint
17 handled him alright. You couldn't leave Tony in charge. There was no way you could
18 possibly do that because he couldn't get along with VP at all because he didn't know
19 how, the same reason, he didn't know how to talk to anybody like that because he'd
20 always yell and shout and all kinds of stuff. He couldn't have done it.

21 SM: Now when you made a decision...I'm sorry, go ahead.

22 BL: A lot of people have said, "You ought not have let him stay up there at all."
23 But, he was very good in the training and he liked it up there.

24 SM: You're talking about Tony Poe?

25 BL: Yeah.

26 SM: When you made that decision that even though Tony Poe was senior, that
27 Vint...did you say Vince or Vick?

28 BL: Vint.

29 SM: Vint?

30 BL: Vinton Lawrence.

1 SM: Oh, Vinton Lawrence, even though he was junior he should be in a position
2 of authority. Did you have to talk with Tony before about that?

3 BL: I told him I was going to.

4 SM: Okay, so you did. There was obviously some professional courtesy there
5 that Tony must have appreciated as well.

6 BL: Well and I just told him, because VP's English wasn't very good at all. He
7 was learning English but he spoke French, and Vint spoke French, so that's what I put on
8 as the major factor, which was true.

9 SM: Yes, the communication.

10 BL: VP almost looked upon Vint as one of his sons. He loved Vint because Vint
11 handled it in a gentle way but he was always able to talk VP into doing things, but he did
12 it in the right way, in a lot of cases ending up with VP thinking it was his own idea. See,
13 that's the way you deal with it. I've talked at great length about this, see, and we became
14 close because of that. Vint came back, and he's this bright guy, and he knew all kinds of
15 people. He went to Princeton and I never thought he would stay forever in the Agency
16 and when he got back...see, I knew it would be hard for him because he's so damn
17 young and he gets this position, this very high position, it's very hard for him to go back
18 to something that he would get when he got to headquarters so he didn't stay very long at
19 the Agency. His family was a friend of Cyrus Vance who was...what was he, the
20 Minister of Defense or something, some big job, I think it was defense. So, Vint went
21 over there and worked for him and then when they left, politically left, he just resigned
22 from the Agency. Vint, he'd majored in some sort of 18th Century Art or something like
23 that at Princeton, but actually what he wanted to be was an artist. Oh, he could draw.
24 So, he decided...he wrote me a letter when he quit and said he decided to become a full
25 time artist because he had money. His family, they lived in an apartment in New York
26 where he grew up but they had the whole floor of a building. He had a big family. But,
27 they always had what they called "the farm" in Connecticut. It was basically about 700
28 acres right on the side of a beautiful mountain. What they did was he had about six, at
29 least six brothers and sisters, and each one of them has a house scattered through that
30 area, and then after I retired and came back home he'd married some Austrian gal and
31 then eventually something happened to that and he ended up married to this woman who

1 was in TV, worked for NBC; I even saw her on the TV once in a while, news stuff. She
2 was a news type person. I hadn't met her of course. So one day I got a letter from her
3 and she said, "You don't know me but I'm Vint's wife," and they're coming up to his... I
4 guess it was 50th birthday, something like that. It was a birthday, it must have been, and
5 she said, "We're going to have a surprise party and it's going to be like 'This is Your
6 Life'," so she wanted me to come up there, and she sent me a ticket and everything. She
7 said, "Would you arrive, and I'm going to have a friend of mine meet you at the airport
8 and you'll go over and stay with them one night so Vint doesn't know you're here and
9 then we want you to appear on the stage," because she said, "Because of all the people he
10 knew, he certainly would want you to be there." I think what had happened, NBC owns
11 public television, this television you see, what they call it, it's a regular public television,
12 they've got it all over the country?

13 SM: PBS?

14 BL: PBS, NBC owns that because she went over and was working for public
15 television. Then you had the student uprising in Peking, NBC called her back and sent
16 her over there to cover that. That's why I know, she said that connection between PBS
17 and NBC. So, I didn't know that she was called back and everything but it looked like
18 she wasn't going to be back when they were going to have this thing. So all of a sudden
19 one day Vint calls me and he said, "Well, she spilled the beans." He said when they got
20 to the airport when she was leaving to go to China that she finally told him, and so he
21 said, "We want you to come anyway!" So, I went and really enjoyed it. See, he lived
22 there and most of the family all worked in New York so Vint runs...I say, he had 700
23 acres but they have maple trees and all sorts of stuff, and they have guys doing things, but
24 Vint runs that. He looks after it. But he also did his artwork and he got into the cartoon
25 business, the political type cartoons. So, he works for years now for that...what is it, it's
26 a very liberal magazine that comes out. What the hell's the name of it? You know the
27 one I mean, it's so well known. You never see it in Texas really on sale hardly ever. Oh
28 jeez, I've seen a lot of the issues of it and he always has a cartoon in it.

29 SM: Is it out of New York?

30 BL: Yeah, I think it's probably printed in New York I'm sure.

31 SM: But it's not The New Yorker?

1 BL: No, it's not The New Yorker. I know the name, as well as my own, but I just
2 can't think of it for the moment. You'll know it if I say it. So, he's from that very liberal
3 northeast groupings. But he's an awfully good guy, I think the world of Vint. Let me get
4 something right here to show you. He'd always draw...he had some fantastic things he
5 drew. I kept a lot of them and then somehow in all my moving and everything I
6 somehow lost it. I had one, I used to have this meeting in the really early days where
7 we'd have the pilots, and everybody would come in in the evening and we'd plan what
8 we were going to do the next day and where the airplane would go and all this, and when
9 Vint was down he would go, of course, but he drew one of those kind of drawings of the
10 meeting and it was just fabulous.

11 SM: Of all the personalities involved?

12 BL: Yeah, and Tony was one of them, for example. It's tremendous, the one of
13 Tony sitting there! It was great, and somehow it got lost in all that shuffle.

14 SM: Would he also use his artistry skills in terms of giving you sketches on the
15 mission oriented things, whether it be a base camp that they were looking at or...

16 BL: Yeah, every once in a while he'd draw something to show what something
17 looked like, yeah. He always had some sort of a drawing on that was like this.

18 SM: Right, almost a political type drawing, the personalities involved?

19 BL: So, he obviously had a lot of talent.

20 SM: Well, we've talked a lot about the strengths and weaknesses of people and I
21 was wondering what you thought were the strengths and weaknesses of a couple of
22 projects, in particular White Star and the Special Forces operation? How much did you
23 have oversight of that or knowledge of it and what did you think were its greatest
24 strengths?

25 BL: See, what I thought, my knowledge of White Star for example was White
26 Star went there before we ever went there, and White Star went because PEO was
27 supposed to be in support, but non-military support, in Laos. But, they were basically the
28 US was giving some support to the Lao Army, and White Star came in under PEO and
29 they were going to do the training but they were supposed to be civilians. So, when we
30 started, White Star was already there and they'd been working with some of the Lao...for

1 example, I think with Cong Le's battalion where Jack there was the advisor to them, I
2 think there was a White Star that worked with them some, too.

3 SM: These were sheep-dipped American Special Forces?

4 BL: Sheet-dipped Special Forces, right. So then when we opened all that training
5 up in north Laos, after a little bit, because they had the White Stars and they didn't know
6 what yet to do with them, they sent one or two White Star teams up to work with us and
7 that's where Chance was one of them. I would say they were good people, there's no
8 absolute question about that, but basically if you used a White Star team to train you had
9 to put a PARU team with them because they couldn't talk to the locals. So basically, if
10 you really looked at it, it was something extra that you didn't really need, but they were
11 useful. I remember the first Thanksgiving up there they cooked a wonderful
12 Thanksgiving dinner. They took the turkeys and roasted them underground, you know.
13 They were good people, no question about it. I think now, White Star's probably a hell
14 of a lot better than they were then as far as the idea that you're not going to lead these
15 people. You're going to train them and they're the ones that are going to do it...it looks
16 to me like in Afghanistan that's what they're doing.

17 SM: But in the context of Laos, because they couldn't communicate well with the
18 people they were training, but the PARU could, was there anything that White Star
19 personnel could train on that the PARU could not?

20 BL: Oh they probably knew some things. Yeah, I think they were useful in that
21 they probably had some training that was better. I don't argue that at all.

22 SM: Demolitions perhaps or something like that?

23 BL: Yeah.

24 SM: Or some technical?

25 BL: But, the fact that they...well, there was two things; one, in the first place,
26 anywhere you send a White Star team, anybody who looked at that place would know
27 there was Americans there. But, if they looked at a place and the PARU was there with
28 the locals, you couldn't tell the difference. At that point that was supposed to be an
29 important factor.

30 SM: Yes sir, because it was supposed to be a covert operation.

1 BL: In some cases they were...or like Jack Shirley, he's over back there when
2 there was a hell of a lot going on. He had a White Star team with him. They had a
3 helicopter landing spot there but the bad guys had moved a 105 Howitzer type where they
4 could shell that place where the helicopter came in, where they were at, that area. Every
5 once in a while they'd drop in the shells. The chief of the Special Forces out of Vietnam,
6 he was supposed to be the head man, he came up to visit that White Star team. They'd
7 been shelling there and the helicopter came in. Jack was sitting under a tree where the
8 helicopters came in reading a newspaper. One of the helicopters brought him in a
9 newspaper and brought him in some beer. He was having a beer and drinking and this
10 colonel got off and came over and asked him, "Where's the White Star team?" and the
11 White Star team was down in the shelter underground, and Jack just said [laughs] and
12 sort of put down White Star team.

13 SM: Kind of embarrassing!

14 BL: But what I mean was there was a little of that! But, Jack was a very cool cat,
15 too, I'll tell you. Nothing bothered him. Jack had a lot of faults but he had as much guts
16 as anybody I ever saw. But, if you would have kept him pointed in the right direction all
17 the time he would have been one of the outstanding ones. He really shone when you had
18 some very dangerous thing to do that didn't take more than a couple of days and you
19 didn't have to write reports. Jack was you're man. We're still good... we're very close.
20 He's living in Thailand.

21 SM: Did that happen a lot where you would have just real short, quick operations
22 and you wanted someone...

23 BL: It didn't happen a lot but it happens, or rescue things. He'd rescue. In fact, I
24 don't know, this is an aside. I don't know... maybe I shouldn't really say that... but is it
25 on now?

26 SM: Yes, do you want me to turn it off?

27 BL: Yeah, why don't you turn it off for just a minute.

28 SM: So what year did you go back to Thailand, where you're talking about these
29 operations?

30 BL: '70.

1 SM: This is 1970? So you went back and you were conducting operations not
2 just in Thailand towards Laos, but also towards Cambodia?

3 BL: Yeah. Well, basically I ended up because I'd been different from other
4 people, so my job ended up finally they called me the Deputy Chief for Special
5 Activities. I did an awful lot of things. Anything to do with the liaison with the Thai
6 side, that's pretty much what I did, especially with the Army. We still had some other
7 people that were liaison with the different branches of the police, with the Army, the
8 Border Police, anything like that; plus I did anything else that came along that they didn't
9 know what to do with, lots of things. We had one terrorist. This is one of the very early
10 terrorist operations. The Black September, do you remember that? I think they're the
11 same ones that killed those people at the Olympics in Germany? That was the same
12 group. But all of a sudden one day I went into the embassy and one of these secretaries,
13 in fact she was the chief of station's secretary, she was of Lebanese ethnic background, I
14 think born in the US. But, she spoke Arabic. This guy who had...they had some kind of
15 an intercept on a lot of different places and one of them was on one of the Arab
16 embassies. I don't know which one, I don't remember which one. But, what seemed to
17 happen with this intercept was that these guys called that embassy and told them that they
18 had control of the Israeli embassy. They had the ambassador and everybody at the Israeli
19 embassy as prisoners and they wanted them to communicate to the world that they were
20 going to kill all of those people unless they released a group of prisoners held by the
21 Israelis in Israel, a big list. Of course they didn't know, they came to me with that
22 immediately, "What are we going to do about this?" So, I thought about it for a minute
23 and I said, "Let me handle this." So what I did, I went straight...General Sinay, he was a
24 colonel and he had been the first PARU commander, a guy who I really knew well, and
25 he was like the chief of the southern district of Bangkok or something. He was in the
26 metropolitan police, but he was...and they told me, "Don't tell him where we got this
27 information," because we didn't want to put out that we had those intercepts or anything.
28 I knew Sinay wouldn't even ask me. So, I got in touch with Sinay and explained to him
29 exactly what had happened and he said, "Well, okay, I'll handle this," and he said, "Let
30 me get in touch with the people I need to get in touch with. I'll be in touch with you on a
31 regular basis." So, they did. They got over there and established contact with those

1 terrorists and started talking to them. I would see Sinay every day, at least a day would
2 go by and he'd sort of telling me what was going on and what they ended up... the Thais
3 were very good at this sort of thing. They talked those terrorists into getting up and
4 leaving and they never killed anybody. The only thing they insisted that they get a Thai
5 international plane and fly them to Cairo, that's where they wanted to go, Cairo, and they
6 wanted some prominent Thai to go with them, sort of a hostage. So, that's what they did,
7 they took an air marshal. He was the Deputy Prime Minister I think. But, the Thais, they
8 handled it all so well and it all came off very smoothly. So I did things like that that I
9 could do...probably nobody else could have done the same thing.

10 SM: Because you had the stronger connection?

11 BL: Because there was never any formal contact between the US and the Thais at
12 all. I don't know if Sinay even told them that I was the one that talked to him; I doubt it.
13 That's the way I think things need to be done. You get what you want, and you're not
14 involved. If they'd found out the US was involved there's no telling what the hell they'd
15 have done. I'm sure Sinay never even told anybody that I'd been the one who originally
16 told them.

17 SM: Did your work in 1970 and after involve also operations into Cambodia?

18 BL: Well, it was mainly...see, what I was doing there was working with the Thai
19 Army. They had a lot of operations and we gave them a certain amount of support that
20 we got to take from their agents, that's what that basically was.

21 SM: Was this against the Khmer in particular?

22 BL: We found out what was going on in Cambodia because there was all kinds of
23 fighting because you had all these different groups fighting each other. Of course it's on
24 the Thai border, it affects the Thai security an awful lot, and of course we had the station
25 in Phnom Penh. Whatever came in I just fed it into the machine. It was low level stuff.
26 Some of it was very useful. I don't remember how really useful it was, but intelligence
27 comes from all of that kind of stuff that you feed into the analysts.

28 SM: What had changed the most in Thailand from say when you first arrived in
29 the early 1950s to when you went back in 1970? What were the biggest changes you
30 saw?

31 BL: I was only gone two years.

1 SM: But if you were looking from that 20 year period, what had changed most in
2 Thailand over the 20 years?

3 BL: Over 20 years, oh. The population increased greatly. Bangkok had become
4 a much, much larger city. There were so many more people in the country from the time
5 I first went there, and it was a much more...when I first went there, it was an awful lot
6 easier to work there because it was like a small place and you got to know everybody
7 very quickly. I think at that time it was very easy for me to become friends with so many
8 different Thai people, many different levels of government. I think later that was more
9 difficult because it was a bigger place, and I think at that time Thailand was much more
10 isolated. They wanted to be friends with Americans. It was a novelty to meet an
11 American. But, now there was so many Americans there that it was no longer that. It
12 was a lot of things. But, you see the good part about me was like I'd never been gone
13 because I still had all of the same friends. So, I was able to move right back in and work
14 without dropping a stitch. See, I found out when I went back I went to the war college,
15 see. That was my choice. I wanted to go. I thought I might go off and do something else
16 completely different in some other part of the world and I would have gone if they would
17 have sent me there but they didn't. But I found out later that the guy who I didn't even
18 know went out to be chief of station, a guy named Lou [Ladlow?]. They had been ready
19 to replace...they needed a new Deputy Chief of Station so Lou had asked them to send
20 me as the deputy chief, but they wouldn't do it. I don't know exactly why. I'm sure it
21 was something about all this bureaucracy and all that. So, then he finally...another job
22 that became open was the chief of ops, so then he asked them to send me as the chief of
23 ops. I didn't know about that. Just all of a sudden out of the blue sky they asked me if
24 I'd go back to Thailand and I thought I would be doing something else. I was the deputy
25 branch chief. I could see nobody had offered me anything there. I just didn't see any
26 place that I was going to go. So, I figured I'd go back to Thailand; not that I minded
27 going back to Thailand, but I was trying for the same reason to put myself to where I
28 wasn't...they say, "This is a guy, this is the only place he can work." But it looked to me
29 like they'd already done that. I believe it was a mistake, but I didn't mind it. But anyway,
30 I gave it a try. And so I went back as chief of ops, because I was not the chief of ops
31 really. In there, the way they do the chief of ops because they immediately started using

1 me for all different kinds of things and it wasn't very long before Lou said to me one day
2 he said, "I'm going to create a new job here called the Deputy Chief of Station for
3 Special Activities and I want to put you in that job," and he got some other guy for the
4 chief of ops. That really gave me the freedom to do anything.

5 SM: In that new position?

6 BL: Normally the deputy chief is involved. He handles most of the
7 administrative stuff at the station and I didn't have to have anything to do with that. So, I
8 as basically a case officer who could...and he gave me an office right next to his.

9 SM: Now in Vietnam the war was winding down in terms of the American
10 involvement. How many, if you remember or can say, about how many other case
11 officers were working throughout Thailand and Laos at this point, when they started to
12 wind down?

13 BL: With the insurgency in Thailand, the communist insurgency had started. It
14 wasn't big, but it had definitely started so we had a lot of people up country in Thailand
15 working with the local police, Army, so forth, against the insurgency and all that. Then
16 you always had a lot of teams in Chiang Mai working on the narcotics stuff. I did a lot of
17 stuff like that. For example, here's another really good one I think. Pranet who was my
18 friend, he came back and he became...I think he was the deputy chief of the Border
19 Police. I don't think he was chief at that time but he was deputy chief, but of course he
20 always, as far as the PARU were concerned, he was always the commander of the PARU.
21 He still is today. So, he did a lot of things. He worked in the North against the narcotics
22 smugglers and all of that kind of stuff going on. At that time, see, I was working on
23 narcotics too and they had a guy...what the hell is the guy, they had the big warlord in
24 Burma that was supposed to be smuggling all the narcotics down, the opium. They had
25 the refineries making heroin and all that stuff on the border. What was his name? Maybe
26 I'll think of it. But, we followed that very closely and we got a lot of radio. They had
27 some radios, these people did, so we were able to get those intercepts and all. I noticed
28 one day he was with this group that were moving along in Burma but parallel to the Thai
29 border. You 'em track each day where they were. So, they were coming to a place
30 where it looked like to me they were definitely...the borders go like this and so the trails
31 went right across. So for a period of time there they would actually be in Thailand, but

1 there's nobody up there except whatever locals. Its' a very mountainous jungle type
2 thing. So, I thought that this would be a good chance to get at him because he would be
3 in Thailand. So, I immediately went to Pranet and Pranet agreed so, and Pranet went up
4 himself and got the police helicopters and all and they actually went in and captured...Lo
5 Sing Hahn, that was his name, Lo Sing Hahn. They captured him while he was in
6 Thailand.

7 SM: What happened to him?

8 BL: Of course they brought him to Bangkok and I think the trouble is is that
9 nobody knew exactly what to do with him, but eventually they sent him back to Burma.
10 The Burmese said send him back to Burma and they would try him and do all that sort of
11 thing. So, they sent him back to Burma. I don't think he ever got back into operations.
12 Somebody else took his place. They took him back and they probably put him in jail for
13 a while or said they did house arrest, nothing really bad happened to him. They told you
14 that the whole world would change if you ever got Lo Sing Hahn, but it didn't change it
15 at all. It was just somebody else there the next day, but it was a good operation. I was
16 able to do it because of all the things we'd worked together. Pranet didn't ask any
17 questions and we did it without...no publicity came out that said the US did this and that.
18 That was the sort of thing I really liked, I really thought was good, and so did my boss.

19 SM: How do you spell Pranet's name?

20 BL: P-R-A-N-E-T. The Thai's all go with the first names, but I know his last
21 name if you ever want it.

22 SM: Sure.

23 BL: R-I-T-R-U-E-C-H-A-I, Rittruechai.

24 SM: Rittruechai...

25 BL: He was a good man.

26 SM: Other projects that occurred either while you were in Laos or even continued
27 after when you were back in Thailand? Project 404, what were the strengths and
28 weaknesses of that particular project, do you recall?

29 BL: I remember but I can't remember exactly what it was.

30 SM: It was the training of the pilots, and that of course started with the initial...

31 BL: The H'mong pilots?

1 SM: Yes.

2 BL: I don't know when they came up with calling it 404, but oh yeah. You see,
3 again, that was one of those long range things. I always knew that someday I was going
4 to need a good pilot that was under our control, so he had to be a PARU. So in Wa Hin,
5 all of a sudden they built a school in Wa Hin. It was supposed to be under the auspices of
6 SEATO, you know, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization, but it was a school to train
7 civilian pilots, for Civilian Air. It was right in Wa Hin where we were located. So [Su
8 Moon] came to me. He's one of the old [Lo Pri] guys. At that time he was a lieutenant.
9 Anyway, Su Moon came to me and said he really wanted to be a pilot, he'd like to go to
10 that school. So, I discussed it with Pranet, I said, "If we send him..." of course you have
11 to pay for it, but not terribly expensive. So I told Pranet, "If he's all right with you, if we
12 send him, if I can come up with the funds, we'll send him, give him his duty, he wont be
13 off duty, we wont have to say anything where the police were concerned, but they can
14 give him his duty at different hours," you know what I mean, so he could just go over
15 there and train. So, he did and he went through that whole thing, got his pilot's wings
16 and everything. Someday I'm going to need this guy or something. Okay, then when we
17 went to Laos, after watching the air support and things like that, I figured it would be so
18 damn good if the H'mong could have their own pilots to give them close support when it
19 got to that point. Then, I made a trip to Okinawa to look at...that's where all of our
20 support came out of Okinawa and while I was up there poking around I found these two
21 old Piper Cubs taken apart sitting in the back of that base. They were even...I talked
22 with them and the people I talked to didn't even know who they belonged to, where
23 they'd come from, so they'd obviously been there a while. So I asked them, "Could we
24 have those?" and they said yeah because they weren't even on their inventory. So I said,
25 "Could you put those on a C-46?" We had C-46s going out there all the time, and send it
26 to Udorn, so they did. They sent it to Udorn. I got the Air Force in, the Thai Air Force to
27 give us two mechanics who could put all that together and put them in flying shape.
28 Then, when this started I went and talked to VP. I said, "What do you think about having
29 H'mong pilots?" "Oh yes, we can do!" He always said that, "We can do it!" I said,
30 "How about giving me ten or 12, make sure they can read and write something. Give me
31 ten or 12 young H'mong guys," which he did, he got them. See, when we had moved

1 across the river from Vientiane, Pat and I had moved into this house. It was out of town,
2 right on the river, and during World War II the Japanese had put in an air strip there, just
3 a plain airstrip, but it was still very useable. It was just a [ladderite] strip with grass
4 growing all around it. This house was right by there. So, we'd rented that house when
5 that strip was there, and when we moved to Udorn we still had the house because we'd
6 paid the rent ahead of time or something. So, that's why I told Som Moon, "Take these
7 12 guys and go up and you all live in that house and take those Piper Cubs up there," and
8 then I said, "Start training these guys." I said, "Start out teaching English, teaching what
9 makes the engine run and all that stuff, and then start teaching them how to fly it, just
10 very quietly." Nobody paid any attention to them when this was going on. The Air
11 Force put in a school for South Vietnamese pilots for T-28s so I asked, I started trying to
12 figure out a way to get some H'mong into that school. Every time I'd ever tried, the
13 people would always say, "Oh you could never make pilots out of those guys. They're
14 the hill people," and all that, but I kept trying. Then Aderholt was out there, and he knew
15 all the Air Force people, so I kept asking him to try to get them to take to them and
16 finally he came to me and said, "Okay Bill, they've agreed to take two of them but they
17 don't believe they'll pan out. They'll wash out anyway, but they'll take two of them and
18 try." So then I went to Som Moon and said, "Send me the best two." Of course they
19 were already flying very well in those small airplanes, and they did fabulous in the
20 school. One of them was Le Lu, he became the great hero... He flew something over
21 5,000 missions with never a recess. The Air Force went home after 100 missions. Then,
22 we went on from there and eventually they did all the training in the T-28s, even for the
23 new guys. They took more in. I don't know what we ended up with, probably about 20
24 or something like that I suppose. But anyway, it was a good project but it wasn't...I don't
25 think you could have gotten into it any other way because they never would have agreed.

26 SM: It seems like that project along with most of the other things you were doing
27 were all leading towards self-sufficiency.

28 BL: That's right, because afterwards when we'd get out they could survive.
29 That's what I was trying to do from the very beginning, that's what I wanted to do
30 because I never believed we would win in Vietnam. I just didn't think we would, or I
31 thought there was a damn good chance we never would. I was trying to get them

1 something where they could go on. And in the end, of course when it did end, they just
2 fled the country. I didn't like that at all. By that time, there was nothing you could do
3 about it.

4 SM: Of course things hadn't been going perfectly in Vietnam. What did you hear
5 in Laos about things like Tet '68?

6 BL: We followed all that closely and we knew a lot about it because we always
7 had that monthly meeting in Udorn so we'd talk to the people from there. I saw the
8 traffic out of Vietnam too. We were infoed on a lot of the traffic from Vietnam, so we
9 kept abreast of what was happening.

10 SM: What do you remember about the Tet '68 traffic and how did it effect, if at
11 all, what was going on in Laos and Thailand?

12 BL: It didn't effect Laos much.

13 SM: No?

14 BL: Then of course when I went back to the states in '68, I went to the war
15 college, about once every couple of weeks or so I'd go down and go in the station and go
16 in the office and talk to people about what was going on. In fact, while I was at the war
17 college VP came. They brought him back to the station on a visit. Aderholt was back in
18 the states at that Air Force base in Florida... Eglan.

19 SM: Yeah, Eglin Air Force Base.

20 BL: The home of the...so he wanted VP to come down there for a visit. So, they
21 called me and they recommended I go with him, so I drove to Washington, we flew down
22 in a CIA aircraft to Eglan and oh, we had a good time. It was a nice affair. It was just
23 interesting. But, I talked to everybody so I had a fairly good hand on what was going on
24 over there. As soon as my year was up at the war college I went back to that job and I
25 saw all the traffic.

26 SM: One of the things that Warner talks about with regard to some of the
27 American failures is that...I'm not sure what his sources are for his observations, but
28 when the United States didn't do as well as we should have done or apparently should
29 have done, things like the Bay of Pigs, or things like the failed battle of Ap Bac, Tet '68,
30 that that had a negative effect on perceptions of the United States capabilities and
31 whether or not we could win, as you already said, it didn't look like we were going to win

1 in Vietnam. He alludes to there were some instances where things, Vang Pao's forces,
2 would start to diminish a little bit, that sometimes people would lose faith, and I was
3 curious if you had witnessed that yourself, that sometimes people lost faith and that they
4 weren't sure if the US would come out on top so they were hedging their bets?

5 BL: I don't think that was much of a factor. It may have been a little better. I
6 think a big thing that came out of that that affected us is that the US began to get really
7 desperate about Vietnam so then they tried to get all of the Lao to do a lot more in Laos
8 that they thought would relieve the pressure on Vietnam so they pushed the Laotians into
9 doing a lot of things they never should have done in the first place, and they pushed VP
10 more and more into regular operations. Then they brought in the Thai artillery and all
11 sorts of things that they brought in. He was initially very successful. They retook the
12 PDJ, but they obviously couldn't hold it. Even in the retaking in Laos they lost a lot of
13 people, so the forces were being diminished. They were having to get younger and
14 younger kids in the units.

15 SM: So conventionalizing the war to a degree?

16 BL: That was what I thought was the big mistake. That's really the reason I left
17 when I did in '68, because Shackley was really pushing for more conventional type stuff,
18 and what I thought...looking back, I might have should have stayed. But at the same
19 time, I figured Pat, he'd been there a long time too, he could do that. Since the major
20 thing that I felt was my strong points was the guerilla warfare side and all that sort of
21 thing, probably things would be just as good without me as they were with me. I just
22 didn't like where it was going. I decided maybe I didn't want to present at the funeral
23 because I felt pretty sure it was coming.

24 SM: Well when you came back to the United States after Tet in '68, were you
25 surprised at all by some of the anti-war activity and the seeming show that occurred in the
26 United States?

27 BL: I'm sure. I knew that was all going to have a big effect on whether we were
28 going to stay in Vietnam or not, and I think we made a lot of mistakes in Vietnam but I
29 believe if the military would have been left alone and given the support they eventually
30 would have won. That's what I was always worried about was the fact that the
31 Americans would continue to support, and it just drug on and on and on, and got a lot of

1 Americans killed. Because of the change in the press and TV and all that sort of thing,
2 everything in the US had changed. If you go back to World War II, it didn't seem to
3 matter how many casualties we had because they didn't say nothing about it. In World
4 War II, the media was like propaganda machines for the government. They weren't, but
5 they were like that because they were 100% behind everything. The situation in the US
6 has changed tremendously. They never printed bad stuff about the president and his
7 personal life in those days, they didn't do it. Kennedy was, when it came to a lot of his
8 stuff with women and all, he was a hell of a lot worse than Clinton and nobody ever said
9 a damn word about it. I'm not saying they should or shouldn't, I'm just saying that was
10 the way it was. But as time went on, they were looking at everything. TV was such a
11 big, tremendous...people come on and that's what they would see every night and they
12 just got tired of it. It changed politicians themselves because I think one of the most
13 important things about the politician now is he's got to look good on TV because you
14 look on TV and you see the guy scratch his balls and do this and that, you know what I
15 mean [laughs]? This is just a guy like me!

16 SM: Right [laughs]!

17 BL: Don't you think so?

18 SM: Yes, oh it definitely changes it, it changes the dynamic. We had discussed
19 that. I don't think it was during a recorded session, but the fact that it was constantly in a
20 person's living room, this war going on, constantly on each night on the news.

21 BL: You go back to Roosevelt. See, Roosevelt, he was paralyzed and all that but
22 he was a great speaker. To the ordinary American, he wasn't just a normal human being.
23 It was just a different situation all together. I don't think he could have been all that
24 effective today really.

25 SM: Well what did you think when you got word that President Johnson had
26 decided not to run for reelection?

27 BL: I thought it was the beginning of the end probably. But, see, Johnson, I may
28 be wrong but I think that Johnson wasn't...I think he listened too much to what all the
29 generals were saying, "Just give us this, give us that, and we can do that," and he never
30 looked really realistically at what was happening. He saw it was going bad because the
31 fall...I heard all along that the fall of Phu Ba Ty for example had a big effect on Johnson.

1 He decided right then that the damn thing was over. He was very disheartened and it
2 shouldn't have had any effect because it was unimportant. But, see, they made a big
3 thing out of it that he just began to see that everything was going downhill. That's not
4 the right reason. It was something that could have been avoided very easily.

5 SM: What did you think about Nixon's plan, Vietnamization, to turn the war
6 back over to the Vietnamese?

7 BL: That was the right thing to do. It should have been done in the first place.
8 Unfortunately, that was probably too late. See, what had happened in Vietnam in my
9 opinion, when the Americans went in, the whole character of the Vietnamese Army
10 changed. Now I think the Vietnamese Army was fairly good down at the regular
11 battalion company, down at that level. You change to a completely different kind of
12 generals, because the generals weren't running the war, the Americans were running the
13 war. So the generals who came up were basically politicians, not generals, whereas if
14 they'd been doing all the fighting I think a different group of generals would have risen to
15 the top, the guys who really fight, right? So, you would have had a completely different
16 mix in the leadership of Vietnam. That's what I think anyway. What do you think about
17 that?

18 SM: I'm going to hold off on giving my opinion until we're not recording. I
19 want to ask you a couple more questions because we're close to stopping for today. Of
20 course in terms of the agency operations as they were perhaps different in different parts
21 of Southeast Asia, different in Vietnam as compared to what was going on in Laos, what
22 became a very prominent operation was of course Phoenix and the creation of what were
23 called the PRUs, the Provincial Reconnaissance Units, taking the terror back to the
24 terrorists so to speak and getting rid of some of those people in South Vietnam, the Viet
25 Cong infrastructure. Since the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese were using Laos and
26 Cambodia, and the Viet Cong in particular were using Cambodia as a sanctuary, I was
27 curious if there was any kind of cooperation like had occurred between Thailand and
28 Laos between Thailand and our operations in Cambodia, because it seems to me like the
29 PARU would have been just as effective perhaps in conducting operations along the
30 Cambodian border and into the interior of Cambodia to get rid of some of those Viet

1 Cong that were using Cambodia as a sanctuary. Can you talk at all about that or did that
2 happen?

3 BL: No, it didn't happen. I wondered myself exactly why it didn't happen. Of
4 course it couldn't have...they all had to happen after Lon Nol took over because Sinay, I
5 think he had decided a long time ago that the Vietnamese are probably going to beat the
6 Americans, whether they did or not. But, he knew he had basically nothing to fear from
7 the Americans. They're not going to do anything to us. The guy who's really going to
8 get us is going to be Vietnam and the communists, so we've just got to get along with
9 them no matter what. But, he wasn't a communist. He didn't want to join them really,
10 but he felt that he had to do it to bring Cambodia through the war, and he almost made it;
11 not quite. So, then Lan Nol came in. I'm not sure, you should have been able to do
12 something, it was awfully late in the game by this time because what was happening was
13 Lan Nol was holding the cities and letting the countryside go to the other side. I went
14 over there myself and visited and I knew they're going to lose because unless you can
15 take back the countryside, you're going to lose this war. It's just what they did. And
16 yeah, if we could have got in there and started working, I think there were probably still
17 places where you could have worked for people and I think that kind of operation would
18 have worked very well because the Cambodians are good people. They're not difficult to
19 work with. But then nobody ever really worked with the Cambodians because even when
20 we finally started supporting the so called non-communist resistance and all this sort of
21 stuff it was all done so far away from it. I went up and looked at it a few times and they
22 spent a hell of a lot of money and not very much of the money ever got down to the
23 troops. So, I thought Cambodia was pretty well gone. I think it would have worked in
24 Cambodia, sure, I believe without any question because they had exactly the same
25 situation. You had all these isolated villages. They had to go along with whoever came
26 along with the gun.

27 SM: Well when you were getting new case officers into either Thailand or Laos,
28 were some of them coming from Vietnam? Was there any kind of circulation of people
29 throughout Southeast Asia, so you get information or the perspective from some of the
30 guys that served in Vietnam for a while or maybe served in Cambodia for a while, came
31 through Laos, then went back, anything like that?

1 BL: I never really noticed that. I'm sure we probably had a few. Some of
2 them...there's a few guys I guess that left Laos and went to Vietnam but I don't
3 remember exactly who, because most of them when they came to Laos they didn't want
4 to go.

5 SM: Okay, so if they came to Laos they stayed?

6 BL: They stayed because as far as Asia's concerned I suspect it's probably the
7 best operation that the agency ever had. The people who were in it will never forget it.
8 In fact, in November I think it was, November or December of last year down in
9 Falmouth the current chief of ops... I met him and was talking to him and he said that
10 the one thing he regrets about his whole career was that he didn't have a chance to serve
11 in Laos. So, it's still looked upon, I'm sure.

12 SM: When things started to go really badly in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia in
13 1975 in particular, were you and the organization there in Thailand, were you guys at all
14 able to help with evacuations and things like that, getting people out from hot spots? Of
15 course Air America was there until the very end in terms of evacuating people out of
16 Saigon.

17 BL: The actual evacuation was run pretty much out of Vientiane and Udorn as far
18 as flying them to...but they moved all the refugees to the bases. The H'mong for
19 example, I think they moved 12,000 H'mong out right away and they moved them to an
20 old air base. It had been where the Marines had been. But then when you got all those
21 refugees out, the big one was what are you going to do with all these refugees, and that's
22 when I got into it because the H'mong, especially the H'mong refugees, whatever you do
23 because headquarters sent out a message saying the Agency is not in the refugee
24 business. We've got to find a way to get these refugees so that they'd be responsible, like
25 for USAID to be responsible for them. We've got to do something, and I knew we had to
26 get them off of that air base. They were just packed on that air base, right. So, I got to
27 thinking about it and they gave me the job. So, I went over and talked to the Air Marshal
28 Sid, the director of the National Security Council and also my brother-in-law about this,
29 and what I came up with, and he accepted that idea, was that we'd find some place where
30 we'd get some land and construct places where we could just move the H'mong and
31 where each family would have a small plot of land which they could raise food,

1 vegetables and that stuff, until such time when we could decide what the long term was.
2 Could we do that? And that's basically what we did, but the Thais did it all. I remained
3 behind the scenes as usual, so we made this place and moved them and then once we got
4 them in there USAID gave them farm utensils and started this and then there was
5 something that USAID could support, so we could more or less, after we got them all
6 moved in there and settled, we could back away from it. As far as the Agency was
7 concerned, we were out of it. It was handled from USAID from then on. It wasn't the
8 best, but it was better than...and then of course Jerry Daniels was one of the guys that
9 worked for a long time with us in Laos, an awfully good man, and he stayed with the
10 H'mong and he would stay for months on end without coming out for any kind of rest.
11 He really was good. So what he did, they sent him down first to work with USAID.
12 Then, when they finally made the decision that some of these refugees were going to be
13 brought to the US, then they sent Jerry down there to work on choosing them. The idea,
14 all of this, the idea was to get people who had supported us directly during the war. Well,
15 Jerry was really good because he knew, he knew all of them, you see. None of these
16 other people were doing the process, they said no, and so the tendency was to pick the
17 people who looked good. See what I mean? They didn't know what they'd actually
18 done. Of course if you'd asked them, they'd all done it because they all wanted to go.
19 But see, Jerry was perfect because he knew everybody. He stayed working on that until
20 he got killed. A thing blew up in his apartment. They had a gas and hot water heater,
21 and something happened to that thing and Jerry was killed in the apartment, awful. I was
22 already back here, see, and every time he came back on leave he would always call me
23 and we'd talk for a long time. He lived in Montana, really a good man, and did a good
24 job. Of course the H'mong have never forgotten Jerry. Of course, they ended up
25 bringing so many back.

26 SM: How many H'mong refugees were they able to settle in Thailand? Was it
27 the 12,000 total?

28 BL: They didn't stay there. Those eventually almost all moved to the US.

29 SM: Right, but the temporary settlement?

30 BL: It was all that 12,000 that was on that base. But then they started pouring
31 into a lot of other places because the ones we really brought out, when it looked like the

1 communists were really going to go after the H'mong and then many more started
2 fleeing, so they had refugee camps all along there. They were all supported by the
3 International Refugee Organization and all this sort of different things.

4 SM: How much longer did you stay in Thailand after '75?

5 BL: It was about four or five more years.

6 SM: You left in 1980?

7 BL: Yeah.

8 SM: What did Thailand do, if anything, as the communists were taking over
9 Cambodia and of course North Vietnam eventually invaded Cambodia?

10 BL: I know they did, but I think that was really what defeated the communist
11 insurgency in Thailand. It folded very shortly after that simply because when all those
12 refugees poured across the border, they mixed with all the local people there in Thailand.
13 I think the Thais, down to the grass roots level, decided they didn't want nothing to do
14 with the communists, and I think that's what really beat the communist insurgency here.

15 SM: In Thailand?

16 BL: In Thailand.

17 SM: Right, but what happened, if anything, in Thailand when the North Vietnam
18 or communist Vietnamese forces invaded into Cambodia? Did that effect Thailand at all?

19 BL: It worried the hell out of them because they thought they might come on to
20 Thailand. Sure, they were worried. They were ready to cooperate with anything the US
21 wanted to do about it.

22 SM: Did they start building up defenses along the Cambodia border at all?

23 BL: Oh yeah, but a border like that you can't really hold it anyway. It's a long
24 border, and they started watching it a lot. Then when the Vietnamese came back into
25 Cambodia and took over, the Khmer Rouge, then they all fell along the Thai border.
26 Thailand was always involved.

27 SM: What was it like leaving for you when you finally did leave in 1980?

28 BL: What was it like?

29 SM: Yes.

30 BL: You mean here?

31 SM: Was that difficult? Was it a difficult decision to make?

1 BL: No, not really. I thought it was time for me to go; the main thing was getting
2 my kids back here. Oh yeah, I hated to leave Thailand in a lot of ways. The sad part was
3 already gone as far as... I could see way back the way things were going and it definitely
4 ended up that way. But, you know, I get along... it was a sad thing. I don't let things like
5 that bother me all that much as far as changing my whole outlook on life or anything like
6 that. I figured I did the best I could. I thought we did awfully well.

7 SM: What would you say are the most important lessons we should take away
8 from our experiences in Thailand and Laos? As a young intelligence officer, what would
9 you say is the most important thing that someone should learn from that experience?

10 BL: I tell you basically how much you can get the local people to do in most of
11 these situations, because you look at everything we managed to accomplish in Laos and
12 get things to do. If you would have told the people before that ever started, they would
13 say, "Oh hell, those people could never do that." So, I think anytime we've got to do
14 something, whoever the local people are, that there's a lot of good people there. If
15 they've got the motivation, then we can get them to solve their own problem. It's the
16 best thing you can do, because we don't solve it. In other words, we're going to
17 eventually go home, wherever it is. Because we're so far away from everything, it's
18 getting to where it's not as easy to do and you just wash your hands and go home, and
19 that's the end of it. It's getting harder to do that because now they've got rockets that
20 will fire all over the world, all this terrorist business and all that. But, I think it's still the
21 fact that we can get the local people to do a lot of things because motivation, we don't
22 have really any interest in controlling any of those places. Pretty soon the locals I think
23 learn that in fact you're not going to stay permanently. You're going to help them. It's
24 like Thailand; I think we could have done a better job in keeping our close relationships
25 with Thailand. We'll never have any real problems with Thailand. I think just like they
26 might be...and I think they will generally support the US in whatever we want to do.
27 Now individual politicians will attack the US and they'll say things and all this. Like
28 right now, we don't have those bases and everything there that we used to have. They'll
29 say they don't want it because they're afraid that that'll turn all the communist countries,
30 I mean a lot of other countries against them for having them there, but I think focus it the
31 right way and we could still do that if we wanted to. In fact, we were talking about the

1 Vietnamese and how much they were... wherever you went, the Vietnamese wanted the
2 Americans to work with them and do all this sort of thing. Another big thing is we don't
3 have a good Naval base in the Far East. Once we lost the Philippines, we just don't have
4 it. I bet you that we can work out a deal and go back to Cam Ranh Bay because it would
5 help the Vietnamese a great deal. It's a perfect... its' a very good base. I'm sure there's
6 been some thinking on that. In other words, we just lease Cam Ranh Bay. I've got a
7 feeling it can be done.

8 SM: What do you think is perhaps some of the more important things we could
9 have done better in our policies in Southeast Asia that we could learn from today?

10 BL: I can't really think of anything we haven't already pretty well covered. I
11 think if you look at the end of things, we still are in a very good position in Asia. I think
12 we've got to be careful of how we deal with the China problem. I really believe that we
13 ought to be very careful of being too critical of the Chinese government.

14 SM: Now when you say Chinese, you mean the Nationalist Chinese or the
15 People's Republic?

16 BL: No, the People's Republic. The National Chinese we're committed to help
17 and they don't have anybody else to help them. We don't have a problem there. But, I
18 think we've got to get them not to deliberately antagonize the Chinese government either
19 because I don't think the Chinese are really communist anymore, but they're very afraid
20 of losing control of the country and that's a very legitimate fear. I'm not sure we ought
21 to do anything that's going to rattle the cage. What I'm afraid of, when they get off on all
22 of the human rights and all this sort of thing, because if the government actually fell in
23 China I think we'd have a lot more problems than we've got now because it would be
24 like Russia, I think those individual provinces and all. But, the Chinese have progressed
25 a great deal politically. They're afraid of changing too fast, too. I just don't think we
26 ought to go out of our way to rattle the cage. It doesn't matter what you do. Anyway,
27 that's what I think.

28 SM: Yes, sir. Well I know we're out of time, so I'm going to go ahead and stop
29 this for now. This will end the first series of interviews with Mr. Bill Lair. Thank you
30 very much, sir.