

# Australians at War Film Archive

## Barry Petersen - Transcript of interview

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### Tape 1

**NB. This transcript is of an interview filmed for the television series, Australians at War in 1999-2000. It was incorporated into the Archive in 2008.**

- 00:49 Well when we were gathered together, the first people selected for the Training Team, most of us had heard very little of, or knew nothing of Vietnam,
- 01:00 and we received a briefing at the Intelligence Centre in Middle Head and learnt all about it then. Now we did have two officers who had been to Vietnam and one was Brigadier [Ted] Serong and they briefed us on Vietnam. The rest of the Intelligence Corps people were briefing us on what they had read. They had boned up on what they knew about Vietnam and the war but to us it was a fairly remote
- 01:30 war in those days and naturally, we were very excited at being selected to go to that war because most soldiers are in the army because they, they want to go to war. They want a taste of why they joined the army and we still had that spirit of adventure. That changes of course, as you get older, and you become wiser and you actually turn against wars. I find that most soldiers who are involved, particularly combat soldiers prefer not to see wars
- 02:00 again. My first impressions of Vietnam of course when I arrived there, were quite different to what we had been briefed on when we were at the Intelligence Centre. Saigon was different. It had lots and lots of troops, lots of soldiers, but it was very, very, still very French in those days. The wide, tree-lined boulevards and it was exotic. I had been to Malaya and it was later
- 02:30 called Malaysia previously, but Vietnam was different and quite exotic. And I went with John Healey up to Da Nang and spent a week with him up there before I returned to Saigon and was then taken up to the highlands. Now of course the highlands, my CIA [Central Intelligence Agency (USA)] controller, I was actually on loan to the CIA basically because of my previous
- 03:00 experience in the counter insurgency efforts in Malaya, and Malaysia, as it was later called. In 1962 when the first
- 03:30 Australian soldiers, officers, warrant officers were gathered together at the Intelligence Centre at Middle Head to be briefed on Vietnam, most of us didn't know very much about Vietnam at all. We were, this was our first briefing and indeed some of the people who were briefing us had only learned about Vietnam from what they had read. Brigadier Serong had been to Vietnam so in fact we were being briefed on a war that,
- 04:00 to Australia in those days, was still very, very distant. Of course I didn't go with the first Training Team. I didn't realise at the time why, but I was obviously selected for training in special operations and before I went with the second team, I replaced John Healey. Now when I arrived in Vietnam, of course I found it totally different to what I'd expected. I had been to the
- 04:30 east, to Malaya previously during the Emergency and of course, that I found different at the time, but it was not at all like Malaya. It was exotic. Saigon was very, very French with its wide boulevards, its tree-lined boulevards and quite exotic to us. I went with John Healey, the officer I was replacing up to Da Nang where he'd been working, but I was destined to go to the Highlands and
- 05:00 because of my special operations training, the American CIA wanted me to go to the highlands and disarm the Montagnard [indigenous people of Vietnam]. But my first taste up in Da Nang was a taste of what John Healey had been experiencing. I spent a week up there before returning to Saigon and then meeting my CIA controller and the CIA team, which, at that stage, was working out of a house in a suburb, in one of these
- 05:30 leafy, tree-lined boulevards, in what we would call a garage workshop, and that was the CIA headquarters or the covert action branch, a part of the CIA headquarters in Saigon at that time. Later, for security reasons, they moved into the American Embassy which was not the American Embassy that

was later built providing a platform for the departure from Vietnam. This was an old building that had been taken over by

06:00 the Americans and it was their embassy.

**Just talk about your relationship with the CIA ...**

Initially the American CIA, Central Intelligence Agency, controlled the Special Forces, but this got up the nose of the American Defence Department and

06:30 they eventually took over the Special Forces. But in the time that the CIA controlled the Special Forces they armed literally hundreds, thousands in fact, of mountain tribesmen in the highlands of Vietnam. The mountain tribesmen are called Montagnard, a French term for mountaineers. Ngo Dinh Diem, the President at the time, woke up one morning and realised that he'd had these

07:00 Montagnard revolt against him previously, but here the CIA, through the American Special Forces, had armed thousands of them with American weapons, obsolete weapons but still weapons whereas in the previous revolt the Montagnard only had crossbows and spears. Now they had firearms and he said they must be disarmed. Not only he said they must be disarmed, his cabinet said they must be disarmed, and my task, as I found out,

07:30 was to go to the Highlands and disarm these people. Of course it didn't quite work out that way. I met my agent, my controller, a fellow called Brian Mills, a very effective CIA operator who had spent many, many years in South East Asia, mainly in Laos and Thailand. Now Brian took me up to Banatuit. We flew up in a small Air America aircraft. Air America was the pseudo, private

08:00 airline which provided transport for the CIA and the State Department. And it was just a cover for the support aircraft, and we flew up to the highlands and landed at the town airstrip and I expected the Highlands to be jungle, but of course, we flew over jungle and we flew over patches of jungle, large areas of jungle but Banatuit itself was sparsely treed. It was a dusty, mountain town

08:30 set on this high plateau, a plateau which descended into Cambodia to the west. All of the streams in the highlands flow westward, not eastward towards the sea, but westward towards Mekong and they're separated by the Annamite mountain chain from the coast of Vietnam. That was the general setting and of course, Banatuit itself was really a little hick town and Brian gave me

09:00 thirty-five thousand piastres as they were called then, thirty-five thousand dong they would be called these days, which at that time was about three hundred and fifty American dollars and said, his instructions were to me were, well, just to get to know the people, get the feel of the place and find out if the people we are supposedly supporting here really exist. There was supposed to be two hundred and fifty Montagnard,

09:30 armed Montagnard tribesmen controlled by the province chief and then there were another hundred controlled by the national police. As it worked out there were only a hundred in existence, the other two hundred and fifty under the province chief appeared to be just names on paper and of course the money was being provided by the CIA to support these people. Now the lead up to the overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem

10:00 was, shall we say, reinforced by the discovery that most of the money provided, being provided to these programs was in fact not reaching anyone except pockets of the province chiefs and their officials. But getting back to, getting back to settling in the Highlands - Brian left me with this three hundred and fifty US dollars in Vietnamese piastres and said, "I'll be back in two weeks."

10:30 Six weeks later Brian came back and I owed money all over town for food and I owed the little hotel I was staying at and I had found myself an interpreter. And Brian came back and of course, Brian was a very easy going type, as he buzzed the town in his little CIA aircraft I went out to meet him at the airfield and I was more anxious to get my hands on the money to pay off all the debts around town. But Brian said, "Oh let's go and have a drink." And of course,

11:00 we had to go and have a drink to one of these places where I owed money. It was very uncomfortable but we got by and then as things developed of course, Brian's support was greater and greater but to be without my, to be without contact with anyone for the first six weeks and just to feel my way around the town. I couldn't speak Vietnamese and I found I could speak or understand some of the Montagnard dialect because I could already speak

11:30 Malay and they are Malay or Polynesian, so I could understand the gist of what they were saying. But bumbling along as I like to think of it, trying to find my feet. I believe that I have an attribute. I tend to feel my way by observing the strangers I'm with, and if they're foreigners then I follow suit and I learn from them rather than barging in and being very much Australian.

12:00 They soon get to know that I'm Australian, but this is how I pick up some of the customs and the ways and I find it's very effective in fitting into particularly a foreign society. Now Brian of course, he was used to that. He had been in Asia as I said, for well, twelve years alone in Thailand and Laos at the time I met him and he was a great help

- 12:30 to me. We found that only the hundred men under police control existed and they were controlled by the chief of secret police. They were called the Suretai[?] and Brian said to me, "Well, now you're going to have to take these people over." Now that wasn't a very easy thing to do. We were very lucky in that the director of national police was a very good friend of Brian's, and soon became a very good friend of mine.
- 13:00 But as we led up to the overthrow of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his government, the programs were terminated. The CIA, all of the propaganda programs in the country at the time were controlled by a brother of the President, a fellow called Ngo Dinh Kahn, and Ngo Dinh Kahn operated out of Hue in the north. And the director of the covert action branch, a fellow called Cliff
- 13:30 Struthen[?] flew up to Hue and said, wanted a meeting with Ngo Dinh Kahn and he didn't actually get to see Ngo Dinh Kahn but he got see Ngo Dinh Kahn's spokesman. And the spokesman said, "Look, you just give us some money and we'll use it the way we want to use it." And of course when this was reported back to the head of station for the CIA it was decided to terminate all funds to the, not only the
- 14:00 propaganda programs but to the Special Forces and only the Special Forces which were operating in combat were funded, the Americans continued to fund those people and those people only. So Brian persuaded the director of national police to fly down to Saigon and put the case to Ngo Dinh Nhu, another of Diem's brothers, the President's brothers and Nhu actually lived in a palace with his wife Madam Nhu along with the President. Now
- 14:30 they were older brothers of the President and seemed to control ... I found that those of us who were attached to the CIA were fighting a totally different war or we were involved in totally different activities to the remainder of the training team. The remainder of the Training Team was in the early stages just specifically training
- 15:00 South Vietnamese forces, South Vietnamese irregulars etc, but the CIA, I found that we were in a totally different world answerable to the CIA. Now my predecessors were not involved in field work and this was a problem. Brigadier Serong was the one who made sure that I was involved in field work because his insistence was that one, we must have Australians involved in the field work and that's why I was put with the
- 15:30 mountain tribesmen in the Highlands, the Montagnard as they were called. Now of course, they were quite alien to the Vietnamese. They were referred to by the Vietnamese as moi, which means savage and the Vietnamese tended to look down on them. But at the same time the Vietnamese used them, and the CIA were paying, were funding two programs in the highlands and I was, one of my tasks was to find out whether or not the
- 16:00 personnel being funded by the CIA, the actual tribesmen being paid on the ground existed. Of the three hundred and fifty that the CIA were paying for in the Highlands only one hundred existed. The two hundred and fifty under the control of the province chief were non existent and the one hundred under the control of the director of national police did exist. Now after the government of Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown, of course these people were not being funded at all. That was part of the reason
- 16:30 for the overthrow of Diem, the funding was reduced drastically. I had to look after these people, feed them, clothe them, provide even soap for them and then when I took them over, the CIA started to fund them again. But taking them over from the police particularly because they were under the control of the secret police, the Suretai required a bit of trickery but my CIA controller organised that very, very well
- 17:00 and I then had on my hands a hundred Montagnard. But then I had to extract them from the compound behind the police headquarters to get them out of the police clutches, physical clutches. And so I found a village, I identified a village, a village called Bunya [?] and the province chief, that came under this control so he signed the village over to me. I actually had to go and do a stock take
- 17:30 and I signed for a village and moved my people into that and then no sooner had I done that than my CIA controller Brian Mills told me expand, recruit another hundred and fifty. I said, "Well I haven't even trained the first hundred." Now Brigadier Serong gave, loaned me a warrant officer, Danny Neville, an Australian warrant officer and he came up and spent I think it was about a
- 18:00 month or six weeks with me. And we trained a training cadre, the better Montagnard, the brighter ones, we formed a training cadre out of them because it was physically impossible for me to train every man. So by training a training cadre then supervising the training cadre we managed to train a large number of people. Danny left me and then I was left on my own again until Brigadier Serong said, "Well look, I think you need an assistant." So they gave me Bevan Stokes -
- 18:30 full time. Bevan had been moved from another part of the country and had had some experience further north, but not in this field of work. So Bevan and I undertook to expand further. All I got from Brian every time he came up with the bag of money was, recruit more people. Then he put it to me, he said, "Look, you should form a little private army." And I said, "Well, that's politically dangerous in this country." He said, "No, no, no," he said, "give them a little esprit de corps, something like the Ghurkhas."
- 19:00 So I thought, 'Well we've got to give them identity.' We already had camouflage uniforms we were issuing them with, but I thought well, maybe a tiger's head badge. Now this came to my mind because

we were starting to make an impact on the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese and they were calling our men the Tiger Men, possibly because the camouflage uniforms were striped rather than a blotchy pattern and so I thought, 'Okay tiger

- 19:30 head.' So we produced this silver tiger's head and a green beret and that gave them the pride they needed and we grew from that one hundred men over the two plus years it became a force of one thousand, two hundred.. We had two principal tribal, well three tribal groups, but two of them the Radai and the Jurai were Malay or Polynesian ethnically
- 20:00 and spoke a Malay type language, the basic Malay language. The other group, about a quarter of the force were Mon'Khmer, they were Mon-Khmer ethnically and they spoke a language very close to Khmer the principal, predominant language in Cambodia. Now it ended up that Bevan Stokes took the Mon'Khmer, to the south
- 20:30 and built an operational base down in Lac Din [?] and an airstrip. The CIA said what are you doing - you don't need an airstrip down there. But I could foresee the day that very, very tight mountain pass was going to be ambushed and I said, "We must have an airstrip in case that does happen." And when the CIA didn't provide the money for it we hired elephants, dragging logs behind them and actually built the airstrip ourselves
- 21:00 with labour of course and Bevan built the camp, the base camp down there. I realised that the Montagnard were very disgruntled with the Vietnamese and I had to move them away from Bunya because Bunya was a bit too close to Banatuit. What brought this to a head was in late September, at the end of September 1964 the Montagnard revolted against the Vietnamese administration. Now this
- 21:30 involved the revolt by all of the Special Forces bases and each of the bases had about three hundred and fifty Montagnard and at that time I had about three hundred and fifty in the, well operating from the base in Bunya and they besieged the town of Banatuit. And I knew about the revolt just before it took place and the Vietnamese obviously guessed this and tried to force me to
- 22:00 tell them what was going on. First the director of police, then the province chief, but as it happened we weathered that revolt and it was prolonged a little but I was involved during the revolt in rounding up the leaders of the revolt. General Kohl, General Ngu Kohl who was co-commander of 2nd Corps flew down from Pleiku and they flew in a Vietnamese airborne
- 22:30 regiment to secure the town, to bolster the defences against the Montagnard rebels. And General Kohl told me to go out and gather the rebels together to come in for a talk with him, and that took place from about two o'clock one morning through until four o'clock or I think longer. And then he told me to go and take these people around the following morning and help put down the revolt.
- 23:30 I touched the American Central Intelligence Agency, I found that my brief was to first of all go up and monitor a small force of men, of mountain tribesmen they were supporting in the highlands under the control of the province chief and the police chief and
- 24:00 I found that most of this force was non-existent. Really I found that the CIA didn't know what they were about up there. What they were doing at the time was they were issuing chopsticks and rice bowls with the Vietnamese flag on it and t-shirts with the Vietnamese flag on it and things like this to promote shall we say, promote patriotism among the mountain tribesmen, the
- 24:30 Montagnard. And these forces were supposed to disseminate this propaganda and tell the people how good the Saigon government was, but of course in the eyes of the Vietnamese the Montagnard were just savages. In fact they used the term moi, which is a word for savage to refer to them and of course there was this animosity, considerable animosity between the Vietnamese and the Montagnard. So really it seemed to me to be wasting time trying to convince the Montagnard they should,
- 25:00 be loyal to the Saigon government. What the Vietnamese, with the American insistence, were introducing at the time were strategic hamlets, defended hamlets. Now of course defended hamlets are very difficult to defend if the only force to defend them are the people who have to go and plant the rice and harvest the rice or go hunting. Who stays there to defend the village? And of course, these villages were picked off one by one and after some time, I realised that it was a waste of
- 25:30 time defending hamlets. All you were doing was setting up a place where the enemy could go and pick off the people and the weapons at their leisure. I've always felt that the best form of defence is a mobile defence where you don't have everybody inside the base. You have them outside the base with the minimum number of people in the base. You have them in ambushes and patrols. Now it's very hard to do that with people who have got to go and plant rice and harvest rice and support their families and so on.
- 26:00 So I found the most effective way of doing it was to recruit young men from the villages, pay them, clothe them, feed them and then organise them into eight man teams. If, for example, you had an area where there were four villages, two men from each village would make up a team of eight men. Now my instructions were, you were not to stay in any village overnight and you were not to stay in any village more than one day at a time but
- 26:30 they would automatically move because of the composition of the team, they'd want to go and visit their

own villages and it meant when a team visited a village at least two of those, two members of that team were members of the village and had access to good intelligence. I didn't mind. I found after bumbling along and working this system out I didn't mind if the Viet Cong did get into the village, because when they did get in the village all it needed was a little buffalo boy to slip

- 27:00 out of the village and tell one of the teams that the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese have entered and by radio communications the other teams could close in and ambush around the village. Now of course the reaction of the Viet Cong was to carry out reprisals and I know this is a dreadful thing to say but it became a very, very effective weapon in motivating the Montagnard against the enemy by in fact creating a threat to the enemy
- 27:30 and the enemy carrying out reprisals on innocent villages and it's probably the most effective propaganda tool you can use. Not little rice bowls and t-shirts and chopsticks. I laugh at those and I laugh at leaflets too because I find that they're not very effective propaganda tools. Now the application of propaganda I found was to look at the weaknesses in certain areas and say okay,
- 28:00 what affects these villages detrimentally in their relationship with the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese? And then I'd work on that particular program. I would get the word, comments from the Montagnard for example, why should we send our sons to join the Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese or the Saigon Army or my son has been conscripted by the Saigon Army. There was no conscription of Montagnard by the
- 28:30 South Vietnamese. It was just a bad interpretation by the villagers. It was purely voluntary, but of course, like all soldiers these young Montagnard were sent to other provinces to operate and when you're in a strange province you're bumbling your way along, the same way as I initially bumbled my way along. What my aim was to do was to form a people's army to operate among the people. The same way that Communists do. Then I
- 29:00 turned the tables on the Communists because they became reliant on Vietnamese they had brought up from the coast and North Vietnamese and Vietnamese totally alien to the area, and of course we turned the tables on them. They were the ones bumbling through the province. They were the ones who were increasing their force in size to cope with the hit and run tactics my force used and as a result that put them on the defensive and we really got up their nose. I found it
- 29:30 quite difficult at first to convince my eight man teams that they were quite safe if they would just hit and run and live to fight another day. Just hit run, hit run. They felt that by only having eight men they were very weak but in fact they were very strong. They made less noise moving through the forests. The Vietnamese had the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese had to bolster the size of their forces to cope with this and of course they became easier targets
- 30:00 and for that reason we became a very effective fighting force in Vietnam. From the first, from the hundred men I started off with we ended up with one thousand, two hundred and they weren't all eight man teams but we had included in that what we called drama teams. These people were troops of actors and actresses who could sing, play musical instruments, act and they'd go into the villages. We didn't have a TV of course
- 30:30 and the villages didn't even have radio and of course when a drama team would come, everybody in the village wanted to look at the performance. And these people would perform on a veranda at the end of a long house and they had little skits, there'd be with a little propaganda slant about how the people or how the Communists were in fact detrimentally affecting their livelihood. Now one of the ploys I would use was
- 31:00 when the people would say, "Oh yes, but the Saigon government take our soldiers to be in the army and we don't see our soldiers again." I'd say, "Yes, but the Viet Cong also take your soldiers," because the Viet Cong were actually conscripting youth from the villages and forcibly taking them. The difference was that I was paying the people in my force. The South Vietnamese Army was paying, albeit very poorly, the Montagnard and their force but the Viet Cong were not paying the
- 31:30 Montagnard they conscripted. As well, I was feeding my force, as the South Vietnamese Army were feeding the Montagnard they had. The Viet Cong were taking food from the villages to feed their conscripts and of course they would use some of these conscripts to go down to their village to get the food. Now a lot of these conscripts just wanted to escape and we'd help them. When they managed to get word that they were coming for a food lift, to get food from the village then we would deliberately
- 32:00 ambush that trail. The message we would tell them is you're leading, we'll let you through the ambush and hit the others and of course the Viet Cong didn't like this either but it then legitimately allowed us to capture, if you can say capture, the informant. If that informant defected, of course the enemy would come in and would carry out reprisals on the family or the villagers but if we captured them there was a perfect reason for them to join our forces and
- 32:30 in that way we learnt quite a lot about the operations of the enemy because we had defectors which we had captured or whom we captured.

## Tape 2

- 00:40 What you've got to realise is the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese had a very poor support system, a very poor logistic backup. They were operating in the jungles. They were trying to feed their people on local, locally obtained food. They were carrying their weapons and equipment away down from the north. They really
- 01:00 had to fight an uphill battle, whereas we had support at hand all the time. Now this applied to their method of propaganda, but what they would produce is they'd produce from, on paper that they'd have somebody buy at a market with printing ink and screen printing that they could buy locally in a market, they produced a little local newspaper and they'd have the doves of peace at the top of it and it would be
- 01:30 called News from the Front. It would be in the local dialects or the local language to impress the people. Now the stories in it, the local stories were accurate, but the stories about what was going on elsewhere in the country were outright lies. It was just propaganda. 'Our heroic forces attacked the Da Nang air base and destroyed so many dozen American aircraft and killed so many hundred Americans.'
- 02:00 And of course the local people, who have no access to the media, they look at that and they say, 'Oh, is that right?' but then they read other articles about what is actually happening in the province and they see that they're true so that gives credibility to the lies about what's going on in other provinces. A very effective tool. What we used to do is, when our teams would find the first of these newsletters left outside villages
- 02:30 or left on trails or left on roads, we would get a copy back quickly and we would copy it but delete the articles about, delete and replace the articles about what happened locally and we would exaggerate those. We would say, 'Oh, our victorious or our heroic forces attacked the district chief or district of Lac Tien, killing the district chief.' Of course, which was not true. They might have fired a few shots in one night to frighten them,
- 03:00 but we'd say they overran the district headquarters. An outright lie and of course, this totally removed the credibility that the Communists had built up and this probably hurt them more than any number of people we killed or captured, because we were undermining their credibility throughout the province and adjacent provinces and this they didn't like at all. With regards to the other types of operations we carried out, the Vietnamese
- 03:30 had resettled a lot of Vietnamese from the heavily populated coastal regions where Communism was well ingrained in the people, and they'd resettle them in the mountains, into what they called land development centres. They took over the most fertile of the land of the Montagnard, the mountain tribes owned and built these fortified land development centres. Now of course the
- 04:00 Viet Cong recruited a lot of young men from these coastal provinces thinking that by taking them to the Highlands they would be meeting uncle and aunt and cousin and therefore would have access to these strategic or these land development centres and they did, and we found that the land development centres were becoming fortified villages under the control of the Communists. Now unfortunately the Vietnamese Army and the Vietnamese province chiefs,
- 04:30 regional forces, were operated in a strictly conventional military manner and they would approach with artillery, with trucks, with armoured vehicles, they would approach these land development centres invariably running on mines, on land mines, invariably being ambushed and they could never get to them. Sometimes they'd bomb them or napalm them, but generally these were not affected because they built trenches and pits in the villages and all it did was
- 05:00 alienate the villagers and the land development centre even more against the Saigon administration. So the province chief said to me on one occasion, "Why don't you try? Why don't you get your Montagnard to do this?" Now this is politically very dangerous because of the alienation of the Montagnard by the Vietnamese and to have the Montagnard attacking Vietnamese was not very helpful in improving relationships. But
- 05:30 we tried it and it worked. What we would do was, because our teams were controlled by radio and they were eight man teams, we could bring them in from all over the province and we'd put our blocking forces in position on the far side of the land development centre and we'd approach from a mountain area or from an unexpected route on foot. We would attack generally around midday, early afternoon because that's when the Vietnamese including the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, that's
- 06:00 when they have a sleep. They have a siesta. And of course we would approach them during the siesta and attack during the siesta. They were too alert at night and we were successful in overrunning several strategic or several of these land development centres which had become fortified villages, enemy controlled fortified villages. Now I used to go on most of these attacks, but on one
- 06:30 occasion when I couldn't go on them, on one, I came back. I was able to put a stop to the fighting, a stop to any killing on this occasion, we'd bring out lots of prisoners and lots of weapons, but on this particular occasion I had to go to Saigon for some reason or other and I came back. I didn't cancel the operation. We went ahead with it and I came back and I said to the Montagnard commander I'd

- appointed, I said, "How did you go?" "Oh very good Sir we captured... (I think it was
- 07:00 about) a hundred and three or a hundred and thirty weapons." And I said, "Oh, how many prisoners?" "Oh no, no we didn't capture any prisoners, Sir." And I said, "What, no prisoners?" I said, "We always we get prisoners!" and he said, "Oh no Sir no, no, no, they fought until they died." And this obviously was the Montagnard taking it out on the Vietnamese. I don't think they wanted to take any wounded or any prisoners and I wasn't there to put a stop to it and this is where I found my warrant officer assistant who had been operating with the
- 07:30 Mon 'Khmer tribe, same as myself with the Radai and the Jurai, we could put a stop to it. If we allowed them to go ahead they would kill everyone and they were quite ruthless because they hated the Vietnamese so much and particularly because these people had settled on their fertile lands and taken their lands from them, treated them like savages. And you must remember that these resettled people were peasants. They weren't aware people. They were peasants and they looked on
- 08:00 the savages, the moi as they called them simply as savages, even though they were not very well advanced themselves. It was very difficult. I found it was very, very difficult for me to keep the Montagnard, my forces on an even keel and not have them go overboard. They did on one occasion while we were there, a Montagnard revolt against the Vietnamese administration but
- 08:30 I found the whole time I was there, the two years I had not only a force to run, but a political tightrope to keep the Vietnamese happy and to keep my Montagnard force in line and of course to curb their autonomy aspirations. They wanted independence from the Vietnamese, right or wrong, and to keep that at bay, keep them focused on the task of fighting the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese
- 09:00 was, required a lot of diplomacy, tact and sometimes a bit of force.
- Just talk about how you knew that you were having an impact, and mention Viet Cong, just paint a picture.**
- We first found that we were coming to the attention of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese when some of their propaganda leaflets and some of the documents we
- 09:30 captured from prisoners or people killed in battle, we found that they were referring to this, the Tiger Men, the Tiger Force, this new force, this dangerous force and these documents referred to us as that and we could see we were having quite an impact on them. There'd be letters from superior commanders saying be very careful of this new force, the Tiger Men and so on and we became known as the Tiger
- 10:00 Men. We did end up with a name later called Trun Song Force, given by the Vietnamese but generally we were referred to as the Tiger Men. And then of course I found that, word came back that they had a price on my head. Don't ask me how much it was but apparently they wanted me dead or alive and I think really it wasn't because we were, or the killing or anything like this or the captures we were making, it was because we were really alienating
- 10:30 the Montagnard villagers against the Viet Cong and the Viet Cong in turn were having to, were finding they were having to build up their forces in strength and add more Vietnamese to their forces because they would have very reluctant conscripts they'd take from time to time from among the Montagnard. But really here they were with a lot of conscripted Vietnamese from peasant families
- 11:00 who were not being paid and some of them were very highly motivated, but of course a lot of them were just plain conscripts like the Montagnard they used to take as well. I think that it was very obvious to me and of course it became obvious to the Vietnamese and South Vietnamese intelligence network that we were having an impact and indeed near the end of my tour, my two years there
- 11:30 the ambassador at the time, Ambassador General Taylor, Maxwell Taylor, came up for a personal briefing but his comment after that briefing was what an effective program, a people's army. This is what we should be doing everywhere in Vietnam, all over Vietnam but that isn't necessarily so. I was just applying a technique to a particular area and to a particular people which worked. You couldn't have done the same thing
- 12:00 in a province where they were only Vietnamese and no Montagnard for example, and I found that the Americans tended to think that what was good in one area was a panacea for the whole country. It's not, and I don't think the Americans, this is one of the failures of the Americans. They feel if something works then it will work everywhere, and I found for example during my second year there my controller at the time, a fellow called Stu Methven, the CIA, the Agency controller came up
- 12:30 and said, "We want you to start to raise some counter terror teams." And I said, "What are these counter terror teams you talk about?" He said, "Well, they're teams of little, small teams of men we train as assassins and their job is to go and assassinate people earmarked by the province chief and his intelligence people or by our own intelligence information." And I said, "No way." I said, "If anyone has to be knocked off I have the men to do it."
- 13:00 And from time to time we do it, but no way do I want to create a special force of assassins. I called it a Frankenstein monster. I said, "No, I won't be in it," I said, "we'll cope and we'll knock off people who

are positively identified as agents, enemy agents but no professional assassins." Now later this program became known as the Phoenix Program and I never ever took part in it and I think it was

13:30 a very bad program. It was one that was very badly used, misused, because a lot of innocent people died in that program. A lot of people who for some reason or other government officials had grudges against them and decided to get rid of them and of course they'd used this Phoenix Program by pointing them out as Communists. It's very much like McCarthyism in the States, somebody is named and they're blacklisted because they're suspected of being a Communist except in Vietnam

14:00 of course they were killed and their families were killed. So it's a program I detested and I'm very pleased now that I refused to do it and in doing so, of course, I got up the nose of the CIA. They didn't like it at all. As Stu Methven said, "It's working everywhere in the country." But I said, "It may be, but we don't have to have it working here." At that stage I felt I had enough power and respect from the Vietnamese and the Montagnard of course

14:30 and the Americans to be able to stand up to old Stu Methven.

**Can you talk about - were Australians involved directly in Phoenix? Can you talk a bit more about Phoenix?**

15:00 The Phoenix Program as I know of it, I wasn't involved in it, it didn't occur in our province while I was there because I refused to participate, but the Phoenix Program was a program, was a brainchild, an idea of somebody in the Agency who thought let's do what they do, what the enemy do. The Viet Cong and

15:30 North Vietnamese identify the agents of the government or informants and they target those people and assassinate them. 'Let's turn the tables and let us have teams of assassins to kill, to assassinate people who are identified by the South Vietnamese or American intelligence networks or by the province officials.' And quite frankly, I guess tit for tat it's

16:00 okay, but it's a program that could be abused and was abused from what I read. But I didn't have any practical experience with the program myself because as I said I just refused to participate. It was in the early stages called the counter terror program or the counter terror teams and it later became known as the Phoenix Program and my attitude is, my attitude was that you could do

16:30 without teams of assassins, without this Frankenstein monster. If you needed somebody to knock somebody else off it's easy to put your hands on a, particularly if they're Montagnard and the people you want to knock off are Vietnamese. It's a bit difficult to get Montagnard to knock off Montagnard but it wasn't hard to get Montagnard to knock off Vietnamese or vice versa. It was only recently that I found

17:00 that the CIA or elements of the CIA, renegade elements I'd probably term them, who had plans to have me killed. When I first heard this story I thought, 'Well why, why would they want to do that?' I had no idea that this was to go on and probably the only reason if they were going to do that was because I always looked, covered by behind and I felt that okay that's probably the reason I survived it. But

17:30 I tried to substantiate this and I checked around with several people and I spoke with a fellow who was, had a good connection with the CIA operatives and one particular operative who may have been responsible at the time was, he said to me, dismissed years later in Europe because that is the technique he used to use. Now on reflection I really don't think the plan was to

18:00 knock me off. I think the plan was, if I resisted being removed from the Highlands then the plan was, as a last resort, we'll arrange his demise and I think that that was just the thought that came to their head, came into their head. In fact all they had to do was cut off the flow of money and weapons and that would have been enough to get rid of me, but to have me bumped off as my first informant said it would have been,

18:30 he was told by the CIA that it would have been made to look like an accident and I would die a hero's death, which sounded a bit stupid to me. But I think it was really very much like Apocalypse Now, if he won't come out, if he won't leave the Highlands we'll get rid of him. Now the plan to get rid of me of course came about because, near the end of my tour I had been getting up the CIA's nose by not

19:00 forming counter terror teams, the forerunner of the Phoenix Program. But as well, my program had come to the attention of the American Ambassador and he wanted a personal briefing from me and he flew up to the mountain town of Banatuit where I briefed him. Now of course when the American Ambassador flies anywhere so do very senior host country officers, personnel, government officials and so on so there were a lot of Vietnamese with

19:30 him as well as American senior officials listening to the briefing. Now of course he said on his way out, his aide told me later that he turned to the Central Intelligence Agency controller I had at the time and said, "Don't we have any Americans who can do this sort of thing?" And of course that was the kiss of death. Now that was when the CIA then started to suggest that I had spent over two years in the highlands and it was time I had a rest. You

20:00 know, nobody had spent that long out in the field operating and really it was better if I had a rest and of course I resisted this, and the Australian commander at the time, Brigadier Jackson, supported me. But



what brought it to a head was the Montagnard who had revolted during the Montagnard revolt in '64 had formed an army in exile and a government in exile in Cambodia and the head of that, a fellow called President [UNCLEAR]

- 20:30 had sent back three battalions of those forces into Vietnam with the instructions that their commanders were to report to me and to offer their services to fight with my men against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese. And of course when these emissaries came and contacted me I was a little shocked of course. They came direct from the rebel leader himself in Cambodia and I said, "No, they can't do that." I said, "This is the kiss of death for my program, for my force if I bring you
- 21:00 people in and add them to my force." I said, "No, you must be open with the Vietnamese. You must go and talk to the Vietnamese commander." They said, "No, we don't want anything to do with the Vietnamese." I said, "Well, don't have anything to do with me, because the only way I want you to fight in the province here alongside my men if the Vietnamese want you to, is under the Vietnamese control and with the knowledge of the Vietnamese." I said, "I wanted nothing more to do with you."
- 21:30 So I took them back to the base, but I reported this to the Vietnamese general and he said, "I'd like to meet these people, I am prepared to meet them." So I took, I went out and arranged this meeting and took them in. They spoke to the general but then they became very shall we say very bullish and said, "No, we want autonomy." They started to make their autonomous demands and the general wouldn't accept that. He said, "Look, I can't
- 22:00 give you that." So then I took them back and I said I want nothing more to do with you. A couple of days later they said we want another meeting with the general, this time we will be fair. So I arranged another meeting with the general but the fact that I was bringing in these rebels, I had contact with these rebels, reinforced the opinion of some Vietnamese that I may have been behind the rebel movement, the autonomous movement in Cambodia as well and this added strength to the American
- 22:30 effort to replace me with an American. But one thing I must say is that when I was in Saigon before leaving the country I had a request to meet with the permanent, permanent head of the prime minister's department, at the request of the prime minister and he debriefed me and his instructions at the time through the intermediary were that the Americans were not to know about this meeting. So I did have a private meeting with
- 23:00 the, and a very lengthy one with the permanent head of the prime minister's department. So it was very evident that at a very higher level the Vietnamese felt that I was not involved in the movement in Cambodia and I was not involved in bringing those forces back into Vietnam and that I was a scapegoat.
- I've always been able to fit in with Asians ever since I was about fifteen
- 23:30 but one of the things I make a point of doing is to get to know people and to fit in with them. I observe what they do. I don't have to read from a text book that you don't touch people on the head or you don't do this with people, you don't do that with people. I always observe what they do and then I feel now what can I do and how far can I go without, you know, losing discretion, without being circumspect as a foreigner.
- 24:00 So doing that and then trying to understand the people I fit in fairly well and of course you have to do that because sometimes you're required to eat some dreadful stuff and drink some dreadful stuff and do some stupid things like getting up and dancing. Dancing like an Indian around a totem pole and drinking some of the rice wine which sometimes tastes quite foul and eating some of the food which really is,
- 24:30 you know, uncooked offal and, you know, pork that may be a month or so old, cooked in salt but it's putrid and you've got to get this down your gullet and of course you have this battle in your gullet trying to get this rubbish down. And if you give it a go and eat it and show that you're not walking around as a lot of young people do these days with a bottle of water in one hand and buying Kentucky Fried Chicken
- 25:00 or a hamburger at Sizzlers or whatever. If they see that you're prepared to get rid of that bottle and eat the local food and do as the locals do then you're accepted far better and of course putting up with some of the rice wine drinking ceremonies where really they put you to the test and sometimes the test runs away with you, you lose absolute control but they don't mind that. They think well, it's fair go. And there's one
- 25:30 little story I'll just tell you about. The rice wine where they tell you how many containers you're supposed to drink and they have a little boy sitting on the other side with the container and he's dipping into water and he's topping up this rice wine and you have to keep drinking. And I quickly worked out by observing, and this is the thing observing others, that you're allowed to siphon some of it out into glasses and offer it to distinguished people around the long house or to anyone you like. And then of course, by doing that every now and again the little boy on the
- 26:00 other side loses count and you soon escape from the jar because you're spending a lot of time at the jar siphoning out drinks for other people and not drinking too much yourself and you can escape before having it run out of your ears and your mouth, which it does sometimes. So really you learn these little tricks of the trade. Sometimes of course I couldn't escape and I had to eat and drink what was given to

me whether I liked it or not and you just grin and bear it and you

26:30 learn to carry a lot of anti-diarrhoea tablets with you.

**Just talk about what you had to do to be part of and earn the respect of the Montagnard.**

I think the reason the mountain tribes, the Montagnard really got to accept me is they could see after a great deal of difficulty on our part, they could see that

27:00 the program was effective. They could see that, for a start, they could see the young men who were members of our teams; they could see our casualties were very low because of our hit and run operations. When I say they could see these young men, their own members of their family would visit every couple of days and of course they weren't taken away in an army to another province and this was great and they were being paid and they were being fed. This was great. I found

27:30 that people then saw how effective we were and they saw what effect we had on the enemy. Now, whereas in Vietnam the War of Liberation, as the Communists called it, was quite popular among Vietnamese. It was not all that popular among the Montagnard or some of the other minority groups and quite frankly the Montagnard were very, very happy to see me even

28:00 though I wouldn't support them in their autonomy aspirations they were very happy to see me building them into a cohesive force and in fact they gave me a name. I didn't realise this until we were building the main base which was called Dam San, and you know I hadn't given it a name and I noticed that some of my closer offiders among the Montagnard were calling it Dam San and I said, "What's Dam San?" "Oh, that's named after you Sir." I said, "Me?" I said,

28:30 "Why do you call me Dam San, what does that mean?" He said, "That was the name of a legendary warrior. He ran, he beat every one of his foes in battle but he tried to take on the sun and he ran at this large rock, (which in fact does exist in the province), and threw a spear at the sun and the sun struck him dead." And I always say well this is probably what the CIA did to me. I overstepped my mark and they got rid of me. But in fact they used to

29:00 give me hand woven blankets and loincloths and shirts and so on and the final shirt they gave me was really a very good one, fringed. And it's the one that is now in the Australian War Memorial with some of the other artefacts, loincloth and so on and it indicated to me that they were treating me like a chieftain and it made me feel very accepted. In fact after two years with these people, over two years, to have to leave them was

29:30 quite an anguish. I found that, the worst I felt was when I read the news that the highland town of Banatuit had been overrun and the province had been overrun by the North Vietnamese and I couldn't help but think of the people who had worked closely with me and who may be identified. I had to be very careful in their protection and even today I have to be very careful in contacting any of them or speaking with any of them because

30:00 I found, I find even today that the Vietnamese don't seem to harbour a grudge against their enemy but they do seem to harbour a grudge against their own people who betrayed them. Who didn't fight for their cause and in fact fought against their cause and therefore I have to be very careful when I go to Vietnam, whenever I go to Vietnam in the way I speak with and contact some of my former people. I was there in 1990 for

30:30 example and some of the people who had worked on my program were, recognised me and I had a cover story. I pretended I was a writer returning to the Highlands and this is the reason I got permission from the secret security service to go to the Highlands, only just got permission. But up there of course some of my people recognised me but they knew that I was surrounded by security people and I had to be very careful. No words were spoken but that look and the way they grasped my hand. Now

31:00 it's common for the Montagnard or for any, a lot of people in Asia to hand things with two hands and very often the second hand, the left hand is around the wrist or the forearm of the right hand and they put this out to greet me and then when I took their hand they would then grasp my hand and bend down and kiss it. Now when you tell the security service that you're only a journalist visiting the Highlands back in the early 60s and you were just going back to look at how they were assimilating

31:30 with the Vietnamese, to suddenly see your hand being kissed by forty year old men they realised there's more to you than what you've said. And after that particular trip my Vietnamese escort from the foreign ministry in Hanoi was taken in for serious questioning and I had gone on to Cambodia but when I returned I was warned that I might be questioned as well. As it so happened the foreign ministry intervened and I wasn't but it just

32:00 goes to show you that they're very sensitive towards this but not to me. I find my former enemy are now friends but I've got to be very careful with their fellow countrymen who did fight against them. When the Americans found that the war wasn't going all that well for them, both in Vietnam and at home,

32:30 in the loss of support of their people, the population they felt it was time to pull out and they coined this phrase, Vietnamisation. In fact the Americans were the ones who were gung-ho in going in and of course they looked at their allies like ourselves, the Thais, the Koreans etcetera to go in with them and

of course the New Zealanders, I shouldn't forget them and of course to go in with them, be part and parcel. So of course when they started to pull out we had to pull out as well but the fact that they

33:00 had gone in there telling the Vietnamese yes we're behind you, we're all the way to victory and then to suddenly say well okay now, it's your war, to pull out, and leave them and call it Vietnamisation and give them all the materials and equipment etcetera and say well go it alone, that's not the way to do it and personally I feel it was a betrayal. It was just President Nixon's way of getting out of it and perhaps saving votes

33:30 that he would otherwise lose.

**INTERVIEW ENDS**