The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training
Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

# AMBASSADOR SAMUEL B. THOMSEN

*Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy*
*Initial interview date: August 26, 1996*


## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Environment
Reporting duties
Contacts
Buddhists
Tony Lake
AID
Relations with provincial government
U.S. Marines arrival
Montagnards
Green Berets
Ethnic Cambodian presence
"Street Without Joy"
Viet Minh
USIA burned
R&R - USA - 1965
Marine Corps Adviser
Marine operations
General Thi vs. Ky
Da Nang in chaos
General Walt
Viet Cong units
Corruption
Cam Ne village incident

Cornell University - Graduate Study 1966-1967

South Asian and South Eastern Asia studies

Vientiane, Laos - Political Officer 1967-1970
Contacts with North Vietnamese embassy
Ambassador William Sullivan
U.S. prisoners released
Peace venue negotiations
PM Souvanna Phouma
Laos in Vietnam war
CIA
AID
Pathet Lao
Ambassador Mac Godley
Air strikes on Ho Chi Minh Trail

U.S. Marine Corps (TDY) 1970-1971
Political-military

State Department - Political/ Military Affairs 1971-1972

Spare Assistant to director and Political -Military Affairs Bureau
Staff Director, Political-Military-Interagency Group

State Department - Office of Military Assistance and Sales 1973-1973
NEA and AI responsibilities
Technical Assistance Field Teams (TAFT)
Mid-East arms "clients"
Saudi Arabia's White Army
Iranian assistance

Saigon, Vietnam 1973
Vietnam Accords - 27 January 1973
Ambassador Bunker
Consulate General established
Changes in Consulate establishment

Hue, Vietnam 1973-1974
Joint Military Commission
ICCS problems
James Bullington
After Cease Fire
Thieu government
General Truong
U.S. troops leave Da Nang
Watergate influence
PRG/VC down ICCS helicopter
"Third Vietnam"
Economic rebirth
Oil embargo effect

Gaborone, Botswana - DCM 1974-1976
U.S. interests
Ambassador David Bolen

Lagos, Nigeria - Cultural Attaché 1976-1979
General Obasanjo
Ambassador Donald Easum
Students to U.S.
Manpower development
Nigerian universities
Corruption
President Carter's visit
Second Festival of African American Culture (FESTAAC)

State Department - Nigerian desk officer 1979-1981

## INTERVIEW

*Q: This is an interview with Samuel B. Thomsen for the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy.*

*Thomsen. Obviously that's Scandinavian.*

THOMSEN: Norwegian.

*Q: Sam, let's start where that Norwegian came from. Could you tell me a bit about when and where you were born, and about your family.*

THOMSEN: I was born July 10, 1931 in St. Paul, Minnesota. My father's father had come to the United States as a 17 year old in the late 19th century, worked on the railroad, settled in a little place called Bald Eagle Lake...

*Q: He came from where?*

THOMSEN: From Norway. Oslo, a railroading family. He worked for the railroad and was a tower man, homesteaded some property, had a few houses and a dairy farm. My mother came from Canada. Her great grandfather had been in parliament an explorer. They'd moved to Little Falls, Minnesota, where my mother went to school with Charles Lindbergh. My mother went to St. Cloud Normal School which is now the University of Minnesota at St. Cloud. My dad went to the University of Minnesota for a year, then began the depression. He dropped out of school, married my mother, and produced me.

*Q: Where did you grow up?*

THOMSEN: The first ten years in Minnesota, in Bald Eagle Lake which is near White Bear Lake.

*Q: What about school?*

THOMSEN: Moved to California when I was ten, and I went to UCLA.

*Q: But before school. In grammar school, where were you?*

THOMSEN: White Bear Lake was “the big city”, and “Washington” was the name of the school. My dad had gone there. In fact, I had the same third grade teacher as my father. I had the same name as my father and she used to call him “Sam Mule” because he was so stubborn and she reminded me of that when I first appeared in her class.

*Q: You moved where? To California then?*

THOMSEN: To California, to Los Angeles.

*Q: You moved there in about '41?*

THOMSEN: 1941. My grandfather had lost the dairy farm as the result of the depression, and my dad went to California to look for work. I remember I grew up drinking cow's milk right out of the cow. I got to L.A. and one of the fascinating things is remembering opening a container of homogenized milk, and being shocked because it had no cream. There was no cream at the top. I finally learned what homogenized milk was.

*Q: Where did you go to in California.*

THOMSEN: To Los Angeles, specifically to Hawthorne, California, which was very close to Northrop Aircraft, it was so-called the South Bay Area.

*Q: What was your father doing? Did he find work there?*

THOMSEN: He worked for Northrop Aircraft during the war, and went back to the family tradition, worked for the railroad for the rest of his life.

*Q: Where did you go to high school?*

THOMSEN: A place called Leuzinger High School. Adolph Leuzinger, I think he may have been a Civil War general; I'm not even sure.

*Q: It doesn't ring a bell with me.*

THOMSEN: Absolutely not.

*Q: How did you find the high school, the education there?*

THOMSEN: Well, it was a lower middle class community, and the teachers were average except for two or three that were outstanding, who affected my life a great deal. But I got a good education.

*Q: Who were the ones who affected your life?*

THOMSEN: The one who really affected my life was a woman named Evelyn Gawthrop. She had been the band teacher, and I began playing the clarinet in the seventh grade. When I got to the high school, she had moved to the high school to take over the band there, and for the rest of my high school career she was kind of a mentor. I was pretty lazy and she used to chew me out for not doing my geometry better. Told me that I was able to do far better than I was doing, and convinced me that was true, and turned me around.

*Q: Everybody needs somebody like that.*

THOMSEN: That's right.

*Q: In high school did you get any feel for the world and foreign affairs?*

THOMSEN: Not really. I'll tell one anecdote. When I was in the seventh grade we had to do a paper on what we wanted to be when we grew up. And out of somewhere, which I have no idea where, my paper was titled, "I want to be an ambassador." But I really wanted to be a high school music teacher, with a tennis court in my back yard...this is southern California, and live the good life, and that was really all I had in mind.

*Q: That's a little hard to dissuade one. I really should ask now, where did you go wrong. After you got out of high school, you graduated when?*

THOMSEN: 1949.

*Q: Okay. World War II was over, the Korean War was about a year away. Where did you go?*

THOMSEN: I was intent on being a music teacher. This was a lower middle class area. Probably two of our 150 graduates went to college. The rest of us either went right into jobs or probably a dozen of us went to a junior college near by. I was a music major at El Camino Junior College, played in the dance band, and took solfeggio and harmony, and piano, and began making my way.

*Q: What was your instrument?*

THOMSEN: I was a tenor sax player, clarinet and tenor sax.

*Q: What happened?*

THOMSEN: It's a strange story. At the end of my first semester I bought a Selmer Tenor Saxophone, which was the finest instrument you could have. Having done that on a time payment plan, I discovered I couldn't go to school and pay for my tenor sax, so dropped out of school and went to work for the railroad following my father grandfather's footsteps. After a while of that...

*Q: What were you doing for the railroad?*

THOMSEN: I was in what was called the auditing office. And my guess is they thought a good deal of me. I could probably have been the vice president of the Santa Fe Railroad for auditing, whatever the title was. But instead I joined the Army, which was probably a pretty foolhardy thing to do.

*Q: You joined the Army when?*

THOMSEN: Early 1951.

*Q: Obviously the Korean War was on, and you must have been somewhat eligible for something, weren't you?*

THOMSEN: I'm not sure actually in looking back whether I would have been subject to the draft or not, very possibly. I was 18 years old. But a friend of mine was playing in the Sixth Army band, he had played the trumpet in my old dance band. He encouraged me to audition, and I auditioned and was accepted as a musician in the Army.

*Q: Did you go up to the Presidio in San Francisco?*

THOMSEN: That's where I was supposed to go but they ended up sending me to Fort Mason which was at the foot of the Embarcadero about two miles away from the Presidio, which was even better.

*Q: How long were you doing that?*

THOMSEN: I only did that for nine months until I was levied to Korea.

*Q: So you went to Korea when?*

THOMSEN: I arrived January 1952, just after the retreat from The Yalu. The retreat had been completed.

*Q: A very, very difficult time.*

THOMSEN: Things had stabilized. I joined the Seventh Division. The Seventh rear was in Chunchon, we were with Division Forward. I was with the marching band, but we pulled division security, and formed small groups that played kind of morale boosters for the front line troops.

*Q: What was the Seventh Division? Were they occupied...*

THOMSEN: Right in the middle, right on the DMZ.

*Q: So we were still fighting.*

THOMSEN: Still fighting, but the lines were pretty stabilized.

*Q: How long were you there?*

THOMSEN: Only six months.

*Q: You left when?*

THOMSEN: Left Korea, went back to Japan in the summer of '52. In those days you accumulated combat points for a month if you were with a front line division. So in six months I had 24 points, and then they started rotating and those with 24 points went back to Japan. So I joined the 24th Division in Japan and was with their band in Sendai, Japan, a post called Camp Schimmelfennig.

*Q: Schimmelfennig was a general in the Civil War.*

THOMSEN: I think he was in the Civil War.

*Q: In fact he was in the 11th Corps which my grandfather was in, that's why I know that. It stopped being occupation duty by that time.*

THOMSEN: While I got there the occupation was completed. Mark Clark actually came to Schimmelfennig and there was a ceremony to end the occupation.

*Q: How long were you in Japan?*

THOMSEN: Until 1953.

*Q: What was defense duty like in Japan?*

THOMSEN: The 24th division had units all over central and northern Japan, and the 24th division band moved from the side of Mount Fuji. (I thought of the name just this morning--The 24th Tank Battalion was on the side of Mount Fuji), and one of the regiments was far north Honshu, and we would travel by train from place to place and play concerts. We also did a concert out of Tokyo on a monthly basis which was broadcast on Armed Forces Radio.

*Q: I probably heard you because I came to Korea...I was with the Air Force in the spring of 1952, and then was stationed in both Misawa and then at Johnson Air Force Base near Tokyo until '53.*

THOMSEN: We may have even played a concert for you.

*Q: Did you get any taste for exotic lands?*

THOMSEN: Possibly to some extent but an anecdote which really...it's not an anecdote, it really is the trigger. I was named the troop information and education NCO for the band, and the Army produced the material. I had to do a weekly program for the unit, and one week the material sent down was, "Why We Are in Korea?" And the "Why We Are in Korea?" was because “Dean Acheson gave Korea away”. It was a reference to a speech that he gave in which he drew a security line around Asia which excluded Korea. I'll never forget this. I was instructing my troops, I instructed them the State Department was responsible for the loss of North Korea, and we were specifically responsible for the war in South Korea. I remember saying at that time, I don't want to be a band teacher. I want to join that outfit and help straighten it out. My intention from then on was to take a political science degree and try to join the Foreign Service. I totally turned around.

*Q: You left Japan in '53?*

THOMSEN: I left at the end of '53 and actually got...another little story. I left Japan in late '53, actually arrived on a troop ship at Fort Lewis, Washington I think the day before Christmas, 1953. Put us on a troop train to Camp Stoleman outside of San Francisco, and

I was released for leave Christmas morning, 1953. I flew home and got there in the early afternoon, only to discovered that my parents and family were all gone somewhere else to celebrate Christmas. I had intended to surprise them. Well, it worked out all right. I called a friend of mine who lived a few blocks away, he came and got me and we went to my grandmother's where I suspected they were located, and they were. So we had a wonderful homecoming.

*Q: How much longer were you in the Army?*

THOMSEN: Another fortuitous event. While on leave I was advised that I could probably get an early discharge if I were enrolled in college. So I went to UCLA and enrolled and I was discharged 18 days early and was able to enroll in the spring semester of 1954 at UCLA.

*Q: Did you go to UCLA for the full time?*

THOMSEN: Yes.

*Q: What were you taking at UCLA?*

THOMSEN: Political science. I was really intent on joining the Foreign Service.

*Q: Had you done any research to find out what is this peculiar thing called the Foreign Service?*

THOMSEN: None at all. It was done in a totally naive way.

*Q: What was the spirit of the times as far as the political science course was?*

THOMSEN: We had a number of conservative professors, and a number of liberal professors. I remember one professor who espoused communism. But UCLA was going through quite a period of its own. The young socialists there...there had been a murder just a week or two before I arrived which was apparently a political Young Socialist party. The Dean of Students was tied in closely with the FBI. As a Korean veteran I was regarded as a conservative and someone who would become a part of the apparatus. So I was invited to a meeting with the Dean of Students who briefed me on the difficulties they were facing. It was called the “Little Red School House” in those days.

*Q: I'm surprised. What was sparking this? I mean the height of the Cold War...*

THOMSEN: It wasn't yet the height of the Cold War. It was really the beginning, I think, of a real sensitivity toward the Cold War. This was simply, I think, a post-Second World War romance with socialism by some of the young liberals. I really didn't investigate it very much, but I would guess some of those who had gone through the '30s and '40s were

still at UCLA and were influencing some of the students. But there was a very strong conservative group at UCLA at the same time.

*Q: Southern California has always had this ying and yang. Did you get in the middle of this?*

THOMSEN: I didn't get in the middle. I really didn't have any interest at all in it. I stayed on the outside. But essentially I was prepared to be observant and if I saw anything untoward to make it known. No one approached me, and I was not invited to go anywhere so I simply went to my classes.

*Q: How did you find the professors? Were they kind of all over the place?*

THOMSEN: Yes, a great variety. Dean McHenry who was one of the strong professors, later became Chancellor at Santa Cruz, was a fine instructor. There was a professor known as Charlie Titus. Charlie Titus had been a strong public affairs assistant who helped meld the University of California into a single entity for budget purposes, taught a great course on politics which was extremely Machiavellian, taught us how to behave in politics. By and large the faculty was competent and interesting, but not ideological, the ones I ran into.

*Q: I'm trying to think when you were there...I guess McCarthy had already been dismissed, that was much earlier. You graduated when?*

THOMSEN: '57.

*Q: Why don't we stop at this point because it's just 2:00, and pick it up next time. You graduated from the University of California in 1957, and a little about how you viewed the world, and how things were going. We'll just carry on from there.*

*Today is September 9th, 1996. Let's start off with..1957 you're at the University of California?*

THOMSEN: Yes, kind of wrapping up the UCLA experience. One of the significant experiences there was a program called "Project India" which was run by an organization known as the University Religious Conference. The URC was an organization conceived under the concept that was espoused by an organization made up of Christians and Jews during the '30s and '40s, which was essentially that there was a kind of a civic religion which had as salient parts of its philosophy that we would get along with each other, and that we would be proud to be Americans. It was a good idea, especially at a secular institution like UCLA.

The URC comprised the principal Jewish Rabbi, the Catholic Cardinal the, the Episcopal Bishop, and representatives from the Methodist and Presbyterian and a whole bunch of others. It was devised to take account of the constitution of California which said, there

shall be no sectarian religious or partisan political activities on university campuses, and since this was sectarian, it could operate. But essentially a lot of its activities were not all religious, but were civic, and one of them was Project India. It was devised by a group of students who had been briefed on India...this is back in 1955-56, that the Indians did not know much about the United States and they were very suspicious of us. There was a very strong communist movement among the students in India, and Chester Bowles and others were interested in trying to counter that. So Project India went a couple years. Ed Peck, who you may know, Ambassador Peck was a Project India in '55 along with Jerry Lewis who is a senior Republican congressman today. I went the year after they did. And as a result of that I developed a very strong interest in Asia and South and Southeast Asia particularly. That would come into play later on as we get into my Foreign Service career, but that's a little bit of a background. It did give me a real taste of public diplomacy because USIA and USIS provided our principal support in India. We traveled throughout India but the various USIA branch posts gave us a lot of support. And when we were in Delhi the ambassador and others were very, very helpful. But again, USIA was our principal support.

*Q: Did you find yourself up against the Indian intellectual class who really had picked up the British intellectual classes dislike of these brash Americans? Were you hit with this particularly?*

THOMSEN: We ran into it but in our own kind of naive way we rolled with it and enjoyed it, and gave it right back to them. For example, we would do work projects. In Calcutta we would go out to a village and put up a dispensary, or repair something, and bring dozens and even hundreds of students with us. So the pseudo-intellectuals who were kind of looking down their noses at us, would do that but in a somewhat isolated way because most of the students were very excited about what we were doing, and very intrigued by a bunch of American college students spending time living in their hostels, attending their classes, playing basketball with them, or tennis, or whatever their sports were. We just kind of hung out with them.

*Q: This was?*

THOMSEN: June of '56.

*Q: What degree did you get?*

THOMSEN: Bachelor of Arts in Political Science, with speciality in international relations.
*Q: So when you came back in '57 you're out, what whither?*

THOMSEN: Well, back up just a quick step. I'd entered UCLA in February of '54, and that fall I took the written exam for the Foreign Service, and passed it as essentially a sophomore with only a year of university. I took the oral and was kindly told to go home and come back when I grew up, and had graduated. So I had taken it again in, I guess, late

'56 or early '57, and passed it again. But at the same time the University of California in Santa Barbara had asked for someone to come and help start a URC there. And having been very much taken with what the URC stood for in terms of its world view, I accepted the challenge of starting a URC at Santa Barbara. Of course, it's also a very attractive place to spend a few years.

*Q: What's your denomination?*

THOMSEN: Episcopalian. The Episcopalian Bishop was very active and very supportive of this.

*Q: So what did you do in Santa Barbara?*

THOMSEN: Well, I essentially started the same interfaith organization working with a Jewish Rabbi, a Catholic priest--there was no Bishop in Santa Barbara--with the Episcopal clergy, and the others, and created a little institution off campus that became involved in Project India and in other similar projects. At the same time, I was supporting the various denominations and faith groups in their activities. A couple of quick anecdotes. One, the Episcopal chaplain had a small chapel and associated activities hall which was the only thing worth using near the campus. The Episcopal church authorized me to put an office in there, along with the chaplain, and to use the facilities. So on a Sunday evening Hillel Council, the Jewish student group would come in and have their fun, and during the week the club, the Catholics, the Methodists, and the Episcopalians would do their thing. Well, one Saturday Hillel Council came to have a spaghetti feast and they had no red wine. So they asked me if the Episcopal chaplain would mind if they used his Mogan David communion wine, and I said he hadn't blessed it yet so go ahead and take advantage of this interfaith opportunity. So they used Episcopal communion wine to go with their Kosher meat balls.

But in any case, we did take Project India from Santa Barbara and it was a worthwhile experience. But in early 1960, or late 1959, I took the Foreign Service exam again, after three years. I'd done my three year tour, my commitment, passed it again, and by May of '60 I'd passed the oral and had been told I would be on a register.

*Q: When did you take the oral examination?*

THOMSEN: I think it was April, or May of '60.

*Q: Do you recall any of the questions? Or how it was set up? I always think it's interesting to get an idea of what they were doing.*

THOMSEN: This was my third oral. Essentially they asked me a few geography questions, a few current history questions. It was not at all...I was 27 years old, it was not at all critically challenging. By this time I didn't feel at all hesitant, or certainly not frightened by it. It was three friendly senior Foreign Service officers asking someone

who...it almost appeared from the beginning they already regarded as a colleague, and putting me through my paces.

*Q: When did you come into the Foreign Service?*

THOMSEN: In October 1960.

*Q: This, of course, was just before the Nixon-Kennedy election which Kennedy was elected. Could you characterize a bit about your entering class.*

THOMSEN: Delighted to. It was class number 40. I don't know what that number means.

*Q: I'll tell you where it starts. There had been a hiatus during the McCarthy period, and class one started on July 5th, 1955. I know because I was a member of class one. There had been classes before but a complete stop and then it picked up.*

THOMSEN: Was Nick Veliotes in your class?

*Q: No, no.*

THOMSEN: It may have been a year later. Did we start re-numbering again?

*Q: They started re-numbering again, yes.*

THOMSEN: In any case, we were the 40th class, and we were the class of 40 because we had 40 members, which was very large. Among those who are still around, the youngest was John Negroponte, who just returned from ambassador to the Philippines. Curt Kamman, and Mary Curtis who became Mary Curtis Kamman, and a very fine Soviet specialist, William Shinn who had just gotten an advance degree in law from the University of Moscow. He was totally fluent in Russian to the point where he'd studied law at the University of Moscow. Bill unfortunately suffered early in his career from Parkinson's disease, and had to retire. He'd been the first Consul General, I think, in Leningrad, and then was forced to retire for medical reasons. They were the premier members of the class of 40. A bunch of good people, but you're reflecting on the fact that we were during the Nixon-Kennedy campaign caused me to recall that we were a very social group. We liked each other a lot, and one evening Mary Curtis, whose father had been the DCM in Haiti and therefore was a very distinguished senior member of the Foreign Service, invited us to their home to watch the first Nixon-Kennedy debate. And we all sat there, I was an Eisenhower Republican veteran of Korea. We took a poll, I and one other, a former Lieutenant Commander in the Navy, who was over age but somehow had gotten an exception to come in, a law professor, we were the only ones who voted for Nixon. The other 38 members of the class were strong Kennedy...

*Q: To carry on this, did the Kennedy era of activism sort of infect your group, do you think?*

THOMSEN: Well, certainly it affected us. We were all excited by Kennedy, no question about it. You recall by '61 with the opening to Africa we created the Bureau of African Affairs torn out of part of NEA, and started putting up embassies, and some of our young officers went off in that direction. I was a member of the management staff, my first assignment, and among other things became involved in drafting the legislation which would replace ICA (the old Marshall Plan organization) with the Agency for International Development, which was going to be a lean, mean development machine. The original legislation was going to untenure every member of ICA, and require that they be re-employed by the new much smaller, tougher, more pointed organization. But when congress got a hold of the legislation they reestablished tenure for everybody and it simply became a successor to ICA in every respect. I think the original Kennedy intent would have been a very positive thing. It was a very interesting thing for a young officer to be involved in.

*Q: You were in management from when to when?*

THOMSEN: From early '61 until August '62.

*Q: Where did you sort of fit within management?*

THOMSEN: First of all, the superstructure of the Department in those days was a deputy Under Secretary for Administration and that was a very distinguish elder statesman, whose name escapes me, but one of the auditoriums is named after him.

*Q: Loy Henderson.*

THOMSEN: Loy Henderson was our deputy Under Secretary, but his was a totally staff responsibility. Off of his box in the organization chart you had FSI, the Inspection Corps, and the Director General. But he had no operational responsibilities. The real operator of the Department of State was the Assistant Secretary for Administration. And that was Bill Crockett, and under Bill Crockett you had Deputy Assistant Secretaries for Personnel, for Budget and Finance, one DAS for both for both, one DAS for operations, and a management staff, a little staff of eight of senior officers, and two junior officers which reported directly to Bill Crockett. And among those senior officers were Ed Smith, Coulter Highler, and Gladys Rogers. There were five others who obviously who were just as distinguished, but those three are the [ones] who come to mind. Gladys was the principal drafter for the AID legislation, I worked as her henchman. We worked with a legislation called a body called the Humelsine Task Force. Humelsine, I think had been the Executive Secretary under Marshall. I think he took over Colonial Williamsburg later. But to study the Department of State and make it more stream-lined and more efficient. The first interagency support plan for the new Peace Corps. I went over to the Peace Corps with Ed Smith to try to devise a concept for how the State Department would provide administrative support for Peace Corps entities abroad. And we were trying to soak them for something like 30 or 40% as “overhead” and they decided they'd do their

own administrative support until we knocked it back down to about 20 or 25%. But those are the kinds of issues that I was involved in as my first assignment. And all of it was associated with the Kennedy reforms, and Kennedy emphasis on foreign affairs.

But the final act in this, was when in August of 1962, I was on my way to Montreal, as a vice Consul, Chris Chapman, who was my personnel counselor, called me down to tell me that since I had put Hindi, that's the Indian connection, as my first language choice, quite clearly any Asian language would obviously be of interest to me, and since President Kennedy had levied a requirement on the Department of State to provide six of its "brightest and best" to study Vietnamese, I would be one of those volunteers. So in August of 1962 I was among the first officers to study Vietnamese.

*Q: Before we get to that, you were in one of the branches of sort of the revolution that was going on in the State Department, what was your impression of obviously some levels down, but how William Crockett had operated?*

THOMSEN: Well, first of all I liked Bill Crockett a lot, and I didn't have any understanding of the implications or ramifications of what would become later the four cones, and all of this sort of thing. I was simply a junior officer, there was so such thing as a cone. I presumed I would serve in the political...I knew that better than I knew anything else, but I wasn't limited to that. Crockett would talk to us about administration being "the handmaiden of policy", and I really even to this day regard that as the finest definition of what administration should be. It isn't the manager of policy, it isn't the competitor to policy, it is the handmaiden, it is the supporter, and the better you do that job, the better the policy makers can do their job. And that was his philosophy. And the management staff...we were trouble shooters a lot. A cable would come in from an ambassador, or even from USIA about a problem and they'd stick me on it, and I'd run around and get all the details, and then come back with a senior officer make a recommendation on such things as ambassadors claiming they weren't getting their official vehicles on time; or USIA complaining they weren't getting proper recognition from the Indian government about their diplomatic titles and rank;or CIA use of various kinds of cover inappropriately. This sort of thing. It kept me very much involved in the process and structure of foreign policy and of the State Department.

But forgive me for diverting. Crockett was single-mindedly trying to provide the best support possible for the formulation and execution of U.S. foreign policy. I thought that was the finest approach one could have to that, and everything he did was in line with that.

*Q: Did you within his staff, get any feel about something that comes up from time to time in these interviews on either side of the issue, about members of Crockett's staff who were rather junior, but trying to change how the Department of State worked and running up against the barons of the various geographic bureaus? You were somewhat removed from that, but did you get any feel for this?*

THOMSEN: I didn't at all. Bill Bradford, I think maybe a special assistant, was a guy who I used to spend a lot of time chatting with, but the idea that Crockett was trying to revolutionize the structure of the Department is not something that I came across at all. There are two kinds of anecdotal things that I should say about this period. One of which I elected president of the Junior Foreign Service Officer Club during this period, and we did a lot of fun things. But one of the things, Crockett wrote me a letter as soon as he learned this, in which he said, congratulations; “if there is anything I can do to enhance the status of the junior Foreign Service officers, let me know”. And I arranged that every Thursday at 4:00 Crockett would appear in what was then the second floor dining room, the old Executive Dining Room. And any junior Foreign Service officer who wanted to, would come and have a cup of coffee and could blow his steam off, or could complain, or could make comments, and we had wonderful bull sessions with Crockett. That he had essentially had volunteered for...and kept very assiduously on his calendar.

A couple of other things. As president of the Junior Foreign Service Officer Club, we initiated the first formal swearing in ceremony in our history. My swearing in had been on a Saturday morning and the group 22-25 with a GS-5 saying you've all filled out your forms, now will you please stand up and raise your right hands. But in about July of '60 with Crockett's support and approval we initiated the first 8th floor swearing in ceremony with Tyler Thompson, who was the Director General in those days. Tyler Thompson was another one of these folks who was staff, and he had no line authority at all. Tyler Thompson was a great Foreign Service officer who distinguished our swearing in ceremonies, and who spent a lot of time encouraging younger Foreign Service officers. But the Director General, who the Foreign Service Act of 1946, had identified as similar to a Chief of Naval Operations, or a Chief of Staff of one of the armed services who would have access to the president on behalf of the Foreign Service. By 1962, I think mainly the Hoover Commission of '49, and the Wriston Act of '56, had emasculated so that he had no line authority whatsoever, and was essentially an adviser to the Secretary on personnel matters, and on the Foreign Service. But Tyler Thompson was our first patron. Again, that was an example of Crockett's interest in the Foreign Service and particularly in the Junior Foreign Service.

*Q: There was almost a phenomenon in society in the United States at that time, and the Junior Foreign Service officer was known as JFSOC seemed to represent some of this. I was kind of in and out, I was just a little too old for it, but not old enough to feel estranged from it. It became more pronounced, I think, in the later '60s, but almost as though the generation that came up of the '60s was untainted by original sin. The idea was, don't trust anyone over the age of 30. For a while the Junior Foreign Service officers actually had a certain amount of influence. They weren't just flunkies. People kind of looked over their shoulder during that time.*

THOMSEN: I think the dissent channel started during that time. But I preceeded that. I was still one of the old timers. It may be that some of the things that we did helped...and as you say, it was really a cultural thing as well as generational, but I think we proceeded that.

*Q: But you established the machinery. It's sort of faded now.*

THOMSEN: Oh, absolutely.

*Q: Particularly as the Vietnam War heated up.*

THOMSEN: That's really what happened. I think in the early '70s we kind of suffered from it in terms of some of the officers' attitudes.

One more anecdote I would like to put on the tape, and I think probably in the fall of '61, the Operations Center was initiated and that's another one of the little landmarks that I want put a claim on. You will remember the name of the Counselor Achilles--I want to call him Norman Achilles.

*Q: Theodore. I think his son was named Norman.*

THOMSEN: I knew Norm, but Ted Achilles was the Counselor of The State Department. One day he called Coulter Huyler, who was a senior analyst and said, "Coulter, the president is really unhappy, he can't find anybody in the Department of State except the Secretary himself after 5:00. The military has the Military Command Center, CIA has a 24-hour watch, we've got to do something." He said, "would you, as an experiment, spend the night there with the Red Line to the Command Center and another line with access to the numbers USIA, CIA, and the White House. We're going to see if the State Department by having a 24-hour watch will increase its effectiveness." So Coulter came to me and said, I've been asked to do this. Would you mind sitting in with me? And I said, I'd love it. So the two of us went into this empty barn of a room with a cot at one end, and a hotplate, and a small executive style refrigerator, two desks, a red phone and a couple of black phones, and we sat there. That night, there was a coup in Southeast Asia, and a head of state from Latin America was lost over the Atlantic and we were on the phones all night long. The next day Coulter was able to report to the Counselor that he felt probably an operation like this might be effective in enhancing the State Department's participation in all of this stuff. So when I go over to the Ops Center with my class, (The "Washington Tradecraft Course, which I ran) and they talk about the origins of the Op Center, I would chime in at some point, I can't resist, and mention that I was the first junior, watch officer.

*Q: Great.*

*On the management side, you were talking about trying to cut the new AID establishment down, was it the feeling that there was either a lot of dead wood or the bureaucracy had gotten too big?*

THOMSEN: Both, and it only got worse over the decades subsequently.

*Q: Why did congress tenure in the whole thing?*

THOMSEN: I have to admit I cannot give you a good answer, and I've thought about that. Essentially they were simply upset with Kennedy's attempt to manipulate beyond what they thought was his executive authority. This organization which had been created by congress apparently, and they wanted their oar in. My guess too is, that a lot of ICA folks lobbied with them on an individual basis, and simply won a lot of individual support, which is certainly an effective way of getting things changed. But the fascinating thing was that when congress got a hold of it they started chopping it to pieces.

*Q: Well, it was a good lesson, wasn't it? I mean, what can be done, and what can't be done, and what seems like a great idea all of a sudden runs across the political realities.*

THOMSEN: Part of I think probably was the State Department's ineptitude in its dealings with congress and not getting its point across. I'll get to this in a couple of decades later when I was deeply enmeshed in getting legislation passed, and spent an awful lot of time running up and down corridors making sure no congressman was surprised by what we were trying to accomplish.

*Q: You started Vietnamese training, and how long did the actual language training last?*

THOMSEN: We spent six months in Washington.

*Q: This was from when to when?*

THOMSEN: I'm trying to recall. Probably September, October...or October of '62 to April '63. We landed in Saigon in April '63, and then I had an additional three months training on the ground in Saigon. So it was a total of nine months of language training.

*Q: How did you find learning Vietnamese?*

THOMSEN: It was very difficult. It was not as difficult as learning a language where you have different characters, such as Chinese or Japanese or Arabic. Vietnamese does use the roman alphabet, but there were five tones and it was really a mental exercise to memorize...their grammar is really telegraphese. But to learn the words, and to learn the tones, and the articulation was arduous mentally.

*Q: Who were the others who took it. Where did they come from?*

THOMSEN: There were two others who were in this little section with me. One was Doug Ramsey, and one was Ralph Moore. The three of us were together, but actually I ended up being in an advance class with two younger officers, one of whom was William Anthony Lake, otherwise known as Tony Lake, now the National Security Advisor. And a young man named Joe Luman, who had just resigned from the Army, he'd been an academy graduate, spent three years in the Army, and then joined the Foreign Service. The three of us were kind of the advanced group. Then Ralph and Doug, and a couple of

others, took a slower track than we were on. Others who followed on with us in the same kind of general time frame where Richard Holbrooke, and Vlad Lehovich. So there was quite a coterie of very good Foreign Service officers in the same process.

*Q: What did you think you were going to do at that particular point? Before you went out there from your teacher, and from what you'd been reading, what did you think the situation was going to be?*

THOMSEN: First of all, I'd been in Korea and Japan. I'd been in Korea in a war situation although as a traditional war. I expected there would be danger, and I expected there would be some difficulties. I wasn't aware of what an insurgency really was, but neither was anyone. The insurgency really hadn't started yet, and it was really at the beginning. By 1962 there was a very small problem in South Vietnam, but my expectation was I would go and establish contacts at the provincial and district levels, and talk to people. I guess I had a little bit of a romantic idea that I'd be down at the village level talking to a guy in a rice paddy. Essentially my job would be to do political reporting, to do reporting on the situation in the countryside. That's how I imagined it.

*Q: Were you married at the time?*

THOMSEN: I was. We actually had a daughter who was six weeks old when we went to Vietnam.

*Q: So you arrived in Vietnam in April of '63. You had this period of three months of study there. How did that work out?*

THOMSEN: The embassy was in the business section near the river, and a compound which later became the compound where the new embassy was constructed was the home for about five bungalows, and Tony Lake and his wife, and Judy and I, and Joe Luman were in three of the bungalows, and the fourth bungalow was reserved for the language training. The compound was large enough so we had almost a football field size play area. I remember one day breaking my little finger on my left hand trying to catch a pass from Dick Holbrooke. We were engrossed in our studies, and getting to know the community. There was no war as we got to know it later in the late '60s. Saigon was a beautiful city. It still had all the trees on the main thoroughfares. Not a lot of traffic, the cyclos were the major vehicle. It was an attractive place to be.

*Q: You were in Vietnam from when to when on this tour?*

THOMSEN: April '63 to July '66.

*Q: What were you getting before you got absorbed by the embassy. What sort of contacts were you able to make with your language, and how well did you use it? What type of people would you getting in touch with?*

THOMSEN: At first we were limited to our own tutors. Then we became involved with the Vietnamese-American Association which was bringing Vietnamese in for our English primarily, but college students and small scale entrepreneurs who for good capitalistic reasons were trying to learn English. So we developed a relationship with a cross section of the private sector. But not much in the way of the bureaucracy or the military at that time.

*Q: What was the American military presence like at that point?*

THOMSEN: It was modest. In Saigon it was noticeable but not certainly as overwhelming as it became. Then if you moved past my training into my provincial reporting duties in the provinces the provincial sector advisory team would be a colonel, a couple of majors and a few captains. Well, I shouldn't even say it that way. There would be a colonel, lieutenant colonel, a major and a couple of captains, and a lieutenant, a total of six officers, and maybe four or five NCOs to support them. That was a very small presence even in those days. And that was about it. Military units at a battalion level would have a captain and maybe an NCO. I visited the Ranger battalions because I covered the area south and west of Saigon, and there were a number of Ranger battalions and the Americans serving with them lived pretty exciting lives.

*Q: Let's move to the time when you finished your language training. You were assigned where, and who was your boss?*

THOMSEN: First of all I should say that during my language training from April until July things started falling apart. The first Buddhist riots, demonstrations I think probably initially, in Hue occurred in early May. By the time I'd finished my training, my first reporting assignment was to cover the declaration of martial law by the capital district commander, General Ton Thuc Dinh. I sat and listened to him deliver in Vietnamese a long diatrive about the “damnable Buddhists”, and how the righteous government had to protect itself and freedom and democracy, and so had invaded the pagodas the night before, and had arrested Buddhist Monks from all over. And two of the prominent Bonzes, Tri Quang and Tam Chou had sought refuge in the embassy. Part of my job was their core and feeding, along with Jim Rosenthal, and Lyall Breckon. In any case, Jim Rosenthal was head of the provincial reporting unit in the political section. Bob Miller was the deputy chief of the political section. Mel Manfull was the chief of the political section. Bill Trueheart was the DCM. It was a first rate team. In addition to that provincial reporting unit, there were folks like John Burke in political external. Dick Holbrooke was next door with USAID as a special assistant. Tony Lake became Lodge's staff aide. Joe Luman took the job of the press attaché which was an O-1 job, and Joe was an O-7, but did a superb job at it--put a cot in his office and a bottle of whiskey in his desk drawer, and was a buddy of all the press from then on. But that was kind of the structure.

*Q: At that time how many people trained like yourself in Vietnamese were there around?*

THOMSEN: I would guess under ten that had the full training. Tony Lake and Dick Holbrooke, and Joe Luman and the others had had only six months of introductory training. Ralph Moore, Doug Ramsey and I had the nine months. Then there were others like John Helble Ted Heavener and Tom Barnes, who had preceded us over the previous years also were Vietnamese language officers. But it was a small cadre at that time.

*Q: What was your initial assignment?*

THOMSEN: The Third Vietnamese Army Corps, around Saigon to the north and west. In the north, Binh Dirong and Tay Ninh, the area closest to Cambodia and the environs in the capital area itself, was kind of my beat. The way I would execute that would be to travel to the provincial capitals on a fairly regular basis. I would stay with the U.S. sector advisers. I learned over time, the lieutenants and captains were probably the best sources of information available to me in the whole province. I would certainly call on the province chief. I would call on the sector commander, I'd call on some of the subordinates. I'd get to know the Chieu Hoi (Viet Cong returned) people...

*Q: Chieu Hoi being?*

THOMSEN: The returnee program.

*Q: This is the people who were in the Viet Cong and surrendered under, you might say, honorable terms, came back and they were reeducated, or whatever you want to call it.*

THOMSEN: Those were very interesting programs, and the people who ran them were often returnees themselves and had tremendous insights into what was going on in the province. But it would be the young American lieutenant who was the sector S-2 adviser, that is the intelligence adviser, would have tremendous understanding...

*Q: This is an American?*

THOMSEN: This is an American. I'd spent time with them in the evening and it would be as useful to me as anything else, because in some cases what they would tell me in the evening would be 180 degrees from what the sector official report to MACV would say. The embassy would get this report, then I would be able to come in and make comments about it, and tell them the true story. It was really an important job.

*Q: Why did this happen? I mean, both institutionally, but within Vietnam where you often have this split between the top people within any organization, and the people who were actually doing the work.*

THOMSEN: Anecdote, and this comes from what was then a young S-2 lieutenant.

*Q: S-2 being...*

THOMSEN: The intelligence. When Paul Harkins leaves, his last order...

*Q: He was the commanding...*

THOMSEN: Commanding General of the military assistance command Vietnam, MACV, his last instruction was: I want you to give me the 25 indicia of why we're winning. So all the people down the chain of command are put through their procedures, and it ends up at the lieutenant level and he's got to write down 25 ways we can tell we're winning. And that goes back up the chain of command as amalgamated and compressed, and summarized, and finally Harkins before he departs is able to give a speech in which he gives the 25 indicia of victory. Then Westmoreland appears on the scene and the first order he gives is, I want you all to give me the 25 indicia of why we're losing. So the order goes down through the chain of command and ends up at the lieutenant level, the lieutenant has got to figure out, actually somewhat easier, how you can identify the problems that we were facing and causes not to be a success for us. So that goes back up the chain of command, and Westmoreland says, I just started my new task here in Vietnam, it's an enormous task all the things I've got to overcome, but victory is assured, our hearts are pure. Well, that's why, because of command requirements. And the Army in those days, and those of us who kept track of friends, the Army I think has changed a great deal, but essentially it was the management style. It was called the management style, the Army was managing itself instead of leading itself, and it was a victory through management. I think they learned their lesson. I hope they did. But that's why...

*Q: In the first place, your reports and were the other officers getting more or less the same type thing?*

THOMSEN: Yes, pretty common. I had direct access to the ambassador. When I'd come back from a field trip, Tony Lake would call me and say, come on up, Lodge wants to spend a few minutes with you. I would just give him anecdotally my reaction to what I'd seen in the past several days in the field. Now, that seemed to have some influence in the way Lodge saw that war, for better or worse. And that was what Kennedy wanted. That was his original intention. He had a bunch of people who had no axe to grind, who had independent thought, who could get their views known at the higher levels.

*Q: Essentially what was the story that you were bringing back?*

THOMSEN: From my area, the story I was bringing back was that there was arrogance and aloofness on the part of most of the GVN authorities, but that was a cultural thing. It was kind of built into the system. There was a true war going on, it wasn't a sympathetic Viet Cong subverting an imposed upon populous, protecting them from a totally evil government. The governor could be well intended generally, but not very effective. The old story of the the emperor’s writ ends at the village wall, which goes back to ancient Mandarin times, was still true in Vietnam. And again the government's structure was such that traditionally the central authorities went only to the village level, and the village wasn't just a little hamlet, it was a series of hamlets, but that the village was its own self

contained unit, and that a group of village elders, traditionally the land owners and the prestigious, would make decisions if there was a levy on people, they were the ones who would call out the young people to go out and dig the ditches. If there was a tax, they were the ones who would collect the tax.

The Viet Cong system was essentially to destroy that authority system, and to replace it with a younger, merit based because it was essentially based on the young dissatisfied who would run off into the bush and find a way to counter its elder leadership. And the Viet Cong were able to profit by that.

But by and large the population was willing to go along with the government as long as the government could provide security. That was to me the equation. When the government could not provide security, then the Viet Cong would assume authority.

Later on, when I was back home, I spoke at colleges in the '65-67 66 period. I was at Brown, I would say, you're at college, you've got a president in your university, you've got deans and faculty, you've got a small security force, you've got professors who you like, some you don't like, and you're a student population of about 6,000. Now if 60 of you, one percent, if 60 of you were given arms, the first thing you did was kill the president, and the next thing you did was kill the chief of the security organization, the third thing you did was kill the most popular professor whose views you didn't like, then you issue an edict, saying anybody who opposes what we're doing is going to be killed. How many of you would voluntarily organize yourself and go out and hunt down those 60 people with guns, and you knew there was 60 of them, not 2 or 3, but 60. How many of you would do that?

Bernard Fall was one of the great French Journalists and really a great analyst. I had a few opportunities to be with him. He asked me a question one day, “what is the most important and pervasive element of a national government to the private citizen?”. I scratched my head, the police and the medical. He said, the postman. The guy who delivers the mail in any culture, in any situation. He said, who are the Viet Cong popping off? They're popping off the people who are the communicators between the central government and the villages. He said, when you go into an area if you want to know what the security situation really is, look for the medical deliverers, the guys who are doing the DDT in the huts, look for the folks who are delivering the mail. If they're gone, then there's a problem. If they're still doing their job then there's no problem. It was a fascinating analytical tool for me.

*Q: Were the other provincial reporters reporting more or less the same type of thing?*

THOMSEN: Within broad parameters, yes. It would vary from province to province for a variety of reasons including geographic. But in some cases it was the effectiveness of the province chief. A tremendous security factor. I mean the question of what had happened in '54 was a very important question. I had one province which was fascinating, Tay Ninh. I don't know if you ever got to visit Tay Ninh, but it had a fascinating religious

organization called the Cao Doi, an eclectic religion which included Jesus, Gandhi, and Buddha in its Pantheon of holy ones. They had a gaudy temple in Tay Ninh City. They had pretty strong support from their followers, and the Viet Cong were simply not effective within those regions. Where there was really a strong counter philosophy. But in say Binh Long which was almost next door, around the Parrot's Beak corner...Earl Young, a friend of mine, was the AID provincial guy there, Earl did some really fascinating analysis early on in the early '60s. Binh Long had historically been Viet Cong, or Viet Minh. The government was losing the war as early as '62 in that province. So it depends a lot on the geography and the history.

*Q: What was your impression...let's take it up before October of '63. What sort of reaction were you getting by body language, facial expression, or by talking, that you were getting from Ambassador Lodge on what was happening?*

THOMSEN: Lodge was a pretty, I won't call it simple, but like many successful senior folks he like to categorize things fairly much in black and white. Good guy, bad guy, winning, losing. Part of the problem of giving him fairly subtle stuff was he'd pick it up and then throw it in one can or the other. It wasn't a matter of being willing to put it in one of the sub-cans. So if I told him I'd spoken to a couple of Vietnamese lieutenants who were from Catholic families that had been refugees in '54, and they were afraid that Ngo Dinh Nhu was negotiating with the North Vietnamese over a neutral solution, which I did pick up at a Vietnamese Army headquarters, that resonated with him real quick. And, of course, he didn't like Nhu anyway. Now that just one more big piece of information to throw into his bad guy can, and probably right. But I might have been a little more careful with it. But that's kind of the way he was. He made decisions and then he went with them, he didn't question, or he didn't get subtle with them.

*Q: Did you have the feeling that you in this reporting unit were almost against the American military advisers. I mean, what was coming out although you, of course, had been using information from down below. But did you find yourself almost an adversary?*

THOMSEN: We were in an adversary relationship with the senior MACV leadership. I remember, I think it was before Harkins left, I attended a briefing at MACV for a senator--I've forgotten the name of the senator--in which Harkins briefed the senator absolutely diametrically opposed to what Lodge was saying. Telling that senator a story about Diem , I think it was in that time frame, maybe September-October, that was diametrically opposed to what Lodge was saying in his cables and publicly. You can imagine then when I got back to the embassy, and reported this to Tony, and was immediately ushered into the Ambassador’s office, he was not happy with what he was hearing. But there was a strong struggle between the military...I don't think it ever ended actually. It was at the senior level, even the colonel on down level, were grateful for us because we could get the story out that they couldn't get up through their system.

*Q: Could we talk a bit about the events. I guess its October of '63.*

THOMSEN: November 2nd.

*Q: Because that all fits together with the Kennedy assassination. Could you talk about the events that preceded it, and how you at your level and your colleagues were seeing the situation, and then how things developed? First, before I get to that, again a little bit chronological. What was your feeling about the Buddhists? And the suppression of the Buddhists?*

THOMSEN: First of all, the Buddhists came to us, and we had Tri Quong and Tom Chou, the two leaders were in the embassy on the fourth floor, and Lyall Breckon and I and a couple of others were responsible for making sure they got fed, and passed notes to them and got notes out. They were comfortable, but they were not in any kind of luxury situation. We felt that the government had been pretty stupid to create a situation like this. We didn't regard the Buddhists as being communists. We'll get into this later but I was accused both face to face by Colonel Loan, who was later Ky's national police chief, and by Ky himself in his book (although I'm not named) as being a Buddhists lover. We regarded the Buddhists as being a significant political force that ought to be dealt with reasonably rather than simply dismissed, and put upon. We'll get into this substantially later in '65 and '66 when I was the consul in Hue and POLAD for the Marines in I Corps when we had some real hairy things going on. But this time, the Viet Cong threat was really more incipient than real for a lot of the country. Saigon certainly was not yet a city at war. My wife had gone to the market and a hand grenade had exploded probably 50 feet away. I shouldn't say we're not a city at war. In February of '64 there was a terrorist attack on the Army movie theater, two Marines died heroically to get the doors closed and (it was a kids matinee) and to protect the kids. So there were some events like that happening but they were pretty spread out, one every few months, it wasn't something happening at all times. And the hand grenade was not aimed at Americans, we're not even sure it wasn't a drunken Ranger.

But leading up to the coup, I got more and more signs of disaffection, and finally even in the mid-October period, even young Catholic officers were expressing tremendous concern to me at what Diem was doing harm for an anti-communist victory. They were mainly mad at Nhu, but that Diem was really tearing the country apart by his actions, and by the way they were prosecuting the Buddhists. I had one young Vietnamese captain, whose younger sister had been thrown in jail. She was a Catholic, she'd been with some friends and picked up and thrown in jail. He said, I had to go on leave from here...this was in Binh Tuy way out in the boonies, to go back to Saigon to get my sister out of jail. It was that kind of an attitude which was developing. Real pessimism that Diem could carry it off.

*Q: You were of course passing this basically on to Lodge, you and the others.*

THOMSEN: We were doing cables and airgrams, and certainly briefing Lodge.

*Q: Was there a feeling that if we're going to get anywhere, we've got to get somebody new in?*

THOMSEN: No, I don't think we would go that far. We would have said we've got to get Diem on the right track more than anything else. Until I began reading some of the retrospective accounts of the coup, I would not have believed that we were as deeply involved as we were. Clearly we sent the signal. A guy named Conning, you may have done your reading too. I knew Conning, I would never have guessed...I won't call him a slob, but this guy was in a position to be making these decisions, not making decisions, but passing these decisions on to the senior military and the Vietnamese. But apparently we were. A kind of a pregnant thing did develop. The guy who led the military into Saigon was Colonel Nguyen Van Thieu, who later became president Thiu was then a colonel, he was the Fifth Division commander. That was my area. I knew the senior advisor, he gave me his own biographic report on Thieu. That bio said that "Thieu is so ambitious it probably wouldn't matter to him which Vietnam he became head of state of, if he could become head of state. That his driving ambition." It was certainly a prescient statement. I later gusted in my biographic report on Thieu.

The day before the coup I was in Bien Hoa at division headquarters. The advisers told me...you know I haven't really thought this through up until this moment. The advisers told me that the Fifth Division was moving out to Vieng Tan which was from Bien Hoa across the Saigon road and then on to the coast. And the advisers were not going to accompany them. The Vietnamese had forbidden them from accompanying them. I flew back to Saigon in a helicopter and reported this to the embassy. I said the Fifth Division is moving out to the coast without its advisers. And a few people kind of looked at me and nodded their heads with a serious look on their face. The Fifth Division turned on to the Saigon road and moved into Saigon. That was the lead element, the Fifth Division tanks were the tanks that stormed the palace.

I got back to Saigon, spent the night, the next morning a guy from an investment company came over for lunch. I remember at lunch with him hearing what sounded like someone walking on the pebbles in the driveway next door, and I knew it was small arms fire. I got a taxi and went back to the embassy and halfway back to the embassy I was watching T-28s strafing the naval headquarters.

*Q: The T-28 a small training aircraft.*

THOMSEN: The T-28 was designed as a trainer but it was also used...we give it to the Vietnamese to be used as a small tactical support aircraft, it had machine guns. Got back to the embassy to discovered that the coup was in process. I made my way home because my wife didn't have a telephone, and I was concerned about her. So I had to drive through Cholon and all the way around to come in the back way and got home. My wife was hiding in the closet with our daughter because she had seen red things flying over the house, and they were tracers and she didn't know whether they were tracers or artillery

coming over the house. But there was no danger because they were way, way away from us. There was a small American compound across the street.

*Q: Where did you live?*

THOMSEN: We lived on Ba Huyen Thanh Quang, on the way to the airport but just off of...the name escapes me, but just off of the main artery to the airport. We were a little further out than the USAID mission and not too far from the Xa Loi pagoda, which was the main Buddhist temple. In any case, I then went back in, and spent the night watching the artillery going against the palace, and then about 4:00 in the morning Jim Rosenthal, who was an ex-Marine officer said, let's see what's going on. So we went out to the main street and watched the first tanks go by. We stood out where we could be seen so they wouldn't be confusing us with someone trying to resist. The first tank stopped, and an officer popped down and we said, where are you coming from, and he said. Bien Hoa, I said, oh, you didn't go to the coast after all. And then shortly after the palace was taken, Jim and I went in and kind of looked around at the damage.

*Q: What was the feeling among you, Jim Rosenthal and all, about this coup? I mean, as it was going on, did you think, oh God, we don't need this.*

THOMSEN: Oh, my feeling, we don't need this. No sense at all that we'd had anything to do with the...that there had been any U.S. involvement. We were devastated by the death of Diem and Nhu the next day.

*Q: What were you picking up from the ambassador's office?*

THOMSEN: Nothing, pretty silent.

*Q: Tony Lake being very quiet?*

THOMSEN: After it was over Tony kept this to himself too, and we were very close in those days. So he was doing his duty. It was obviously very close hold. If you know the evolution in retrospect, it was Roger Hilsman who actually triggered it in Washington. There was still not an absolute decision to go until with Rusk in New York, and Kennedy in Hyannisport, and MacNamara somewhere else, a cable was kind of pushed through the system with everyone else thinking that everybody else had already approved it, that said go.

*Q: Roger Hilsman, Assistant Secretary.*

THOMSEN: He was the director of INR at that time.
*Q: He, of course, was an old OSS...and kind of a reaction oriented, don't stand there, do something, which is a rather dangerous thing.*

THOMSEN: The anthesis of a diplomatic process. He was, I think, a former military too, don't just stand there, do something. Whereas the diplomats would say, "don't do something, just stand there."

*Q: I think these things are important to get out, the spirit of the times. I think in many ways, you might say the problems...this is my personal opinion, many of the problems we've had, particularly CIA covert action and all, have been as a result of the generation that grew up in World War II where no matter what you did you could run around with a jeep and blow up things, and do something. I mean it was a great feeling of doing stuff where I'm not sure how much that really helped. It was really the Army in the field that pretty well settled the problems, but it was a great feeling, and you were almost immune from anybody saying, that was a stupid thing to do.*

THOMSEN: I think that's right. I think Vietnam was one of maybe the last echoes of that attitude, although I think it's still with us to some extent. There are no Foreign Service echoes that you kind of grew up with as a child, and are inculcated with, but I think we do tend to be more prudent, maybe over prudent sometimes. But I think by and large you don't have to do something. And sometimes it is better to do nothing and let the dust settle, and let the situation revolve itself. In the case of Diem, I don't know what the alternative would have been. I do know that the day after the coup Saigon was in total disarray. The police were totally disarmed, literally and emotionally. The young people were running wild, and it was a good thing the military kind of got control again. But in doing my notes, I noted there were probably nine different governments within a about a 19 month period in South Vietnam after that. The disorganization in retrospect was almost total.

*Q: Well, one of the things you must have been doing in the political reporting section was, were you trying to figure who is in, who is on top, what does this mean. Could you talk a bit maybe both what you experienced, and also the process.*

THOMSEN: Well, it became clear very quickly that Big Minh, as we called him (and we had a lot of respect for Big Minh. I don't know if you remembered this, but he was a big guy first of all) and the group around him Don, I had a lot of respect for Don. Some of the others were pretty heavily tarred with various kinds of corruption and in fact as they were all involved in various activities that we call corruption. But the Army quickly reestablished itself, and it became quite clear very quickly what was going on. We didn't have to spend a lot of time hypothesizing or trying to understand how it was going to work out. I mean, it was over pretty quickly.

*Q: Was there a feeling once it was over that, okay, now let's get on with it?*

THOMSEN: Yes, absolutely. And that emanated from the top down.

*Q: Did you continue this work you'd been doing?*

THOMSEN: I did until July of '64. And let me just comment because you mentioned the Kennedy assassination connection. "Where were you when Kennedy died?" I was in the sector's advisor's compound in Tay Ninh City at about five am. I think this is really important. The first thing I did after finishing cleaning up, was to call on the province chief, and inform him that my head of state had been assassinated. On the way to see him, I walked, it was a couple of blocks, and it was a beautiful fall morning. A little boy, could not have been more than eight or nine years old, a little Vietnamese boy came up to me crying, saying in Vietnamese "your president has been assassinated, I'm so sorry." I've carried that with me ever since because this was a little kid, in a provincial town, he was not my enemy. He was not my country's enemy. He was not just waiting for the chance to bushwhack me, or to drop a hand grenade in my car. He was a little kid who loved my president, and who was devastated by his death.

*Q: I was in Austria on leave, and I was told, and I went back, and I was in Yugoslavia and the whole God damn country was in mourning. Flags were at... It was a communist country. And people would stop me, I mean the guards and the custom people were shaking my hand, and looking mournful. It was a very emotional time for everybody. Was there any feeling...were you beginning to pick up any feeling of certain elements within Vietnamese society were saying, you're responsible for the death of Diem and all of that? Or did that come later?*

THOMSEN: It was sparse. It existed, but it were sparse. There were a few people after Kennedy was assassinated who said it was the result of the curse falling on Kennedy's result of caused Diem's death. There was that feeling among a few. Mainly though the impression I had from November on was that, I'd said that the army reestablished itself, but there was a pick up in the war. The insurgents had become more effective. Maybe there was a loss of effectiveness on the part of the Army, but I think it was more an increase in emphasis, and increase in activity, increase in support from North Vietnam of events from South Vietnam.

MacNamara started visiting, which didn't help matters any, and around this time the provincial reporters became more and more editors and coordinators of the reporting from their areas. I spent a lot of time between December and June and July of '64, in meetings preparing for MacNamara's visits, and trying to come up with joint views on what was going on. We would disassociate ourselves sometimes. But more often than not we would find ourselves trying to create a mission-wide view on what was going on province by province.

*Q: What were you getting from your American lieutenants and captains out in the field after the coup?*

THOMSEN: Well, first of all there was a mixed reaction in the Vietnamese military ranks. There were those that had been desperately loyal to Diem, not to Nhu, but to Diem, who felt very, very badly about what had happened, and they had really bad morale. There were others who didn't feel as strongly but were pleased at it. They may have been the

majority but they didn't have the strongest feelings, if you follow me. But essentially everyone continued doing their job pretty much as they had done in the past. There were no attempts at provincial level coups, and there was no rebellion in the ranks against what had happened.

I'm trying to recall. There may have a couple of attempts. We know there was an attempt coming in from the Delta. Some folks in the Delta had started moving towards Saigon as a counter coup, but that was squashed pretty quickly. From the time of the coup until I went to Hue in July of '64, my general sense is that I got more wrapped up in the bureaucracy of reporting. The kind of a Lone Ranger going out and doing his thing didn't stop, but it was kind of superceded by being more active in Saigon to make sure that the AID stuff, and the military stuff, and the CIA stuff was all making some sense, kind of an editorial responsibility. Which is good. I mean, it was good in its own way. It was a different kind of thing, but it meant that there was someone at the embassy level looking at this other stuff and making sure that the reporting going back to Washington made some sense. And at the same time things were going downhill, and MacNamara would come out and tell us what we need to do now. I remember one day, for example, with an AID/MACV/ embassy meeting trying to come up with the figures on how many armed Viet Cong there were, which was kind of like throw a lot of numbers at the ceiling and which ever one stuck out face up, is the number, and that sort of thing. There became...what was it called, the "critical province program" where you were going to get about a dozen provinces throughout Vietnam that really needed high level attention. I remember one of my great bureaucratic successes was getting Tay Ninh taken off the list, so they could go about their business and not have to worry about all the reporting requirements.

*Q: This, of course, was MacNamara's approach to numbers, quantify everything. I mean, once you'd identified the problem you could overwhelm it with statistics. By the way, you had your Buddhist leaders sitting in your embassy.*

THOMSEN: A couple of days after the coup they said, I guess we can go now, and we opened the door and they walked out.

*Q: There was a feeling I suppose then among the Buddhist community that having gotten rid of this very strong Catholic ruler, Diem and his brother, that things would get better.*

THOMSEN: Well, if you follow the history of that following period, the Buddhists kept getting upset with different things and putting the students on the street again, and the more often it happened, the more effective they got. And I think there was no question that there was Viet Cong infiltration and they began taking advantage of it. This I started seeing in Hue and Da Nang, and because it was so far from the capital, it became really out of hand. We'll talk about it when we talk about my time up there, but essentially they burned the USIS building across the street from my residence and they finally burned the consulate itself. By that time I was in Da Nang full time.

*Q: We might stop at this point. One last question I'll put on tape and we'll pick up before you go off to Hue, and that is since you were doing this editing, and filtering, your impression of the reporting from CIA and information they were getting, and also from the military. Could you talk a bit about that next time?*

---

*This is the 30th of September 1996. Sam, at the end of the last tape I asked if you could...what was your impression of what you were getting from first the CIA, and then from the military as far as a product from your area?*

THOMSEN: Stu, we got not much from the CIA. They gave us a little bit of operational support, and a little bit of intelligence on their views on the infrastructure. But the bulk of our material either came from our own eye witness, that is our interviews and on the ground stuff. And then the copious military intelligence operation reports from their provincial, or their sector advisory teams. We'd go out and confirm that material, but they really provided the bulk of the grist for the mill.

*Q: What was your impression of what the military was reporting?*

THOMSEN: The military, in reporting through channels, that is the product that would be seen in Saigon, was essentially a very filtered product to prove one thing or another.

*Q: You say the things that came up were filtered to prove something really which would mean there would be a tendency...you'd almost have to deal with this the way you would in dealing with Pravda or Izvestia in the Soviet Union. Say maybe there's something here and learn to read between the lines, and say maybe we better check on this. If they reported great progress in such and such a sector, or something like this, that would mean you'd probably want to go and check the sector.*

THOMSEN: Absolutely. But I would give it credit for being a little more on the margin than maybe Pravda or Izvestia. They were putting a spin on it rather then being totally dishonest. But the best way to do was always go out to the field and talk to the lieutenants and captains who had to generate the reports, and get the detail from them and then put your own spin on it, either confirm what had come up, or qualify it as necessary.

*Q: So you went up to Hue when? And you were in Hue from when to when?*

THOMSEN: I was the consul in Hue from July 1964 to July 1966, but from about September '65 I was in reality the POLAD, the political adviser to the Commanding General, Third Marine Amphibious Force, headquarters in Danang. They sent a third officer up to Hue. Finally Tom Corcoran who was a very senior officer came up to Hue, and stayed in Hue while I was in Da Nang. It was an anomalous situation since I was still the principal officer but Tom was on TDY in Hue and was running that show while I was working in Da Nang.

*Q: What was the consular situation as far as posts in Vietnam in what we're talking about now?*

THOMSEN: In '64 the only consulate was in Hue.

*Q: And Hue was more of the focus than Da Nang at that time?*

THOMSEN: First, it was the old imperial capital, and secondly, it was still the headquarters for the civil administration on the part of the Vietnamese, although the Army Corps headquarters was in Da Nang. When AID expanded it headquartered its I Corps efforts in Da Nang. So everything except the consulate and the Vietnamese civil administration was in Da Nang from before I arrived. So being in Hue was an anomaly. And when the focus of the consul's responsibilities became political advice to the Marines, it was clearly required that I be present in Da Nang. But the anecdote I think I should tell is, the old story. And this is a little bit jumping ahead but I was wounded in the embassy explosion in March of '65, and was on home leave and doing public speaking from then until July. Now the Marines had pretty well established themselves in Da Nang during my absence. When I got back and got myself sorted out by mid-August I had recommended in an "official-informal" letter to Mel Manfull, the political counselor, that I stay in Hue as the consul, but that a senior Foreign Service officer be despatched to Da Nang to act as political adviser to the Marines. And on the first of September Phil Habib had taken over as political counselor sent me a cable saying, go to Da Nang, and as your primary duty become the political adviser. I would retain the consulate responsibility.

*Q: I'd like to bite this off in bits. You were in Hue, was it '64 to '66?*

THOMSEN: Right.

*Q: What was the situation in Hue at that time, both military and the political situation there?*

THOMSEN: It was pastoral, I think that's the only way to describe it. My wife came with me, we had a daughter just 14 months old. My wife was pregnant with our second child, our son. She used to bicycle around Hue with our daughter on the back of the bicycle, swim in the Circle Sportif. At the same time we would see dive bombers dropping their pay loads in the far west towards the mountains. So it was an anomaly. My predecessor, John Helble was able to drive from Hue all the way to the mountains in Second Corps to tiger hunt. But within weeks after I arrived, I drove in the Consulate sedan with a driver to Quang Ngai province, and when the I Corps senior adviser heard I had driven without escort to Quang Ngai (this now is the fall of '64), he sent a helicopter immediately and demanded for security reasons that I return by air. He was doing it as a favor in a friendly way, but insisted that I was not safe on the roads, and probably he was right.

*Q: Quang Ngai is in what direction from Hue?*

THOMSEN: Quang Ngai is way south of Hue. Hue is only about 50 miles south of the DMZ. Quang Tri is the northern most province, then Thua Thien, which was the province that Hue was in, and then Quang Nam which was where Da Nang was located, and then Quang Tin and then Quang Ngai. Quang Ngai was the farthest south province in what was called the I Corps. That was my area of responsibility.

*Q: You had that whole area. What were you doing while you were in Hue?*

THOMSEN: Essentially, the consulate had been set up to be a provincial reporting platform, if you will. My primary responsibility was to cover the counter insurgency in the First Corps, with special emphasis on the farther north part of this north provinces. Not long after I arrived, the Buddhists, who had succeeded in toppling Diem, began their activities again. By the fall of '64 the Buddhists were becoming active again politically, and I was covering the Buddhist activity, but the students who were very strongly Buddhist influenced were also becoming active.

*Q: Could you talk about your contacts? I mean how you went about your business. First, with the government, and what was the government entity that you dealt with in Hue? And then contacts, as you say you were covering the Buddhists and the students. How did you go about that?*

THOMSEN: First of all, my primary contact in Hue was the provincial administration, a lieutenant colonel in the Vietnamese army who was both the sector commander and the province chief. We had rather traditional diplomatic/Consular relations. Hue had been the capital, they had a residue of the diplomatic life. The Nationalist Chinese had a consulate there. So we weren't alone. The French had a consulate in Da Nang. So we formed a very small consular community. There was social activity. We were always dignified by being on the platform at special events, and that sort of thing. I took advantage of the USIA, distributed books to high schools, conducted myself as a consul in many ways. Since I had been the escort of the venerable Tri Quang while he was in the embassy, I had a good basis for relations with him. He was the leader of the Buddhists, and who was from Hue. Tri Quang was essentially my point of contact with the Buddhists in Hue.

*Q: Had he been released?*

THOMSEN: He was released immediately after the coup. As soon as Diem was overthrown, Tri Quang and Tam Chou, the two venerables, were released from the embassy where they had been in asylum, and then went to their pagodas, and became active again. And Tri Quang would come to Hue, and when he was there I would be made aware of it, and I would be invited to see him and I would call on him. Actually that relationship remained reasonably friendly until I left, and he gave me a very fine going away reception, and gave me a Buddhist gong clacker that I keep to this day. In his own mysterious way he seemed to have something of an affection, or respect, for me. I found that fascinating.

*Q: What were the Buddhists doing while you were there? Because earlier on which was almost the whole thing it was the Buddhists burning themselves. Was that type of thing going on, or was it a different type of thing?*

THOMSEN: It wasn't that violent. Not long after I arrived, about the middle of August of 1964, the first Buddhist demonstration occurred in Saigon. And not long after that this spread to Da Nang and to Hue. This was the regime of Nguyen Khanh who had taken over and the Buddhists didn't like it. About that time I should say, Tony Lake...
*Q: He's National Security Advisor.*

THOMSEN: National Security Advisor to the President, and who had been staff aide to Ambassador Lodge, Tony as staff aide to Ambassador Lodge had created what would normally be expected a lot of bureaucratic enemies in Saigon. And when Lodge left, Tony had not fulfilled the two year assignment, but Tony was offered a transfer out of the country because Lodge knew how vulnerable he was. Tony chose instead to come to Hue as my vice consul. So Tony and I worked together until he finished his tour. Tony also spoke good Vietnamese. The USIA had a branch public affairs officer, Bill Stubbs, who spoke fluent French. The communicator who was a former Navy man, Joe O'Neill, who later became chargé in a couple African countries, worked his way up from an FSS-communicator to the senior Foreign Service. We kind of covered the town. Joe would get in his jeep and drive around late at night, and just make sure there wasn't any untoward movements.

Tony and I taught a class at the law school on international relations. We taught it in English, and we taught it both to...as English is a second language, and to talk a little bit about world affairs. But that put us in touch with the real student leaders. We knew them on a first name basis, and although I don't think they entrusted all their secrets to us, they were willing to share with us their concerns, and even be critical of American foreign policy. It was an attempt by us to get an insight into the student mind as much as could be expected in Vietnam.

So we were plugged into the Buddhists, to the students. We had a kind of a general overview of the city through Joe O'Neill. The MACV unit for the First ARVAD Division was just a few blocks from the residence and we would spend time with them, and I would spend time at First Division headquarters, and go out to the district towns and talk to people. I was fairly mobile, and we think we were pretty well plugged in. AID was very useful to us. One of the finest insights I got into the insurgency...remember '64 it hadn't really exploded yet. I remember one of the public health advisers for AID saying let's take a look at the villages in the geographic unit within which are hamlets, let's look at the village map of Thua Thien, and see where we have had to stop doing the DDT spraying. He said this is probably the best indicator of security that we've got. Think about it, and he was absolutely right. What was happening, is from the mountains, down toward the Piedmont, and then toward the lowlands, slowly village by village the Vietnamese DDT sprayers were refusing to go into the hamlets because of lack of security. In 1964, that

was happening in the summer, and there was a deterioration in security, even as I had arrived in Hue. I arrived in the first week in July. I recall a Fourth of July party which was combined to be a welcoming party. It was outside in the garden of the public affairs officer, and we could hear small arms fire. I think it was about the 7th of July. The next morning we were told by the First Division advisers that two battalions of North Vietnamese troops had attacked a special forces camp southwest of Hue. Gerald Hickey, who was a well-known anthropologist/sociologist from Cornell was in the special forces camp, and I interviewed him a few days later when he got back. The evidence was absolutely clear that two North Vietnamese battalions had attacked the camp. The first multi battalion North Vietnamese attack had occurred in South Vietnam in early July 1964. Most histories don't reflect a North Vietnamese presence in South Vietnam until the end of at least the end of '64, maybe into '65. But it had really occurred in that month.

Another affect of that attack: John Helble was still the consul, I was reading in. John sent a normal cable the next day, once he had his facts straight, action SecState, info Saigon, a few other info addressees. Westmoreland had just taken charge of MACV in Saigon. The fact that a small consulate in the northern part of the country had been the first to report to Washington a multi battalion North Vietnamese attack, blew him away. He went to Lodge, and then to Taylor, and by the time I took over I had been prohibited from sending action messages to Washington. My only addressee was to embassy Saigon, and they would forward my messages to Washington as they saw fit. So it essentially had removed the consul in Hue from being a true reporting post, to simply being an appendage of the embassy, which probably fit the pattern for Vietnam the way it should. I always felt a little badly about it though.

*Q: How about your relations with the local government, the provincial government?*

THOMSEN: They were friendly. In early '65 after the USIA was burned I was given instructions to make a demarche on the province chief, sector commander, to chew him out for not giving us proper security. As a result they became a little more arms length. The corps commander, Nguyen Chanh Thi, who later came into national prominence was somewhat erratic, but I think a patriotic soldier, and he had good personal relations. But from time to time acting on instructions I'd have to take him to task. He was probably at least 15 years older than I was. For him to accept that, in the Asian pattern, from me was I think difficult for him. But when I was wounded in the embassy bombing in March of '65, he wrote me a fairly long personal letter of regret, and gratitude for the American presence, and for the sacrifices we'd made. It was an unnecessary thing; I was struck by it.

*Q: Had troops been inserted in '64, we're talking about you arrived around July of '64 to Hue. Had American build up started at that point?*

THOMSEN: No, the American build up, that is beyond helicopter units, began in March-April of '65. The Marines again were the first. I was aware of the beginning of the build up, in fact, I pull an anecdote Stu.

*Q: That's what I want.*

THOMSEN: In the fall of '64...remember this is a tiny consulate in an old French bungalow, all of a sudden Joe O'Neill comes to my door and says, "Sir, there's a Marine captain to see you." I'm sitting behind my desk with my flags, and this Marine comes in in full battle gear, and "Sir, I've just come from Task Force 77 in the Tonkin Gulf, and I've come to ask for an intelligence briefing." It was kind of curious, but that's the way the Marines are, as I later learned. So I gave him about 45 minutes or an hour of my appreciation of the situation. I had a map of I Corps and I went through the drill, and toward the end of the conversation he said, "sir, one of my basic missions is to determine the secure rear area where we might establish a permanent base if that's called for." And I must tell you, Stu, I chuckled and I said, "Captain, you left it when you left the aircraft carrier." And he said, "what do you mean?" I said, "there's no secure area unless it's established in this country." And he said, "I understand, and saluted and walked out." And when the Marines arrived they set up their main installation within the perimeter of the Da Nang airbase and they immediately established a significant security perimeter around that airbase. They secured themselves as my briefing had indicated they would have to do.
*Q: Did you have at all the feeling that, God if the Marines are going to go here, I hope they're staying away from Hue? I mean, nobody wants a large military installation.*

THOMSEN: In fact, I did say Hue would be the least appropriate place to put an American installation. They ought to isolate themselves. But, yes, in my briefing to him I made it clear that Hue was not a particular appropriate place to put Marines. When I did learn the Marines were coming a year later, I suggested they needed to be in the Delta. Marine activities in I Corps were kind of a contradiction in terms. In any case, that would come later.

But the first significant Marines arrived in March, a battalion and then later on a brigade, and then finally they built up to two divisions and two Marine air wings. They had a huge presence in Central Vietnam.

*Q: You said the first ARVN division, was that it, was stationed where, was their preeminent division too, wasn't it? What were you relations with this? ARVN means Army of the Republic of Vietnam.*

THOMSEN: Well, on a kind of a protocol basis I had a good social relations with them. I would entertain senior Vietnamese officers as part of our normal social life. I had good relations with the MACV folks, the Army colonel who was a senior advisor to the First Division, and with his subordinates, the intelligence advisor and the operations advisor primarily, and the civic action advisor. And I maintained this on a pretty much a daily basis. I would go to division headquarters probably twice a week at least, and just get a feel for what was going on. I would drive up to Quang Tri, and get briefings from the province chief there. Essentially I had face to face contact with most of the senior Vietnamese military in my region.

*Q: You were in Hue. What about out towards the Laotian border, because that became rather than the North Vietnamese coming straight down against Quang Tri, which they did later on, but there was sort of flanking movements, and we had siege at Khe Sanh, in '68, but I mean in that time what about the hinterland. Was there mountain Montagnards out there?*

THOMSEN: There were Montagnards in the mountains to the west, and there were special forces camps. Generally quite peaceful. I had been, as the provincial reporting officer around Saigon, I'd get to see special forces camps along the Cambodian border. So I had a sense that these kinds of under populated areas that were up for grabs, or under Viet Cong control because they essentially had no population to try to protect. When I got to Hue, some of these areas had rubber plantations, old French farming of some kind, Montagnard camps, a couple special forces camps, and then a few Americans who were there with the Summer Institute of Linguistics translating the bible. There were Americans up there, can you imagine translating, or creating Bibles in the native languages, creating even written languages in the first place, all the things that Summer Linguistics does. So it was again, the term pastoral is not too much of an exaggeration. The war had not yet hit its stride.

Now while I was there, within the first six months that I was there, things changed dramatically in the mountains. And as I think I mentioned earlier, the AID reference to using DDT distributors as a guide. Bernard Fall had said, in a conversation I had with him a year or so before, that the postman, the guy that delivers the mail, and if the guy stops delivering the mail, then you know there's a problem. Well, DDT in that sense was almost delivering the mail. This was what kept the lice out, mosquitos, and malaria down. Villagers knew that, and they accepted it. But when the DDT guy wouldn't come, it was because of lack of security. But that was beginning to happen in August-September of '64. And I recall the Summer Institute of Linguistic headquarters for that area was just a block away from the residence. And I got to know an American couple. They were beginning to get concerned, but they were just beginning to get concerned about their young people who were up in the mountains. And in September-October they began bringing them back, and by the end of the year it was vacated. Shortly after the beginning of '65, when we went north, we were evacuating civilian Americans from that area generally.

*Q: You talk about these special forces camps. These were American Green Berets. They were sort of the apple of the eye of John Kennedy. Were you getting any impression of what they were doing, and any reports you were getting in from them. What purpose were they serving?*

THOMSEN: I have a couple of stories to tell about the special forces camp. I have to tell one story about a special forces camp in Tay Ninh, near the Cambodian border. While in camp I needed a hair cut. So I went to the barber in the camp, and I asked him for a hair cut in Vietnamese. And he looked at me like my Vietnamese isn't...your Vietnamese isn't all that hot. But the problem was that he was a Cambodian. So I finally figured out...I went back to the camp commander, I said, do you know you've got ethnic Cambodians in

your camp? He kind of looked at me as if I had discovered a dark secret. Essentially we were training the Khmer Serei. I went back to Saigon and reported it to Col Richard Stilwell, who later became the head of U.S. Army Forces in Korea. He was head of operations at MACV.

*Q: In charge of operations.*

THOMSEN: I think it was operations, in fact, not training but operations. I briefed him on this, and he expressed great surprise that this was happening in northern Tay Ninh province, but I'm not sure he was all that surprised. I reported that to Ambassador Lodge, and he was surprised. But that was the kind of thing that was going on. We were doing things in all sorts of funny ways out there. And for me to discover that was what I was supposed to be doing even though it wasn't necessarily what some people wanted. And sometimes I think that the reason they created a kind of bureaucratic requirement that we coordinate reporting was to try to keep us in Saigon because we were kind of troublesome when we'd get out and talk to captains and lieutenants, and even the Vietnamese.

*Q: Well, there really was a real dichotomy wasn't there in the reporting? The military has a normal filter. I've watched their briefings where it starts off with a lieutenant giving the briefing, then a captain, then a major, and finally the colonel will give the briefing and it's a well rehearsed thing of which all of his senior officers will sit in on. So nothing untoward is said. And some reporting has somewhat of the same thing. I mean a lot of people are watching it. Whereas the State Department, in those days, things kind of come in and go right up to where they might be acted on without a lot of filtering. The people involved almost won't allow everybody to sit on top of a story.*

THOMSEN: The judgement I came to finally was that for the military reporting is essentially operationally based. They want to know what's important for them to know to get the job done. So it's sort of a "can do" kind of reporting with emphasis on what works. Similarly when something doesn't work, they want to know that too. But essentially it's an upbeat kind of reporting. Whereas a Foreign Service officer should be skeptical when he reports. Not negative. It's the old story of whether you report the glass half full, or half empty. The military report the glass half full. I've always said that a good Foreign Service officer doesn't report a glass half full, or half empty. He reports it as being 50% full, or 40% full. He doesn't say it's half full, or half empty. He simply gives you the quantity, and then makes a judgement about it. And that's what our job was as far as I was concerned. And if I found out something that didn't seem to be generally known, I felt that was an important thing to make sure somebody knew. And a lot of that did happen. But that was the difference, I think, in our reporting styles.

*Q: Was anything happening out in the Quang Tri DMZ area?*

THOMSEN: No. It was very quiet. I recall around Christmas of '64 General Thi, the Corps commander taking a delegation of us, including the Chinese consul, the French consul, and we had a kind of a picnic on the southern bank of the river, the Ben Hai.

There was a bridge across with a guard on either side, and we had a big picnic on the southern side and Thi had loud speakers set up with Vietnamese music playing. He once said he wished he had huge fans so he could blow the food smells across the river. It was entirely a peaceful situation. That was on Route 1 as it crossed the Ben Hai. Quang Tri city was beautiful, it was a small citadel, beautiful pastoral situation in '64-'65.

*Q: Bernard Fall whom you mentioned was a reporter, then he was killed in Vietnam, but he had written his book, Street Without Joy.*

THOMSEN: That was the area from north of Quang Tri to Hue. That was the Street Without Joy.

*Q: What was the situation along the Street Without Joy?*

THOMSEN: My experience was that it was safe, but that as time went on it got less safe. The heart of the war in Vietnam was the Communist Nationalist Party fight that had gone on throughout...I guess going back to the 40s. The Nationalist Party (VNQDD), which if you marked it out, is exactly the same words as the Kuomintang in chinese: and there was a connection between them-- the VNQDD and the Kuomintang. If you go back far enough, as far back as the 20s or 30s, you find that Chiang Kai-shek was actually at a training camp where both Ho Chi Minh and VNQDD leadership were being trained. One of the stories goes that the Vietnam Communist Party was smarter than the VNQDD, and they would turn over photos of VNQDD returnees to Vietnam to the French security in Hong Kong. So that when the VNQDD trainees came back across the border, they were picked up immediately. This always to me has been a litmus test for whether the Viet Minh was just a truly nationalist party, or whether it had something more sinister. I think the fact that we were willing to betray fellow revolutionaries, because they were in a different party, was an important litmus test. The VNQDD had strength in Quang Tri province, and that was a part of the Street Without Joy issue. They also were very powerful in Quang Nam province, and in Quang Ngai province, and had created really by their presence almost like a toxin, a stronger Viet Minh. So that Street Without Joy was essentially a Viet Minh stronghold.

*Q: You might explain what the Viet Minh....*

THOMSEN: The Viet Minh was the Vietnamese Communist Party fighting the French. But in 1964, I could drive down to Quang Tri city in a black State Department sedan with a driver.

*Q: Should we move to when you left? Is there anything more we should cover on this Hue time before you moved down to Da Nang?*

THOMSEN: The late summer and into the winter toward the end of the year.

*Q: Which year?*

THOMSEN: '64. From the time I arrived in July through the end of '64 was the time of our beginning to think about building up and it culminated in the bombing of North Vietnam, and the Tonkin Gulf incident. That created a different situation for us. It was also a time of greater unrest among the Buddhists. And, for example, this is when they first burned the USIS. That called for the American dependents in Hue being brought into the MACV compound. At that time I was in Saigon and Tony Lake called me from Hue to report to me what was happening. I guess I'll just tell the anecdote--he said, Sam, it's your vice, it's your vice. And I thought he was saying, it's your wife, and I was terrified. But he straightened me out. He was telling me that USIS had been burned, and that all the American dependents were being evacuated into the MACV compound. I got back and that was when I was instructed to make a demarche on the province chief and sector commander. This is the first demarche I've made in my Foreign Service career. I knew how to spell it, but I wasn't sure what it was. But I did what I was told, and he was properly chastised and promised he'd improve the security. But the fact is the police weren't in a position to provide adequate security for any of our installations against students demonstrating.

*Q: Why was USIA burned?*

THOMSEN: What the Buddhists told me was a fascinating story. It had beautiful plate glass windows. This was after the time when USIA facilities being harassed in Latin America, and the Middle East. One of the students said that they kind of understood that the reason we put big plate glass windows in our USIA was so it would be a way for them to demonstrate, express their views to the United States government. They were trying to embarrass us, and trying to attract our attention. I think they thought they could have an influence on us by doing that, and bring us to be more critical, and heavy handed with the governments.

*Q: Was there any aftermath to the burning of the USIA?*

THOMSEN: It was rebuilt, that's one thing you can say. I found a charred book which I decided to carry with me as a souvenir called "Communism in Southeast Asia." It was a book written in the 40s, and it was almost naive attempts to kind of create categories. It was virtually worthless as a guide to the reality to the world, but it was a nice symbol of what had happened in Hue.

Our second child was born in Hue on December 28th. The reason I mention this, my wife was instructed to leave in late November to give birth in either Bangkok or Manila. That was the medical office in Saigon embassy. She refused. It was too close to Christmas, so we got the local hospital to provide us with an extra delivery room facility, a little table, the MACV doctor and a French trained Vietnamese doctor became the team, and on the 28th of December our son Samuel was born. Two weeks later the village chief and his village council came and delivered to us 13 copies of his birth certificate in Vietnamese, since the law said that he had to return to the village of his birth if he wanted another copy. Then six weeks after his birth all American dependents were evacuated from

Vietnam. That was in January of '65, and that was an important event. Tony Lake did a superb job as...both of us on first assignments. We took control of the evacuation process along with the military, and Tony performed a wide variety of critical tasks. I just really want to make the point, he was a very fine Foreign Service officer in his time in the Foreign Service.

Tony and I were still trying to work with USAID, and working with the students, to try to find some way of connecting in a way that would allow us to really be communicating, and not just talking past each other. I went to Saigon in late March of 1965 to meet with Alex Johnson, the deputy ambassador, to try to get some money from AID to do a few projects that would allow us to really get close to the students to really begin talking to them. It was at that time on 30 March 1965 that the embassy was blown up, and I was wounded. By good fortune I wasn't more seriously wounded. I was sitting at a desk right next to a heavy plate glass window and I heard noise outside, ran to the window, saw a Vietnamese father throw his small daughter to the ground in the gutter and cover her. There were pops of pistol shots, and I went to the two secretaries who were in the room with me, and told them to go into an inner office. And as I followed them out the explosion occurred. The medal frame went right by my head, and I was hit pretty hard by a lot of the glass but I was just superficially wounded.

I returned to Hue but was given R&R leave shortly thereafter and returned to the United States, to Washington for briefings, and made some presentations in Washington, and then was allowed to go home on R&R kind of as a recuperation leave, and was told that I would have another day of leave for every day I made a public presentation. It was about this time that we were beginning to gin up a public affairs program on Vietnam. By July I was so tired of giving speeches I said I don't care if it is worth another day of leave, I'm going to go back to Vietnam. This is now '65, I'd spent my two years in Vietnam but had been asked to extend, and agreed. So that was the end of '65.

*Q: When you were giving these talks on Vietnam, this is prior to the American student opposition.*

THOMSEN: That's right...Before the major effort.

*Q: So you weren't being heckled.*

THOMSEN: Well, I was actually. It was an ambiguous time. This is now the spring of '65. I went on the David Frost radio show. David Frost did not have a TV show he had a radio show, and he was very friendly, and I was upbeat that we were going to make it, I could see the light at the end of the tunnel. But I said that we had the capability of maintaining ourselves, and that the Viet Cong who I had seen when they were only 25,000 strong, were not going to be able to push us out. At a Hollywood high school I was on stage with Congressman Brown. He brought six of his folks out, and the moderator said that each of them could have a go at me, and then I could respond. So it was six to one on that stage, and I must say I got a little bit of sympathy from the

audience just by being so badly outnumbered. One day I was invited to speak at a college campus in East Los Angeles. A broadcaster from one of the radio stations called me...this was a different era, to say that he had heard me speak in Hollywood. He wanted me to know that a demonstration had already fromed at the college I was scheduled to speak at, and he bad been told by some of the leaders that they intend to harass me physically, as well as to try to intimidate me. He suggested that I not come. I called Washington and was advised not to go within ten miles of that place. They were right. They did not want a confrontation. But that was beginning, that's what I'm trying to get at. It was beginning in the spring of '65.

*Q: When the families were evacuated, where did your family go?*

THOMSEN: Sammy was the youngest evacuee. Katy, our daughter, who was now two years old, and had only been six weeks when she came to Vietnam, was now a young lady of two, she had a sign on her back saying, Katy Thomsen, which appeared in *Time* magazine. They went to Hong Kong first, and then flew back to Torrance, California where Judy's folks live, rented a house and stayed there until I came back in July of '66. So we were separated for about 14-15 months.

*Q: You came back in the summer of '65?*

THOMSEN: I came back in July.

*Q: So you stayed until July of '66. Did you feel an intensification of pressures, incidents, or anything else like that?*

THOMSEN: Oh, yes. It was now a different war entirely. By the spring of '65 the North Vietnamese were now present in South Vietnam in force, and they were destroying the South Vietnamese army. There was battle after battle where the South Vietnamese troops were being decimated. And that's really, if you recall, one of the triggers for bringing the American forces in. And yes, it was a totally different war now, one in which the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were coming down closer and closer to the coast where villages east of Hue were now occupied...I shouldn't say occupied, but had significant infrastructure so they were not secure.

When I got back in August of '65 I made my fatal mistake and wrote the letter recommending that a political adviser be assigned to the Marines, and in September of '65 I was assigned to the Marines. I moved with a couple of bags to Da Nang, moved into the Marine compound, bunked in the General's quarters, that is general officer's quarters. They issued me two sets of utilities, combat boots, and I put U.S. Consul on the right side of greens. I later had a lovely and funny farewell letter from the senior Army advisor, General Hamblin in which he denounced me as a traitor for working with the Marines.

*Q: Did you find working with the Marines something new? Was there a different way of operating? A different approach?*

THOMSEN: Absolutely. I would get up at 5:30 and my first briefings at 7:00. If a political situation had developed, I would brief, but essentially I would sit through a series of briefings on intelligence, operations, supply, and logistics. I would get briefings from young majors who had just come back from long range patrols up to areas I had driven in a year and a half before, in which they would talk about the land mines, punji stakes, and booby traps. The Marines were beginning to move out of Da Nang, and their perimeters were broadening. It was a different war entirely.

General Lewis Walt had been a fullback at Colorado A&M, was 6 foot 2, and 240 pounds. One of the finest, nicest people I have ever known, he took me with him everywhere. He'd get in a Huey (and the Marines only flew with one pilot , so I could sit in the co-pilot's seat and look straight down). And Walt would be in the back with one of his aides, and we'd fly up to a special forces camp, or to a Montagnard village, or to some isolated place, and we'd drop down and he'd get a briefing. And I'd go off and talk to the Montagnard chief, or to the young Vietnamese special forces commander, and we'd come back and he'd ask me what I had learned. That was often more important than what he'd learned. So I was kind of his eyes and ears in a different way. I was also all over Da Nang trying to keep down anti-Marine...I shouldn't say anti-Marine, but I should say Marine depredations which resulted in anti-Marine demonstrations. I recall one day being informed that Marines had urinated in a Buddhist pagoda. I went out and visited the pagoda. I talked to the citizens who were around there. The Marines had dug their security trenches outside the pagoda, but when it came time to relieve themselves had gone in. When I briefed Walt the next day we flew into the Marine headquarters near Monkey Mountain. The entire battalion of which these two soldiers were a part, was on the tarmac at attention. The commander of that battalion later became a commandant of the Marine Corps, but in those days he was a young lieutenant colonel. They stood at ease while I addressed them on the importance of the Buddhist religion in Vietnam, and why you don't urinate in pagodas. And General Walt stood with me while I did that briefing. He gave me carte blanche as far as the Marines were concerned. They sent out their chief chaplain from Hawaii to spend a week with me. I briefed him daily on various aspects of Vietnamese culture. He took copious notes, sent back to me a field manual in draft for review before they distributed it to the Marines to tell them how to deal with the people in Central Vietnam. They took this very seriously. I was very impressed, and, of course, it kept me busy. Since I felt that I was being paid attention to, I worked hard at this.

*Q: The Marines later, I'm not sure if it's later, or when, but more than any other of our military were sending, at some point, small teams out...platoons, CAPS. Did that have its genesis about this time?*

THOMSEN: It did, in fact I knew the young lieutenant who started it, and maybe I even had a hand in encouraging him to try. But essentially the Vietnamese defense forces were at three levels. One was the regular army, the second was called regional forces--they had different names at different times. These were equivalent of a civil guard, or home guard, or a national guard recruited at the province level, under the province commander's

command, and mobile forces, reasonably well armed. Then you had the so-called village defenders, and these were folks recruited from the village who would stay in the village. They were generally not as well armed as the Viet Cong, but they were the ones responsible for providing local security. Now, in the Marine area, this lieutenant started in one village to put his platoon in the middle of the village defenders. He trained them, and they stayed with them. And two of the critical aspects...training was very important, but also the use of the radio for both medevacs and artillery support. And the villages where the Marines began staying, where the villagers began feeling comfortable, that at night if there was an attack they'd have artillery support, and actually air support if necessary, called in by the Marines, but the Marines would stand and fight with them. That if someone was wounded, not just a Marine, but if a villager were wounded, there would be a helicopter to take him or her to a hospital. These villages developed tremendous reputations for being strong bastions. And in fact, in Quang Ngai province toward the west, the North Vietnamese started sending organized regiments against these, trying to destroy the Marine presence. There were really heroic, and sometimes terrifying stories of the Marines and their village defenders standing off incredible odds, while waiting for reinforcements. But they also did a lot of civic action. There was a medic with each of the platoons who would perform sick call every morning in the village. They would send home and send back care packages, and bring them in, books and pads and stuff for the little villages. It was really a fascinating experiment. The problem was you could not possibly cover South Vietnam with a platoon of American forces in every village. But where they were located, they were superb. And the Americans learned to speak a reasonable amount of Vietnamese.

*Q: You were there early on when they started doing this. One would think the Marines would be the last to do this. I mean, the Marines usually are hard charging. Ten days on the ground, and then off and the Army takes over. Was this because of Walt, or was this something built in, or was it just happenstance.*

THOMSEN: I might even have played a part in it. Let me describe Walt's senior staff. His chief of staff was Joe Platt, who was a colonel, later became a two-star general in charge of Marine personnel. Joe was a brilliant man who you'd never guess would be a Marine. He was tall and rugged, but essentially he was well read. John Chaisson, who was the "three"- operations, was a Harvard graduate, later became Chief of Staff of the Marine Corps. Lou Walt became the deputy commandant of the Marine Corps. They appointed a young lawyer judge advocate general corps, a lieutenant colonel, as their first J-5, their first civic action officer. That was at my suggestion. Chuck Keever was his name. Keever sat on the senior staff although he was a lieutenant colonel, and everyone else were colonels. But he would sit with me and with the chief of staff, and with the J-3 and the J-2, as a part of an inner circle for Walt, and advise him on civic action, on intelligence problems, operations problems, and everything they did had a civic action component integrated into it. I was invited to comment on all of this from a political-cultural point of view. Walt was very complimentary to me. He called me "one of the finest professionals" he'd ever known in his book.

*Q: Did you find that you were having a problem serving two masters?*

THOMSEN: Oh, absolutely.

*Q: Could you talk about that?*

THOMSEN: Sure, and we could go into the detail later on of what happened in '66. '66 was quite a national crisis. My instructions had been in September of '65, to report to Da Nang and take on POLAD as my primary responsibility. But if I wasn't doing political reporting, I would get shots from Saigon. In fact, I was called to Saigon a couple of times to help draft country-wide materials in the middle of situations which, in my own judgement, said I should have been with the Marines to help deal with one issue or another. But I was treated by the political section as being a part of the political section when they saw fit, and was called back to Saigon, or taken off what I thought were my critically important primary duties with the Marines. The epitome of this was, during one of the real crises...Da Nang was in chaos, troops which were more loyal to the Buddhists than they were to the leadership in Saigon had taken control of some of the installations. General Ky, who was the acting president, sent his T-28s to bomb the rebel installations. Some of them were right next to Marine installations, and in one morning at the briefing, we're told two Marines have been wounded, one seriously in the neck, by VNAF aircraft.

*Q: VNAF means?*

THOMSEN: Vietnamese air force. General Walt, with his wing commander at his left said, I want F-4s airborne immediately, and I'm going to call the...

*Q: F-4s being?*

THOMSEN: F-4s, are the best, the work horse of the Marine Corps- Phantoms. Walt said that he wanted the F-4s airborne, and circling above the VNF aircraft. He told me he wanted me to call Phil Habib. I called Phil and told him that there was a real dangerous situation, two Americans had been wounded. If an American is killed here, a serious situation would ensue. And I said the Marines have sent up F-4s above the VNAF aircraft. Well, Habib was a strong supporter of Ky, who was the head of the VNAF as well as the president. The person was causing all the trouble was Thi, who was my Vietnamese Corps Commander. He told me to tell Walt to get those airplanes out of the sky. And I said, "Phil, I'm not going to tell him to take his Marine aircraft out of the sky and stop protecting his Marines." He repeated the instructions And I said, "I can't do it, Phil." At the same time Walt was on the phone with Westmoreland, we were in the same room at opposite sides of the desk, and Walt was telling Westmoreland what he was doing, and Westmoreland was more understanding. He said he would tell Ky what the issues are, and how dangerous this is in terms of the alliance. So then I was able to say, Phil, Westmoreland has said it's okay, and then he's going to talk to Ky. And Phil said, he would talk to Ky too and see if they could resolve this. So that ended ok. But essentially, I was torn very badly in situations like that. On the other hand I had a lot of fun. I sent NODISs to Dean Rusk every night, as part of the Marine Sitrep. I wrote the first section

on the political situation, and they wrote the rest. That went to two officials: the Marine Commandant and the Secretary of State. So I was able to say anything I wanted. I had a telephone conversation with President Johnson about General Thi. Johnson called one day and was talking to Walt about something, and Walt said something about "my political adviser" here has known Thi for a couple of years. Johnson got on the phone and said, young man tell me what you think about General Thi. I said "he's naive, not well educated, but I believe he's a strong anti-communist, he's fought against them for 30 years, and I think he's well intended. He needs good advice, and he needs support, but he's erratic and he can go off in the wrong direction." He said, "thank you very much."

*Q: How did that thing resolve itself, with Thi, and Ky.*

THOMSEN: By the end of May '66, Thi was invited to go abroad for study. Other people were exiled or moved around in different places, and the Central government finally installed control over Central Vietnam. At its height armed rebel forces were holed up in two or three Buddhist pagodas in Da Nang, the Vietnamese Marines finally went in with recoilless rifles, and put a couple holes through pagodas, and they finally came out, and gave up essentially, and were allowed to return to their old lives. There were no mass arrests or anything like that.

Without going into all the details, what was fascinating to me were two things. One, in spite of this incredible situation, partly because of the Marines being there, the Viet Cong were unable to take military advantage of this incredible dislocation. Secondly, no one, including the Viet Cong or the rebels, was able to generate any significant anti-Americanism among the population, although there were some attempts. Tri Quang made a statement about the foreigners, where he was alluding to us, that was interpreted to me as criticizing us. Third, there was in fact within the system a lot of...I won't call it flexibility, but a lot of ability to survive. The South Vietnamese system survived all of this. Other systems might have cracked and broken under this incredible strain. They survived and went on, this is in '66, to live for another nine years. And, in fact, to go from strength to strength in some ways.

I went back in '73 which will be a later chapter to tell how having seen the first Marines arrive, I had a glass of champagne with the last Marine to leave, and we'll go into that later. I think there were some very interesting implications of that really traumatic event, instead of events in mid-'66.

*Q: How did Walt deal with Thi.*

THOMSEN: Very respectfully, but very firmly. He ostentatiously treated him as an equal, but he made it absolutely clear when he needed something, or when he required that something happen. And Thi respected that on his side. We had some tremendously successful joint operations. Unfortunately, in one case an American general who was Walt's deputy had given bad orders resulting in casualties of dozens of Vietnamese and Americans.He was relieved by Walt and was out of the area in 24 hours. In other words,

Walt showed the Vietnamese what happens in the American system when someone is responsible for a major failure. But that person, before he left...it resulted in the death of a Vietnamese lieutenant colonel...this general came to me, and asked what could be done to show his regrets at the death of this lieutenant colonel? I advised him to send something to the ceremony, and a letter of condolence to the wife. I helped him draft the letter. What he did was tremendously well received by the Vietnamese because they knew that he had suffered personally, professionally, from that, but that he hadn't overlooked the lieutenant colonel's tragedy. It was very interesting. Relations were oddly good between the Vietnamese and the American Marines.

*Q: You were saying in part of '65 and in '66 the North Vietnamese were taking apart the South Vietnamese army, or was it the Viet Cong? What was the analysis?*

THOMSEN: There were several pitched battles in early 1965, and I forget the names of them all but they're very prominent, in which South Vietnamese forces, in some cases they had to fly in the Vietnamese airborne. The three elite units were the First Marine Division...in those days it wasn't a division, it was a brigade, and the airborne brigade. These were their elite units. The First Division, of course, sat on the DMZ in the north, and then the airborne and the Marines were mobile forces operating out of Saigon. What you saw in the spring of '65 were units being mauled so badly that the airborne and the Marines were being flown in to try to save the situation, and these were pitched battles between North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese units. These were not Viet Cong units.

*Q: What were you getting from the American military in looking at why the South Vietnamese were losing these battles?*

THOMSEN: Mainly senior officer incompetence. They had a pretty good regard for the guy who carried the rifle, but morale was bad. It appeared not to be quite so much in central Vietnam because there were a lot of traditional ties associated with it. A part of the South Vietnamese problem in general...I'll get philosophic for just a moment. They operated under the old Mandarin system of putting both civil and military people out of their own areas, moving a person from the central area to the Delta, and not just military but even district chiefs who were critically important as far as being a communicator between the central government and the village or the villager, would come from a different part of the country. Now, this was not true so much in central Vietnam. They seemed to have some sort of...I don't know why they were able to maintain pretty much central Vietnamese in central Vietnam. But throughout Vietnam you'd find central Vietnamese. You'd find Catholics in Buddhist districts in the Delta, for example. Just a breakdown in communication from the highest levels to the lower levels. Whereas the Viet Cong recruited from the village. And the successful Viet Cong leader would be promoted up to the district. So your Viet Cong district chiefs were all from the district. It was a ladder to success. It was much more effective than the government. And the government was operating on that old traditional Chinese Mandarin system of you had a very strong central authority that delegated things out without regard to local circumstances. That may be too broad to answer your questions specifically. But you had

good units, and bad units, and the good units had good leaders, and the bad units had bad leaders. There are notorious examples of South Vietnamese generals who were incompetent, disinterested, on the take, corrupt. You could buy your way out of a combat situation by paying them off. I know more of that by reputation, that is by story, than I do by personal experience.

*Q: Later, at least in my time...I was there '69 to '70 up around Da Nang the Vietnamese general...Lam was it?*

THOMSEN: Lam, one of the corrupt ones.
*Q: He was notorious for being really corrupt.*

THOMSEN: Terrible. Lam had been the second division commander and I had known him in that capacity, and when they finally resolved the situation in Da Nang, Lam was called from the second division to become the corps commander. That was June-July '66. Lam stayed as corps commander for I don't know how long, and stories of his corruption reached me in Laos. I was there in '67 to '70, and I was hearing stories about Lam all that distance away.

*Q: What about when you were in Da Nang, also Hue, what about corruption? From your perception in your area of responsibility?*

THOMSEN: First a comment on corruption. What we call corruption, and what might be understood to be corruption in that environment were slightly different. I remember a district chief, a captain, telling me, you call what we do being as corrupt, but let me just tell you. I get the equivalent of $40 a month as a captain. I've got AID officials, I've got you, I've got my counterparts, I've got people from Saigon coming to see me every day. I have to put on a lunch, I have to provide scotch, I've got to find income to do that. So I'm using some of the development funds to do this, otherwise it would be impossible to do it. Now, you call that corruption. He said, I've been in the Armed Forces Staff College at Leavenworth, and I know your definition of corruption. He said you tell me how to do my job without availing myself of some of the resources. You know the house I live in...this was a guy who I had fairly good respect for, you know how my wife is living, am I corrupt? Well, the answer is he's not living a corrupt life, but he is misusing government funds by our definition. That's one form of corruption. The fact is from the time you get any position of authority at all, you have to look for...and there's plenty of examples around as to how you do it, other sources of income. So at some point all of a sudden you do have a bigger house, you do start using the cement to add on a bedroom, and then pretty soon you're gone. The senior people, and Lam is a good example, were absolutely without any restraint on their use of what was available to them.

In Hue and in Da Nang, the mayors were civilians. The mayor of Da Nang, for example, had been a professor of medicine at the University of Hue Medical School while I was in Hue, and I knew him in that previous incarnation. He took advantage of his new position to enrich himself within boundaries I suppose of some kind. He wasn't flying off to Paris,

and he wasn't driving a limousine, but he was certainly living beyond the means of a mayor's salary. It was endemic, I guess is the way to say it. And the only difference was how grossly you took advantage of your position.

*Q: Apparently it remains today under the communists. Is there anything we should talk about in the '66 period, or not?*

THOMSEN: Some of the kinds of things I did with the Marines: one stands out in my mind. In early August of 1965, Morley Safer, who was then a correspondent in Vietnam, came across what became a cause celebre story about the Marines burning villages. He had television coverage of a Marine holding a zippo lighter against a thatched roof of a village hut. That story has stayed the course. It was a kind of media example of the coarse, brutal American...I had only been with the Marines a couple weeks by now. But I discovered a notebook, a little thing you put in your breast pocket that I had decided would be the beginning of a diary I would keep and of course managed to keep for about four weeks before it got put aside. But this little event is in that notebook, and here's how it went. Cam Ne was the name of the village, it was about five miles off of Route 1 towards the mountains south of Danang. You had to walk in. On August 3 the Marines in Cam Ne with CBS television looking on, used a zippo lighter to torch a hut. The next day I visited with the J-5, Chuck Keever, I spoke to the village chief, and to the sector S2, this is a young Vietnamese lieutenant intelligence officer.

Here's the story that I got. In '54 100 men went north, they were Viet Minh and when the exchange occurred mainly Catholics came south, from various parts of South Vietnam really hard core cadre went north. Well, 100 men went north from Cam Ne. Six or seven had already returned by August '65. But they were just beginning to come back. The French could never enter Cam Ne. There are still secret cells and guerillas in Cam Ne. There were sniper holes in the huts for VC to fire from. Cam Ne was in fact a place where the Marines had gone in, had received fire, and had destroyed what they regarded as enemy facilities. And I think the Marines had a right to do that.

That's the report I took back to the commanding general, General Walt. I'd been on the ground, I'd seen the sniper holes in the ruins of the huts that were burned down. But Morley Safer never came back to do an after action report, and say, "By gosh, I talked about the defenseless villagers but maybe there was more to the story than that." But that's the story of Cam Ne. It's one in which I regard the Marines as having behaved responsibly and been judged unfairly.

I think probably, without trying to go into an awful lot of detail, that I've given you a lot of what was going on during that period. By July of '66 I was pretty beat, smoking three packs of cigarettes a day, getting to bed at 2:30 after writing the political section of that Sitrep, and getting up at 6:00 to start the next day. I was thin, I was wiry, I was tough. I'd gone through probably what is as intense an experience as most Foreign Service officers will experience in a good 30 year career, but I was ready to come home. Well, there are other stories too, a couple of them on the Marines that I'd like to tell.

One on Walt. In mid-May of '66 so-called rebel units really had become organized, and one fanatic Buddhist warrant officer with an engineer unit had mined a main bridge out of Da Nang to try to prevent the government forces from using it to come in. Walt was apprized of this by the American advisor to that Vietnamese unit which had done the mining, and he had decided that that bridge had to be kept open. It was a main logistic route (MLR). Walt's strategy was to walk to the middle of the bridge and ask the warrant officer to come to him. The warrant officer came to him and they had a consultation in the middle of the bridge. At the same time the American military advisor to the engineering unit slipped under the bridge and disconnected the wires to the explosives. Walt asked the Vietnamese engineer commander to please remove the explosives because of the bridge's importance to the success of the war, and to protect the people of Da Nang against the common enemy. The officer refused. He said, I will die on the middle of this bridge with you General if you try to prevent me from destroying it. By that time Walt had gotten the signal the wires were cut, and he told the engineer he had one minute to disperse his forces and to defuse the mines underneath the bridge. The warrant officer said no. They stood there for a minute. Walt said, you now have to leave this bridge immediately. The warrant officer raised his hand and lowered it as an instruction to his men to blow the bridge with Walt and himself on it. They pushed the plunger down and nothing happened. And Walt in his book says...he briefed me as soon as he got back. In the book he says the man shriveled up as a shrimp drying in the sun and slunk off the bridge and they had ended that.

There are about five of these episodes with various senior Marine officers, Colonel Chaissm, and General Walt, facing down either pro-government or pro-rebel units to stop them from confronting each other. The air force confrontations I've already described. The Marines used incredible patience, and incredible courage to dampen what could have been an incredible bloody situation in the Da Nang area, and they did it with quiet, matter of fact...Chaissm went out one day and landed his helicopter right in front of artillery pieces that were aimed at the air base, and told the colonel that he had to take away those artillery pieces. He was putting himself essentially in the path of the shells.

I really found that one year with the Marines a tremendously, exciting, and stimulating.

*Q: Do you think when you would go back to the embassy, they were able to get the flavor of this? Because so often the Marines are looked upon as great people to attack a beach. But almost like big kids who've got a lot of guns. Do you think you were getting across to our people in the embassy and elsewhere the importance of the job the Marines were doing?*

THOMSEN: I think at the Lodge-Taylor-Alex Johnson level I was. But as far as my political section colleagues were concerned, they couldn't believe some of the stuff I was saying. They couldn't believe the Marines were really trying to do this or that. I think Terry MacNamara won't believe some of the stuff on this tape because he came later with a different general who apparently paid little attention to him.

*Q: This is it. Terry, whom I have interviewed has told quite a different...it really does depend on the generals as you were saying with the South Vietnamese army too.*

THOMSEN: Oh, yes. Absolutely. We'll get to this later but by the time I got back in '73, the commanding general of I Corps was General Truong, who was probably one of their finest military leaders. I only had a short experience with him but he was superb.

*Q: You left there when?*

THOMSEN: July '66.

*Q: And where did you go.*

THOMSEN: Cornell.

*Q: It should be interesting. I want to ask you about Cornell's insight into Indonesia which I've always found rather fascinating. You were at Cornell taking what? From when to when?*

THOMSEN: From September '66 to August '67.

*Q: And you were taking what?*

THOMSEN: I was taking a graduate course in Southeast Asian and South Asian Studies.
*Q: In interviews I've done, and talking to people who dealt particularly with Indonesia, and particularly during that period, Cornell had the reputation of being...I don't know if it's the right interpretation, but very sort of anti-government, particularly dealing with Indonesia, and we were responsible for all sorts of things. Did Cornell and the course you were taking have an attitude?*

THOMSEN: I think it did. It was probably one of the earlier university campuses to be anti-Vietnam, for example, although they were professionally very correct, and reasonable toward me. George MCT. Kahin, who was the Indonesian specialist, and who was kind of the leader of the anti-government views regarding Indonesia, was gone. He was on sabbatical or studying out in Southeast Asia. So I never met him. A woman named Ruth McVey who was one of his protégés was running the Southeast Asia Studies program. She was courteous to me. But people I dealt with mostly though were a professor named John Lewis, who was a China specialist. Doug Ashford, who was a general political scientist. Oliver Wolters who was a fabulous British historian. And an art historian whose last name was O'Connor, former CIA, and I can't recall his first name. But what I engineered with FSI was the ability to take both Southeast and South Asia. I just found the basis of the nexus between the two being a very crucial area. It didn't turn out that way, but it gave me a chance to do both South Asian and Southeast Asia studies.

*Q: The difference between South Asia and Southeast Asia.*

THOMSEN: Yes, the break is at Pakistan and Burma, now it's no longer Pakistan. It used to be East Pakistan, its now Bangladesh. As a student I had visited Assam in the far northeast India which is also a part of that connection in the nexus, a part of that connection in the Tibetan low mountains, the Ngai Indians in Assam, and some of the tribes in Burma and even in northern Thailand and Laos, and now are all kind of inter-related. So I was able to take South Asian history, art history from O'Connors who was mainly Buddhist history but also ended up dealing with Southeast Asian history of art. Wolters was a tremendous specialist in Southeast Asia commercial history in the 13th and 14th centuries, the Sher in Indonesia, a connection between South Asia and Southeast Asia. It was fascinating. The Southeast Asia study aspect of it was really rather minor except that I did a paper on the local government in Laos, the so-called chao Muongs, who had a lot similarities between other parts of Southeast and South Asia. It gave me a chance to do a little bit of focus.

*Q: How useful did you find the course in a year of study.*

THOMSEN: Well, probably because of that paper and the fact that I ended up being in the political section in Laos next assignment, it became very useful. But beyond that I did another paper on the history of Ho Chi Minh using some of their very, very good primary sources, and determined that Ho Chi Minh had been a professional communist from the twenties, that he'd been all over Southeast Asia solving intra-party communist battles, or wars in Malaya, Hong Kong, had been a part of a plot that betrayed Vietnamese Nationalist Party (VNQDD) leaders who had been studying with the communists in China at an academy, which was run by both the Kuomintang and the Communists, with Russian advisors.

*Q: Chiang Kai-shek...*

THOMSEN: Chiang Kai-shek was there, and Russian and Chinese communist leadership were there. Ho was there too. It was fascinating to get that insight into him.

*Q: You left there in 1967, and were assigned to?*

THOMSEN: Assigned as the deputy in the political section in Vientiane in Laos.

*Q: And you were in Laos from when to when?*

THOMSEN: From December '67 to July '70.

*Q: What was the situation in Laos when you arrived?*

THOMSEN: I arrived just after the worst defeat the Lao army had suffered from the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese in what they called the Plain of Jars. Just before the Tet

offensive in '68, just as the Khe Sanh situation was developing in far northwest of Vietnam

*Q: This was the siege of American Marines in ...*

THOMSEN: Near the Lao border. And we were also escalating our B-52 strikes along the Ho Chi Minh Trail which was in Laos. Things were getting hotter in Laos than they had been before. You may recall that in Laos at that time we had the North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, the PRC, British, Poles, Soviets, Czechs, and French, just an incredible microcosm of the Cold War. Probably the only place in the world where both the South and the North Vietnamese were diplomatically represented. But the International Control Commission was there with the Canadians, Indians and Poles.

What I got into almost immediately after arriving was the first negotiations with the North Vietnamese on various issues. You may recall that in February, just a couple months after I arrived...

*Q: February '68.*

THOMSEN: February '68 the North Vietnamese released three Americans in Vientiane. As I recall it was Dillinger was in Hanoi and as a sign of their willingness to be accommodating the North Vietnamese allowed them to bring out three Americans, a major lieutenant J.G. David, I believe, and a captain John Black. They came out through Vientiane. I was a part of the team that helped debrief them, and in return then we began a process of releasing some of theirs. From then through to May we were the venue for the decision that negotiations would take place in Paris. I think on May 3rd the President announced this publicly in Washington, but we had already on May 3rd, a day earlier, been given the note from the North Vietnamese embassy that Paris was agreeable to them. It was quite a fascinating process to get from our first meeting to that agreement in May over a period of about two months.

*Q: Do you want to talk about that?*

THOMSEN: I'd like to just get it on the record. It's kind of fun, and for a young Vietnamese language officer fresh from the battles of Vietnam, and having been wounded there, it was a real introduction for me into what diplomacy was really all about.

I think going back we recall that on February 16th there was a release. On the 4th of April I went to the North Vietnamese embassy, knocked on the gate, a guard came to the gate, looked at me, recognized me as certainly someone they didn't know before and probably an American, ran back inside. A young Vietnamese diplomat who I later knew to be named Kim, came to the gate, scowled at me, and exchanged a few words in Vietnamese. I told him I was trying to deliver a note and I was told to come back later. I did. I was able to deliver the note, and then was invited to come back the following day for a response. The response was a long note in Vietnamese with coastal maps of North Vietnam in

which they were attacking the United States for being war-mongering imperialists. A tremendous diatribe in what was supposed to be a diplomatic note. I could read it well enough to know that I wasn't going to be very happy trying to discuss it. But there was no time to discuss it anyway, so I took it back to the embassy and translated it and showed it to Bob Hurwitch, who was our DCM and a veteran diplomat. Together we drafted a cable to Washington with the substance of the note, which was they were after all willing to talk.

We were given instructions to go back and to say that we wanted to release a number of their prisoners. Bob accompanied me this time. The language was switched from Vietnamese to French. Their chargé came in, another experienced diplomat. Bob and he began to discuss the substance of our concerns. We put aside the note, and the language that was in the note, and just then talked about substance. Over a significant number of exchanges, we talked about Phnom Penh, and Warsaw, we talked about dates, and finally Paris came out. But for me to watch all of this, and Bill Sullivan, our ambassador, who was also a consummate diplomat, a protégée of Harriman, they were the ones who were really doing a significant job of diplomacy, and I was there learning during that process.

*Q: Can you go into considerable more detail, if you'd like...let's stick to this talk negotiations, and then we'll come back to other things.*

THOMSEN: Okay, I mentioned in October 16th they did release three of our prisoners. On March 29 we released three of theirs, and that was as a result of negotiations which we had conducted. We had informed the North Vietnamese of our intentions to release three fisherman who had been washed ashore in northern South Vietnam after the storm. They were going to fly in by Air America to Vientiane from Saigon. We proposed that they receive them and put them on the ICC flight that flew three times a week to Hanoi. Their chargé said, "what we do is our responsibility"...this was his formulation, that they did not explicitly agree to accept the prisoners, but they did make it clear that they would be appreciative if there was no press at the airport when we brought the prisoners in. On the 29th of March the plane arrived. We had something for them to sign which would recognize that they had received their prisoners back. They refused to sign. The three men got off the Air America aircraft; a car drove out from the main terminal. We were parked a little way away from the main terminal, a car drove quickly to the airplane from the terminal. Two North Vietnamese embassy officials jumped out, issued instructions in Vietnamese, which I could barely understand, but essentially told them to strip, so they striped to their underwear, they were originally in fatigues. They were handed grey North Vietnamese outfits, they put them on, jumped in a cab, which had followed the first car, and drove away.

*Q: By that striping of the sort of standard garb that we give people who are incarcerated, that had been done en masse during the Korean War.*

Thomsen: That's interesting. So they had a precedent. Well they certainly followed it. It surprised us, but the reality was that having had our negotiation without any confirmation on their part, that they knew in effect do what had to be done to get the job done.

On the 3rd of April they announced in a kind of propaganda way that we had done this. On the 4th of April we tried to deliver a note that suggested that there be a meeting between the two governments on April 8th in Geneva. They signed a receipt for the note, but refused to discuss it. But later in the day COM, the second secretary, arrived at the embassy, and asked to speak to Mr. Hurwitch by name, or the "Secretair Particular," which they intended to refer to me. In any case, I met with them. They reported that the message passed by the embassy had been forwarded, that a response had been received, and they would like to see the ambassador at the North Vietnamese chancellory that afternoon. So at 4:00 I went with Ambassador Sullivan to the North Vietnamese embassy. The chargé was there, translated the note which was in Vietnamese. The note accepted a proposal for discussion and said that we must specify what we meant by a bombing halt, which had been a part of the first note. It confirmed that ambassadorial level would be alright for the meeting. They suggested Phnom Penh and the 12th of April.

On April 10th, Bob Hurwitch and I went to the embassy to arrange an appointment with the ambassador, and agreed we could meet in the American embassy this time at noon. The ambassador and I again went to the North Vietnamese embassy. By the way, during this time we were driving in Bob Hurwitch's yellow Chevrolet Corvair. what was the name of that small Chevrolet?We were in the Covair, partly to dodge the press, because by this time there was a fairly good size press contingent in Vientiane. We got there at noon on the 9th, and the chargé Chun read an aid memoire. He said that Phnom Penh would be convenient for Hanoi, but not final. We could start on the 12th. The ambassador again raised the problems of Phnom Penh, for example, the question of how an ambassador could get back to Vientiane from there.

*Q: Was there concern there that if we went too often to the North Vietnamese embassy that this would show that we were deferring to them?*

THOMSEN: That's never came up. No, it never came up. Mainly what we were trying to do was avoid the press. There was a gal there, and I can't remember her last name, her first name was Estelle, who was maybe a stringer for some of the major press. She would just sit outside the embassy waiting for official vehicles to go to certain places. That's one of the reasons we used the little Covair. I had a big Chevy station wagon that I would use once in a while, but the Covair was a lot more convenient. In any case, by the 11th of April they were coming to us as often as we were going to them. Cam, the little second secretary arrived at 4:00, and after a brief conversation said he was just dropping by on another errand to see if anyone would be around if he delivered a document toward 6:00. That was kind of, "if I came by around 6:00, would anyone be here to receive a document." Bob Hurwitch assured him that our bureaucratic requirements would keep us there long past 6:00. At 5:50 Cam arrived again with their attaché, Kim, who claimed to speak some English, but no French. That was a very interesting thing. Cam constantly

kept him informed in Vietnamese of what was going on in English. We suspected that obviously Kim was intelligence or had some control or responsibility. Cam passed Bob an envelope for which he required a receipt for "the secretariat," he said. Bob took the letter to the ambassador, returned shortly, Bill Sullivan came back out, he thanked Cam and told him we would transmit it immediately and give the answer as soon as possible.

*Q: When you say transmit immediately, you mean back to Washington?*

THOMSEN: We were going to send it back to Washington.

*Q: I assume during all this that Washington was calling the shots, wasn't it?*

THOMSEN: Oh, absolutely. We were simply messengers. That isn't to say that Bill Sullivan, who had been through the earlier Geneva talks, wasn't giving his own views on what the best solutions might be. (I have to say as an aside, that the Vietnamese had been giving us delicious green tea at the Vietnamese embassy, which they bragged about. They even told us which part of North Vietnam it came from. So when they came to our embassy and went back into the little kitchenette that we had, and poured some of the worst tea I've ever tasted. In any case, it was interesting because Tiem, who was supposedly just a low-level functionary, made the first move to go. We'd gotten to know Cam fairly well. But Cam was very stiff in that situation. We had actually gotten to the point where we were giving friendly goodbyes, small talk, and he was very stiff and formal during this time.

So on the 19th of April 1968 was the next event. A telegram came in and was delivered to Cam by Bob and me in the yellow Corvair. We were telling them about a Rusk press conference that was just to be held. Again on the 22nd of April at 11:50 we delivered to Cam an expression of our concern about the press play. April 25 I was absent, but by this time the press had gotten on to it and were following us back and forth to the North Vietnamese embassy. Finally on the 27th of April, at 4:00 in the afternoon Cam and Tiem were waiting in the lobby for Bob Hurwitch who had not been informed of their presence. They invited the ambassador and Bob and me to the embassy where they gave us a note offering Warsaw as the location. On May 3rd the DCM, Bob Hurwitch, passed a note to the North Vietnamese. Nick Veliotes, the political counselor accompanied. I was at home but my phone wasn't working. We agreed on Paris. At that time the President made the announcement that Paris was agreed upon. On the 4th we went to the embassy to invite the North Vietnamese to come to our embassy. They showed up and were given a 7-up this time, instead of the tea. And at that time we delivered the note formally agreeing to Paris, and that was the end of the exercise. It was a fascinating exercise because, as I say, the beginning with the juniors kind of walking around each other and not knowing quite how to deal with the reality, to see Bob Hurwitch and Bill Sullivan operate, and the North Vietnamese chargé who was an experienced diplomat. And they cut through all of the negative stuff, and went right to substance. A lesson I never forgot.

*Q: With Sullivan, was he making any comments that you heard as this process was going on about what he thought was happening, and where it was going?*

THOMSEN: I haven't covered it in here in great detail, but when various other venues were being proposed by Washington, he was encouraging us to focus on Paris. It seemed the North Vietnamese were more interested in that location. So he was urging us to keep our eye on the ball, and not to allow locations to divert us from getting some place for the talks, and Paris actually turned out to be quite alright. Phnom Penh of course would not have worked.

*Q: If you want to come back at any point to this, but let's talk a bit about developments in Laos, particularly early on. 1968 was not a good year, with the Tet offensive, and the fighting at Kue Sanh. What were you absorbing from the other people in the embassy about whither Laos at that time?*

THOMSEN: Well, actually I had a lot of other responsibilities besides this exercise. In the political section, the primary demand was to keep an eye on the CIA activities, and the military situation. So I did a lot of traveling. The defeat that had been suffered was at Nam Bac in the far northern part of Laos, and it was a major defeat in that major Lao units were badly hurt. But what it did, and the escalation of the war in Vietnam did was to give us more resources. For example, B-52 strikes in northern Laos began. We began bringing in better and more equipment for the Lao army, giving them better training and we were giving them better air support from Thailand. So aside from Nam Bac, and again that occurred before I got there, the situation in Laos was pretty stable through the time I was there, which was until July of 1970. In fact, in some areas the Lao army actually regained some territory.

One of the fascinating results of my study at Cornell was an understanding of the history of the region, I copied a map at Cornell of Thai influence in Laos .in the 19th century Laos was essentially a hinterland of Thailand up to a certain point of elevation in the Annenite chain. At that point the Vietnamese had superiority. For example, the Plain of Jars which was a major battle area, had been under North Vietnamese influence in the 19th century. The local princes would go to Hanoi to show their fealty. Whereas in the lowlands, to the south and west, the local princes would go to Bangkok. The Lao were really kind of a country bumpkin Thai. The point being when I was trying to assess North Vietnamese versus Lao control, I discovered that it was virtually the same line as in the late 19th Century. What we thought of as a war situation in 1970s was almost identical to what had been the political situation in the late 19th century, which gave us better insight into what was going on in those areas. A friend of mine who was a prince of a royal family, and traced his ancestry back many, many generations, recalled that his great grandfather would go to Hanoi. That was again in that part of Laos. And that they regarded Hanoi as friendly, protecting them from the Thai who they considered to be rapacious, although they were ethnically related to the Thai. They were not Chinese, they were ethnically more like the Thai. But politically in the 19th century they had regarded the Thai as less friendly than the Vietnamese. That was true all up and down the chain, all

up and down Laos. And really helped inform us as to what was going on, even at the village level.

*Q: How about contacts with the Lao government?*

THOMSEN: The Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma was a very urbane, distinguished political leader. He was from the family that produced the Prime Ministers historically. They were related to the royal family. So Souvanna Phouma had a kind of a charismatic leadership capability. He loved to play bridge, would play bridge all night, enjoyed the company of Bill Sullivan. Was very practical in his approach to what was going on. We had very open relations with, for example, the Foreign Minister. Nick Veliotes and I would play tennis three times a week with the chief of protocol, and the deputy chief of the political office in the Foreign Ministry, both of whom subsequently became ambassadors. They were from major families. I think we would say they were open with us, and were very pragmatic in how they dealt with common problems. Some of their colleagues, on the other hand, were a lot more circumspect because they were looking to the future for alternative futures where they might have to be able to live. One of my best friends actually was another deputy in the political office, later became chargé in Washington while I was the Lao desk officer. He subsequently went home with his beautiful new '73 Ford, and when Lao finally went communist after the fall of Vietnam, he was imprisoned and we learned in 1995 that he has finally been released from digging up land mines in of north Laos. He's home in Vientiane working at the Ministry of Tourism now. What I'm getting at is that the Lao that we dealt with, who had essentially cast their lots with us, were working with us very closely to try to find diplomatic solutions, and reasonable solutions for themselves. But there were others in the same Lao government who were much more careful to protect the future with a different kind of government, which is in fact did happen.

*Q: During this '68 to '70 period, what did the United States government want from Laos?*

THOMSEN: I think essentially to allow us to prosecute the war against the North Vietnamese, and have their assistance where possible. We did not regard the Lao army as particularly effective but it did hold several North Vietnamese regiments in Laos, engaged there which might have otherwise gone to South Vietnam. We were able to interdict the trail without the kind of criticism from the Lao that Sihanouk was giving us from Phnom Penh. They allowed us to organize the Meo. The Meo tribes people were valiant fighters against the North Vietnamese. Again you go back to this 19th century history where the North Vietnamese...I don't think persecute is exactly the right word, but essentially treated them very much as they treated their own Montagnards, badly mistreated them. So the Meo were willing to be armed and led against them. I think if we could have created a truly neutral Laos protected from the North Vietnamese, we would have been delighted to do that. But in the absence of that, we simply wanted not to have them be a problem for us as we fought in South Vietnam.

*Q: Did you find that many people that you ran across in Laos were either overtly or covertly trying to say, look, this is a big boys' battle, keep us out of this and we want to stay out of the way.*

THOMSEN: I didn't get very much of that. I think the Lao have always seen themselves as needing a protector. Again, let's go back to the 19th century. The name of Pavie isn't well known in the world, but Pavie was the French explorer that boated down the Mekong, and when he stopped in Luang Prabang, which is the royal capital of Laos, the King of Laos asked him for French protection from the Thai and the Vietnamese. I think this is where the word protectorate must have come from. The King of Laos asked for French protection from the Thai and the Vietnamese. And in a sense we were a successor to that legitimate by request protecting relationship. I think the Lao understood where they were. They were a tiny country between two larger countries, and to get another country on their side was to their advantage. I think if they thought they could be put in a situation where they could be left alone, they'd have been delighted. But I don't think they saw that as an alternative.

*Q: From your perspective, what was the role of the Thais at this particular time?*

THOMSEN: The Thai were very supportive of our efforts to keep the North Vietnamese away from Mekong. The Thais saw the North Vietnamese as a major threat. I think they'd seen them as a threat for 100 years or more. They saw us as the bulwark against the North Vietnamese coming to the Mekong. There were situations in northern Thailand where the Chinese were very active. If the map of Laos, Thailand, China and North Vietnam, there are places where the North Vietnamese could become a danger to the Thai. There were reported some North Vietnamese units that had moved close to the Thai border in the province of Saisbuiy where the Mekong River flows actually through Laos. Saisbuiy is on the Thai side of the Mekong, and there were rumors of North Vietnamese units supporting Thai insurgents from that area. The Lao were not very good at controlling even their own lowland territory, and the under populated areas. So the North Vietnamese could move in some of these places.

*Q: I'm not sure it was at this time or not, but I understand that the Thais sent troops who put on Laotian uniforms and fought some battles there. Was this going on when you were there?*

THOMSEN: I don't think so. I think the Thai had a very strong liaison team of military officers at Lao headquarters, and I think they were probably in Lao uniforms. And there also, I think, Thai observer liaisons with some of the hill tribes. But as far as Thai fighting in Lao uniforms, I hadn't heard of that.

*Q: You said you were reporting on the CIA. People I've interviewed, and also it's well known, Laos was practically a province of the CIA in many ways. I mean it was very much their operation more than most others. What were we doing? And what were you doing?*

THOMSEN: I was simply trying to keep informed would be the best way to say it. I wasn't trying to monitor them, I had no commission to second guess them. The CIA were supporting smaller ethnic Tai minority groups in the mountains all over the north, and there would be an American case officer in some of those villages who would live there and make sure that the support was available to them. And I would visit those places, visit with them, get an appreciation for what was on the ground from them, and just get a sense of what was going on. I would use the CIA contacts in those locations to do that.

*Q: You had been very much involved in the war in Vietnam, and you were getting out beyond dealing with the North Vietnamese, and as a diplomat probably you were seeing the case officers. Can you compare and contrast the war in Laos as compared to what you'd seen in Vietnam?*

THOMSEN: Much lower intensity. And much more localized. Often the North Vietnamese would be using other Lao, or other minority tribes to gain control of territory. And their main interest was really not to occupy, but simply interdict, or prevent us from using certain territories. So it was a very much lower level kind of activity. And often I'd visit a case officer and there wouldn't have been any sort of violence for weeks or months. The tribal troops were training, and he was making sure they were being fed. Some of them got very much involved in education, and community development, small scale gardening, all sorts of things. It was a fascinating experience to see these Americans, some of them in their 30s and 40s who had been there for a long time, just totally engaged with these tribal communities, and looking after their best interests, and feeling committed to them. That was not unique.

*Q: Was there any concern on the part of the embassy that the CIA was running its own program that the embassy did not have control or oversight?*

THOMSEN: I don't think so. Both Bill Sullivan and his successor, Mac Godley, were called for different reasons, the Field Marshal. And having served as a political advisor with the Marines in Vietnam, I was familiar with the morning daily briefing which is not a typical event at an embassy. But we would have a regular 7:00 a.m. briefing. One of the things about Laos was that we still had the old military attaché system where we had not just a Defense attaché, but we had an Army attaché, an Air Force attaché, and even a Naval attaché who was a Marine out of Bangkok. They would give us full operational briefings every morning, and then the CIA station chief would give us a full briefing on the events, essentially he was giving us a military briefing on what the CIA supported units were doing in northwest Laos. That's I think probably why I was travel to make sure that something wasn't happening that we might want to be interested in. I must tell you that some of my closest professional friends over the years are case officers I worked with in Laos. My feeling to this day is that they were pretty much playing straight with us.

*Q: What about the case officers? Where were they coming from? Do you have any feel for where they were recruited?*

THOMSEN: Some were recruited as long ago as the Second World War. They were long term CIA officers. In other cases they were bright young officers out of the eastern schools, as is often said to be the case. They weren't strange kind of off beat folks coming out of strange places.

*Q: Because this can often end up by having people looking for adventure and getting away from their families. You can end up with some very good, and very weird people.*

THOMSEN: We had a couple of them, but they were not recruited off the street for these jobs. These were men who had served in the agency for a couple of decades. This is just where they were put with all of their color, and idiosyncrasies.

*Q: What about AID? What was AID doing there, and what was your impression of how things...*

THOMSEN: AID was essentially the infrastructure for the country. Air America and Continental Air Services, the two contract airlines, were the means of communication for the Lao as well as the Americans from north to south. I think it may have been after Vietnam the largest AID mission in the world. It was a huge organization. And there they had some of the brightest young Americans I've ever seen. Kind of Peace Corps types but not from the Peace Corps working in the provinces, and they were essentially the CDOs, the Community Development Officers, were in many cases the backbone for the province chief providing him with the communications, and with the logistics that he needed to keep some vestige of control in his province. Some of these men and their families, and their families were with them, had harrowing experiences later on, when the North Vietnamese became more active than they were while I was there.

*Q: With these officers out in the villages, was there the same feeling that there had been in Vietnam? Where the Viet Cong would come in and take control in the night?*

THOMSEN: It was very different. The Pathet Lao were not real insurgents. They had been organized and trained by the North Vietnamese, and they were in units but they didn't have the same kind of local infrastructure they had in Vietnam. There was no fear in the late '60s in provincial Laos that an AID officer might be hurt by somebody.

*Q: As you were working on these peace talks, granted it was a peripheral and getting things ready, helping to get the thing going, but obviously there must have been talk among you and Nick Veliotes, Hurwitch, Sullivan and others, was there concern that when the peace talks came about, that the Lao might end up as being deserted as what we would consider more important to considerations?*

THOMSEN: No, our feeling was that peace would be good for Laos. That the Lao could only benefit from a peace treaty for the war next door. That almost any agreement next door would reduce tensions in Laos. That the Ho Chi Minh Trail would cease to be

critical. We always felt that the Lao could make an accommodation among themselves if the outside pressures were removed. The head of the Pathet Lao was the half brother of Souvanna Phouma. They did know each other. So the sense was that they could find an accommodation once the outside pressures were removed. And we recognized that we were one of the outside pressures, and if we were able to lower our level of visibility that would be helpful too. But we couldn't at the time as far as we were concerned.

*Q: How about the People's Republic of China? Did that play any role there while you were there?*

THOMSEN: Not significantly. They were there in a fairly significant presence. One of my other monitoring responsibilities was to keep track of a road the Chinese were building through north Laos. Everyone ignored it officially. The Lao disclaimed any knowledge of it, but I would go up north from time to time to get local reports on the progress of the road. The road would have been a threat to Thailand. But by the time the road got near where it would been a major threat, things had changed enough so we didn't think it was any more. But it was the kind of thing that was going on in this fascinating part of the world.

*Q: What was life like at the embassy? I mean family and all that sort of thing?*

THOMSEN: Life for families was comfortable. Vientiane was a tiny French city with the cosmopolitan diplomatic corps I've described. We had a huge commissary, a supermarket of a commissary for the Americans. We had a small community called K-6 with a school. I don't know how many thousands of Americans there must have been there, but it was large enough for there to be a school, and a small hospital. The embassy medical unit had, I think, eight doctors.

*Q: What was your impression of Bill Sullivan as ambassador?*

THOMSEN: Bill Sullivan, I thought, was one of the most consummate diplomats I've worked with in my career. His style was very interesting. He would use a legal sized yellow pad to do his drafting. He did not go out a lot, he was not a person who was an outside man. His most important visits were with the Prime Minister when there was something to talk about with him. Socially, he and his wife were very gracious and did entertain, and kept themselves in the community that way. But I'm comparing him to Mac Godley who I can talk about in a minute as almost the antithesis of Bill Sullivan's style.

An anecdote: Bill Sullivan would spend a day with his legal tablet preparing a gem of a diplomatic message, and it would be read. Everyone knew...I recall in Saigon the Marines, who I got to know later would say that these they would fight over who would get to read the Sullivan's cables first, because they were so pithy. They were gracious, well written, but that they had important information in them and important judgments. That's exactly what they were. He was an important player, but he was not an activist in his personal style. He was quiet, somewhat withdrawn, but very, very personable. I'll tell

another anecdote. When he left, the American community had a farewell party for him at the American club. It was a part of the commissary, but it had a snack bar, actually a large dining room. The place was absolutely packed, and as a junior officer in the embassy, I got to play..).they had skits about Ambassador Sullivan at various stages). Sullivan as a six month old, and a huge logistics officer ( It could have been a noseguard for the Chicago bears) he had me over his shoulder like I was a six month old. But the amount of affection and respect that flowed out of that farewell was just overwhelming. And Ambassador Sullivan, who had the gift of gab of any good Irishman, gave a farewell speech that would have gotten him elected mayor. He was very well liked, he was very low key. He was very polished, he was very affectionate, and a great person to work for as a role model.

*Q: How about Mac Godley? When did he come?*

THOMSEN: I would guess toward the end of '68. He was a totally different kind of ambassador. Where Bill Sullivan would sit for a day crafting this careful tome. Godley would spend the day in a helicopter with his AID director, his station chief, and his Army attaché , all over Laos. He'd come back at 4:00 or 5:00 in the afternoon. He would call the whole country team together in his office. He would bring in his secretary, who I think is now an admin counselor somewhere. She would sit down and he would start dictating. And as he dictated he would say, "and I visited the AID project in such and such a place, and here's what we found." And he'd look over at the AID mission director. Unless the guy got out of his chair and waved his arms, or stomped up and down, they would just go on. That would be his clearance. And at the end of let's say a 45 minute dictation in which he would give his appraisal of what was going on, he would then give maybe a two or three paragraph summary of action requirements, or recommendations. And at the end of that time, unless someone said, I can't agree with that, his secretary would type that up, it would probably be ten or twelve pages of the loosest prose you can imagine, and he would sign it and then he would go away. That would be Mac Godley's day in Laos, and in it would be buried absolute nuggets of important information, and a page and a half of loquacious sharing of his impressions of a village chief. It was a fascinating variation on the theme. But that's the way he operated. He was always out, always with the people. When visitors came, the Godleys would entertain and half the embassy would be there. But Godley would be in a room with two or three of his senior folks making decisions and getting things done as people were enjoying the party. Another fascinating professional to watch for a younger officer.

*Q: Was there a bit of sort of feeling like country cousins to the embassy in Saigon, or anything like that?*

THOMSEN: We had very few relations to Saigon. Bangkok was really where we had our ties, and most of our communications were with Washington. Our only real relation to Saigon was the interdiction of the Trail. We had what has been popularly called a "bombing officer." It would be a junior officer who sat in an airless office, one wall of

which was covered with a map of the Trail on a ½ inch to a kilometer, incredible detail. And every morning we'd get the requests for air strikes to the Trail.

*Q: Those were the B-52s.*

THOMSEN: He'd go to his map and he'd mark them out on the map. I say it was his office. Actually he was doing this in the conference room, his office was adjoining the conference room. When we went there to our meetings the first thing we'd look at would be the air strike requests with his recommendations. A young officer telling the President of the United States in Washington.

*Q: Lyndon Johnson.*

THOMSEN: He had this FSO-6 in Vientiane vetoing it. We had an agreement that if we found that any strikes would be in an area that had populations, it would be called off. So he was the one who was using that map.

*Q: This again was something I think I picked up some of this from an interview I did quite a few years ago with Nick Veliotes talking about the problems that the American military was always saying, all right, if we only get this particular point here, this is going to cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. It never did. But I mean, it was always this is a junction, or this is a...what do they call it...some kind of a point...*

THOMSEN: concentration

*Q: A choke point. And if you bombed that, which always happened to be a village or something like this, this will stop them dead. Of course, if there was anything that experience showed, the Ho Chi Minh Trail just kept expanding, it would by-pass. Could you talk about the embassy's role in this bombing, and any problems that you can remember?*

THOMSEN: Well, essentially, if there were complaints from villages that bombs had been dropped near them, we would investigate and try to make restitution and certainly then try to prevent any repetition. What had happened was that a village, or a populated area, might be in existence and not on the map.

*Q: You were talking about the role of the embassy. I mean you pay restitution.*

THOMSEN: Our intention was to prevent any injury to the Lao to the best of our ability. And we had agreement all the way back to Washington that any concerns that we had would be operative. It was simply a matter of having information to protect the populations. The Trail though had a low civilian population density. The North Vietnamese were not wandering through villages. They were moving in uninhabited areas. So it was not as much of a problem as it might sound. But there was certainly the possibility of a mistake, or of a bomb going into the wrong place, or of a village moving

because they were fairly mobile. Some of those tribes stay a while in one place, and move to another place and we might not spot them.

*Q: ...enter into the equation of this bombing...the bombers were ordered from, I think, when it came to CINCPAC, didn't they?*

THOMSEN: Probably because the bombers were based on Guam so CINCPAC would have been a good relay point. My recollection is that the coordinates for the targets came right out of Washington.

*Q: Were you aware of any kind of clashes between the military? So we got to bomb point B, and the embassy saying no, we don't want you...or that type of thing?*

THOMSEN: Yes, that kind of thing was going on all the time at a fairly low level. There was never an instance where the military said, this is a choke point of major proportions where thousands of tons of logistic or material are going through every week, and we've got to do it. And we would say, no. Those so-called choke points just weren't in inhabited areas. I'm trying to remember a few instances where we judged that there was a village within a few kilometers of a trail and they simply wouldn't bomb there. They'd bomb further up or down the trail. It would call for an exchange of messages, it wasn't a simple no and that would be the end of it all the time. Although in many cases there would say seven or eight targets, and we'd erase two targets and they would do the other five and let the two go.

*Q: While you were in Vientiane the anti-Vietnam movement in the United States was really sort of hitting us. Were you aware of this? Was this having any impact on the embassy officers, or other people in terms of morale, or people who were sort of agin what you were doing within the ranks of the Foreign Service, or CIA?*

THOMSEN: No. In the political section we had one junior officer who was kind of a peacenik. But he regarded what we were doing in Laos as supporting peace. He didn't think about what we were doing in Laos in the same way he thought of what we were doing in Vietnam. I thought of him as a bellwether, a kind of litmus test. If he got upset about something we were doing in Laos...and he wasn't all that happy about bombing in Laos, but he was delighted that we had some control, and that we weren't just being cut out of the picture. So what we were doing with regard to the bombing, was something he regarded as being beneficial. And the fact that he was a fairly thoughtful guy meant that a lot of us who were mostly engaged in the Vietnam situation, although we didn't approve of all of his attitudes, the fact that he was supportive of what we were doing in Laos was helpful to us.

I must say we didn't pay a lot of attention to what was going on in the States. We weren't wrapped up that much. Again, when I'd been at Cornell for a year, I had been involved in giving the State Department views around that part of New York, and into Pennsylvania speaking at colleges and public fora about Vietnam. So I knew that there was a rising

consciousness about what was going on, but that faded into the background while we were in Laos. We were pretty much taken up with what we were doing there.

*Q: Is there anything else we should cover in Laos?*

Thomsen: I don't think so. The embassy was an effective, the political section was certainly unusual. Nick Veliotes and myself and two other officers, three other officers including the bombing officer doing a variety of things that needed to be done. And doing it effectively. I had tremendous respect for Nick Veliotes as political counselor. I think that's probably a good coverage of..

*Q: Then you left there when, in the mid-1970...*

*THOMSEN: July, 1970.*

*Q: And whither?*

THOMSEN: Back to the Marines. I don't know if this is useful from a personnel point of view or not, but let me give you a quick run-down of how it happened. First of all, I'd gone there on a three year tour, 18 and 18, but I'd been promoted to FSO-4, which is now a 2....

*Q: This is about an equivalent of about a major.*

THOMSEN: So, Nick agreed with me that I might as well instead of doing 18 and 18 just do a two and a half year tour, a 30 month tour, and move on. So that's how we happened to move on in the middle of '70. Partly because Bangkok had a unique section called the the Coordination section. They had a counselor for coordination, and this was George Tanham, who latter became president of Rand. They were running a kind of an economic development/counter-insurgency/information program to help the Thai, and George invited me to come down and be his deputy, which would be a promotion assignment, that is, a stretch assignment. The Ambassador, Leonard Unger, in Bangkok and Godley in Vientiane both approved of it. But my personnel counselor said no, I'd been gone too long. They wouldn't count the Cornell assignment as State-side, so they were counting from '63 on. I'd been overseas for seven years. So they wanted me to come back to Washington. They killed the Bangkok assignment which I would have given my eye teeth for.

They wanted me to go to the Lao desk, which is exactly where I should have gone, but I got my back up, didn't want to do what they wanted me to do. I don't know today whether I really didn't want to do what they wanted me to do. I got a letter from a Marine general, we'd kept in touch, and he said we'd sure love to have you at Marine headquarters. I said, why not? So I wrote back and asked my counselor to let me out and join the State-Defense exchange program. I spent a year with the Marines.

But in terms of pure promotion, pure career development, I should have gone to the Lao desk. That would have been the right place to go. I spent a very interesting year with the Marines. I was their political-military planning officer on the joint staff planning team.

*Q: So you were doing that from '70 to '71 approximately.*

THOMSEN: Right. It was going to be a two year assignment, but it was a one year assignment.

*Q: What were you doing, and your impression of Marine headquarters?*

THOMSEN: First of all, they gave me the concurrent title of Political Advisor to the Commandant, and they treated me very well. General Walt was now the Deputy Commandant, John Chaissm was the Chief of Staff, General Joe Platt was the G-1. Most of the generals at Marine headquarters had been with me in Vietnam, and we'd had a good working relationship, and they were very glad to see me, and they were very accommodating. I had a great job. I was doing political-military work in the Pentagon working with what was called the Joint Planning Group, which was made up of a dozen of their best majors and lieutenant colonels. I worked on things like Law of the Sea, and any significant political-military policy issue that the Pentagon would be involved in. I would be the Marine representative on the task force, or on the working group that would deal with it. And if you know the way the Joint Planning system works, any paper in preparation is developed by a team of four officers from the four services, plus what they call a "purple suites", or someone who represents the joint staff. That group of five people would essentially write the first draft, and take it to the point where it needed to be dealt with by the general officer level, the deputy or the Ops Deps. It was a very useful learning experience for me in terms of learning how you do policy planning. It's rather rigid, very specific, a lot of jargon, a lot of processes that you have to memorize in order to get the job done right. It was a very enjoyable year even though I had to be at work at 6:30 every morning because that's the way the Marines operate. It increased my respect for the Marines. The Marines are very effective in that forum, and were actually well regarded by everybody else. The Navy kind of thought of them as younger brothers, but the Army and Air Force paid a lot of attention to what the Marines had to say.
*Q: Did you find as you went through these exercises that each service wanted to be sure that their turf was protected?*

THOMSEN: Absolutely.

*Q: ...and they had to have a piece of the action no matter where. It might really be an Air Force issue. Was this the name of the game?*

THOMSEN: Not on a one by one situation. The Air Force, Army, and the Navy planners and action officers who I worked with, I would see fairly frequently. We would be working a lot of different "papers" together, as they call them. So it may not be that the Air Force would have a piece of this action, but it would be understood that next time we

would pay a lot of attention to their concerns. But the idea of turf was very much on the table. No one was pretending that they weren't representing their service. The guy representing the Joint Staff was really pretty much a moderator. He did not have much of a view until the last stages when the chairman of the Joint Chiefs might step in, and then he'd represent that point of view. But he would let the four services pretty much have their way as the program developed.

One of the fascinating exercises which I did not participate in, but I watched because the action officer next to me had the action. That was the revision of the unified command structure in 1970, and the Marine major who later became an artillery general, a general commanding artillery in Okinawa, Roy Belli, designed the unified structure, and I watched him do it. And the paper that he created, with the blessing of his seniors in the Marines, went into this joint planning system, and except for rejecting his idea that one of the unified commanders would be a Marine, his plan essentially is the one that's still in operation today. It wasn't that he was a genius, but he simply had a very good idea that went through the system. And as I say, except for taking off a Marine general unified commander, it was exactly the way that the geography of the thing broke out. And watching that was fascinating.

Another story I can't resist telling, is the young major sitting next to me one day turned to me and said, "Sam, what do you know about the White House intern program?" And he said, "I've been invited to be nominated for it, and I just wondered if you think it's worth trying." And I said, "Bud (McFarlane), it can't hurt. Take a shot at it."

*Q: He later became head of the National Security Council.*

THOMSEN: ...and his career was ruined by the Iran Contra situation. I see Bud from time to time, and we exchange greetings, but that's the kind of people who were on that staff. The best they had, and Bud certainly was in that category.

*Q: Then you left that, and of course you'd been out of the eye of the State Department. This is the trouble with these assignments, they can be fascinating and really add very much to your knowledge, but you're not within the State Department system and sometimes this doesn't help you. What job did you get then?*

THOMSEN: Well, what happened was the Special Assistant to the Director of the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, Don Gelber, who was the godfather of the exchange program was so enamored of the idea that I could be the political advisor to the Commandant of the Marine Corps that he got Admiral Zumwalt, who was then the Chief of Naval Operations, to ask for a POLAD for the Navy. And I was the precedent that Gelber used. So Don was released to go to the Navy as the political advisor to the Chief of Naval Operations if I would leave the Marines and take his job as Special Assistant in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs. And I agreed to do that, so I ended up being a Special Assistant, never having served on a desk except in the management side of the house. I was also Staff Director, of the Political-Military Interagency Group. I had all

sorts of things to do that I never even had an idea of before. I was the principal paper pusher. P-M did not have its own Executive Director so I was also the Executive Director which meant I ran the budget, space, and personnel. I also ran the exchange program, and the POLAD program. It kept me busy. Ron Spiers was the Director of PM at the time and Tom Pickering was the principal DAS. The three of us ran the bureau.

*Q: You did that from when to when?*

THOMSEN: July '71 to July '72.

*Q: What were some of the issues you dealt with?*

THOMSEN: Well, it covered the gamut of political-military issues. SALT was a critical issue, and Tom Pickering's time was taken up almost entirely fighting with ACDA. But every single force structure issue and deployment issue. I'm talking now about the kinds of papers that I would have to push through the interagency process. SALT was pretty much on the side. Tom Pickering ran it with Kissinger, and I forget who was the head of ACDA. Ron Spiers would get into it from time to time. My day was spent with every kind of military issue, security issue you could think of.

*Q: This was the height of the Nixon Administration. Was the Nixon Administration paying more attention to the military side than at other times, or not?*

THOMSEN: No, I don't think so. I think their strategic view was as much political as it was military. The sense I had was that security interest was a factor, a function of our overall political strategy. I'm trying to think in terms of anecdotal material that he used. But essentially no, I didn't feel that the military was preeminent, or dominated. We pretty much held our own where there were issues.

*Q: How about the role of the NSC and Henry Kissinger?*

THOMSEN: Well, we had to fight for our life to prevail in that arena. It was a totally different situation when he came over as Secretary.

*Q: You were there when he was not Secretary.*

THOMSEN: That's right.

*Q: Who was calling the shots?*

THOMSEN: The shots were being called out of the White House, out of the NSC, and State to the extent that it had different views would have to fight vehemently to get its views even on the table. Kissinger was really his own architect, and men like Spiers and Pickering who were brilliant and active, and I think later when Kissinger shifted hats became much more powerful.

*Q: You mentioned that Pickering was fighting ACDA in a way. What were the two different roles? ACDA being Arms Control Disarmament Agency, and Pickering representing political-military affairs. I realize this was not right on your plate, but you were seeing this. What was the basic dispute?*

THOMSEN: As I recall, we were a little more suspicious of the Soviets and wanted a little bit more in the way of, not confirmation, but verification. We wanted to be a little tougher on that and these kinds of issues were the ones on Tom's plate.

*Q: On the political-military side, what was the general view during this '71-'72 period of the Soviet Union? Was it a "threat" or how did we feel about it?*

THOMSEN: We had pretty much the traditional view of it, that it was a powerful threat, and a critical threat. That it had the capability of doing what it wanted to do, and we had to be powerful ourselves, and we had to be tough in terms of restraining the Soviet Union. That was the view within that bureau. It's interesting. It may have been not clientitis, but that we were the interface between the military and the Department. So it may be we took on a little bit of the color of the military on that issue. A little more willing to listen to the military perspective, partly because we had a fair number of military officers within the bureau.

*Q: You left that in '72 and whither?*

THOMSEN: In '72 I became what I call the "arms merchant to the Middle East." I moved to the Office for Military Assistance and Sales, and my part of the world was NEA and AF, but it really was the Middle East.

*Q: This is from when to when?*

THOMSEN: July '73 until December '73 is really the right answer, it was a six month period because, although it had intended to be a two year assignment, in October I did a one month trip through the Middle East as a kind of get acquainted tour, and traveled with Rocky Suddarth, Roscoe Suddarth, ambassador to Jordan later. Rocky was in P-M and the two of us went to Lebanon in the days Beirut was still a beautiful city; to Amman, Jordan; and to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. No, we actually went to Kuwait first and spent a week, we went on together to Jeddah and then I separated and went to Riyadh and to Dhahran, to Bahrain, to Muscat in Oman, then Tehran where I spent a week negotiating the most comprehensive military assistance contract that had ever been negotiated up to that time. It was called the Technical Assistance Field Teams (TAFT) and the Iranians paid for everything including the retirement for our military. But when I got back from that trip at the end of November, I was told that I was a part of a 100-man levy to go back to Vietnam to observe the cease fire which we expected imminently. That destroyed my wife's Christmas plans and party because I was on 48-hour notice. It was a great stress on

the family. But we left finally at the end of February. So my P-M tenure was cut very, very short.

*Q: Let's talk about the time you were with P-M dealing with Middle East arms sales. This would have included the aftermath of the '73 war. Did you get involved in that?*

THOMSEN: I was there before that.

*Q: What was the feeling within P-M, your own personal feeling about our arms sales particularly to Israel?*

THOMSEN: Well, one of the studies I did, and I did as thoroughly as I could was to try to get control of what was going on, and the situation is about the same today as it was then, it was virtually uncontainably. They had virtual carte blanche...

*Q: You're talking about Israel.*

THOMSEN: Yes, uniquely. Not everyone, but certainly they were hard to constrain. But I did a study, and I forget now exactly what the results were, but to show that the diversity and the breath of their actions with regard to our armaments industry, they probably had a better handle on developments in our military hardware than we did. There was almost nothing they couldn't get if they wanted it.

*Q: You always had the feeling that they were looking at the latest catalogues and ordering it. What would happen? What would P-M's role be in this, albeit maybe futile, but what were you doing?*

THOMSEN: Well, it wasn't futile because for policy reasons we didn't try to constrain them. We, I think, had a kind of political sense that there wasn't much we could do. The P-M had, the munitions control office at the time, and had to approve all arms sales to any country, and it still does. But the kinds of judgments you would make about arms sales to countries around the world did not really apply in that situation. Literally they didn't apply. Reasonably they didn't apply. But politically they sure didn't apply. So there wasn't a lot of stress in trying to fight particular things. There were some situations in which it they looked like they were buying something we were doing and something the French were doing, and we just as soon they not do that and create an even better product that used French technology with our technology. And we'd try to convince them not to mix technologies to protect ours. They would talk to us seriously about that sort of thing.

*Q: Did we have any other clients in the Middle East. Let's not include Iran. I want to talk about that a little later. At that point we didn't have relations with the Egyptians. No, we had an Interest Section.*

THOMSEN: Jordan, Lebanon to a very minor extent. Certainly Saudi Arabia we had a lot of business with Saudi Arabia, and Muscat and Oman. The issue with Muscat and Oman:

they had an insurgency with one of the two Yemens and I forget which one, and they needed 75 mm. artillery shells. We were very sympathetic because we wanted access to some of their air fields, so we were in a real trade-off situation. We wanted to become more influential with the Sultan of Kaboos. The British were there, when I arrived in October of '72 the British were still in force in Muscat and Oman, and were flying their sorties and were doing what was necessary to help them, and we were trying to begin playing a role there.

*Q: Was there a problem in giving arms to the Saudis and that the Israelis could sort of veto what we did there?*

THOMSEN: I didn't come across that. It could have been. What we were selling them at the time was F-5s which was our "freedom fighter," a neat little plane which Northrop put out. They had British Jaguars which were big ugly things. The F-5 would have been a better aircraft for them. We had a military assistance group in Riyadh, and the Corps of Engineers was in full force building these isolated military camps for them, fully air conditioned, beautiful facilities, that they were paying for and the Corps of Engineers was managing. The Saudi Arabian army was one thing but they had a kind of civil guard which was loyal to one of the other princes, and we spent a lot of their money, or we got money helping them, not so much train, as provision and equip.

*Q: I was in Dhahran from '58 to '60 and the White Army was always considered a counter point to the regular military, so that was still going on.*

THOMSEN: Absolutely.

*Q: It's more a tribal issue.*

THOMSEN: That's right, they were the tribals, and it was very much a political effort.

*Q: Let's talk about the Iranian deal because I've had the impression that Nixon and Kissinger went to Iran and fell in love with the Shah, and said, anything you want, in many ways it was not a very good policy.*

THOMSEN: It certainly proved not to be.

*Q: What were sort of when you went there and were negotiating. In the first place, how did you see the situation at the time? What were your marching orders from Washington?*

THOMSEN: Well, the marching orders were that they wanted to buy huge quantities of sophisticated American weapons. And our regional justifications was that we were counterpoints to Iraq, and to the Soviets. And so we were to be sympathetic to their interests. But what I was doing was not involved in the sale of the weapons, and creating a system for bringing over the technicians to manage the equipment, and the TAFT, as it was called, the Technical Assistance Field Teams, was a concept that would call on the

Iranians to pay for everything we could think of. I was the State Department representative, but Defense had their biggest guns from Defense Security Assistance Agency, who were there doing the heavy work. I was making sure that nothing went wrong, or that nothing would affect our political interests would be involved. So we were providing helicopter training, helicopter flight trainers, and maintenance trainers. They were going to buy our most sophisticated destroyers, and we were helping them build their naval installations, and we were going to make them pay, as I say, for everything down to their retirement for every soldier that went to Iran. The Defense Department could cross off that line item in their payroll.

*Q: One of the criticisms was that as this went on we put so many Americans into the area, not just military, but mainly civilians like Bell Helicopter...*

THOMSEN: That's true, a lot of contractors.

*Q: ...a lot of contractors, Bell Helicopters, etc. etc. It helped raise a tremendous amount of resentment within the body politic of Iran, and was at least a cause for the uprising and revolution. Were you getting anything from the embassy about wondering what the hell we were doing?*

THOMSEN: Well, I was at the early stages, I think, of that process so it may not have become as apparent as it might have later. But when I was there the embassy was very much supportive of what was going on. The political-military officer was Henry Precht. He was later DCM in Egypt, and became well known as head of the Iran desk during some of the Iran-Contra hearings. The embassy was very gracious and helpful to me. I think they saw my role as being helpful to them; they gave me a good range of briefings, economic as well. Bill Lehfeldt was the economic-commercial counselor. I had the sense that we regarded the Shah as being solidly in place, not being threatened, that Iran was a very important player on the southern flank. That the Shah was competent to take advantage of the material that we were going to provide him. We weren't going to provide him with toys that he couldn't use properly. It was altogether a sound deal, and I don't think balance of payments was a critical issue, but that certainly the amount of money they were going to spend was going to be helpful to us, and wouldn't be ignored.

My recollection is that there was no sense of a domestic threat, no insurgency or coup rumors.

*Q: Of course, I guess our military was interested because there's a certain economy of scale...the Iranians and stuff that we wanted too. If you manufactured so many tanks as opposed to many fewer tanks, you got a better per tank price.*

THOMSEN: Exactly. And they were buying that stuff. That's what they were buying. They were buying our latest stuff, so the economy of scale was a likely factor, that's right. But I did travel around. I talked to our military, we did have a military advisory groups there at the time, and I did not get a sense, as I had as I mentioned in Vietnam earlier,

from the younger officers that there was something wrong with what we were doing. That did not come through at all. We were giving good training, we were equipping, and that we were producing a fighting force that would be allied to us, and would be a valuable asset to us, and that we were doing it at their expense rather than having to pay for it ourselves.

*Q: This is interesting because sometimes I've been involved with people who dealt with training programs and the feeling is, okay, we're doing all this, but you know these people can't fight their way out of a wet paper bag. But you weren't getting that.*

THOMSEN: Well, I wasn't getting it, but I don't think I asked that question. I don't know that I ever got a very specific appraisal of what would happen if they had to fight. I was told that their pilots were excellent, and their tactical exercises, they performed very, very well. How you lead men in battle though is something you can't predict too well, and that's what I'm getting at. I'm trying not to suggest that we were judging how they would be in battle.

*Q: In many ways we don't really know because after the revolution the Iranians did fight off the Iraqis but it was almost a tie.*

THOMSEN: It was a tie...

*Q: You were saying by the time the Iran-Iraq war was in full swing the Iranian army was...*

THOMSEN: Many of the most effective senior leadership in the Iranian army and many of the tactical leaders had already been removed - either escaped, or been killed, or had been cashiered from the military as untrustworthy by the fundamentalists. So it was a different military force in that sense in terms of leadership than it had been earlier, although one of their technicians and a lot of their, I guess you'd call them managers, were still in place, and the infrastructure was still in place.

*Q: Sam, why don't we stop at this point, and we'll pick it up. You were slated because of your Vietnamese, back to Vietnam. One couldn't get away from that particular tar baby, could one?*

THOMSEN: In fact I wanted to go back, Nick Veliotes was by then special assistant to the deputy secretary, and invited me to apply for the junior special assistant position, and I decided instead to take the levy back to Vietnam and see what had happened in the time I'd been gone, which may or may not have been a good choice. Another one of those career decisions that may or may not have been the soundest.

*Q: Well, one never knows. As we do these things, talk to people, we all look upon career decisions, but there's more to life than a career. The real fun of the Foreign Service is the*

*fun of the foreign service, and going where the action is, and where you're interested in. And not just moving up the ladder.*

THOMSEN: Thank you for saying that because I've often second guessed myself. But that was my decision at the time to go back and see and be a part of it and help finish what we'd been involved in seven years before.

*Q: Just to put on the record. You went out to Vietnam when? And you were there from when to when?*

THOMSEN: I went back to Vietnam from February '73 to July '73.

*Q: Okay, and we'll pick it up at that point.*

*Today is the 12th of November 1996. Sam, you have written some notes so I'll start this off and ask you a question or two and then you may revert to reading from notes, and I may interrupt you from these which were taken from what, a diary?*

THOMSEN: A diary.

*Q: But I want to get what you were doing in some detail because I think it's important. You got to Saigon, was there any briefing, and what sort of things were you told you were supposed to do? Or what did you understand you were supposed to do, and how did you get assigned?*

THOMSEN: I was assigned because I was in a pool of officers who had served in Vietnam and had Vietnamese language skills. Not all of them had Vietnamese language skills, but almost all of them had served in Vietnam. Some staff supporters, I have Jean Ronchetti was a GS and she came as a secretary. Other than that we were officers who had served previously in Vietnam, and were just pulled from wherever we were.

*Q: What were your marching orders?*

THOMSEN: Our marching orders were that we were going to establish four consulates general and report on the post cease fire in great detail. In the absence of the MACV, which was phasing out, we would become the primary source of information about what was going on in the countryside. Subsequently the defense attaché office was established to take on some of the MACV responsibilities and by about halfway through the six month TDY had a small office in the consulate general and were doing their own political-military reporting, and, of course, CAS was doing its own political reporting.

*Q: CAS was CIA.*

THOMSEN: Right.

*Q: As you went out there, and when you first arrived, what were you getting from your colleagues when you're talking about whither South Vietnam at this point?*

THOMSEN: We just didn't have any idea. Most of us had been away. Those who had been there were not any more familiar with what was expected than we were. The Kissinger negotiations in Paris, which had resulted in late January in the signing of the Paris Accords, didn't know the parameters. In fact, just doing a review for this interview, clearly no one except Henry Kissinger had any idea what was expected, and even Henry didn't really know what would come out of it except that it would put an end to the fighting, and we would have an opportunity to withdraw the last 20,000 American troops.

*Q: Was there any of the feeling that what you were doing was sort of a fig leaf or bugout?*

THOMSEN: Not at all. Of course, domestic politics played an important role in this, and Watergate later on, clearly had a decisive role in the final outcome. But at the time of the Accords there was a substantial hope that something could be pulled off. In fact, a lot of our reporting...we were there from February to July, toward the middle of the period, we started looking at what looked like a "third Vietnam" being formed in the west in the mountainous area. At the end of my tour Don Colin who was head of the reporting unit in Saigon, actually put together a substantial airgram which drew on reporting from all the consulates general, which was called the "third Vietnam," and was to hypothesize that the Viet Cong, the PRG, the People's Revolutionary Government, might establish itself in a political competition in the west in the mountainous area. That wasn't to be ultimately but certainly that thread was going through, and we were seeing ourselves as watching something that was not a foregone conclusion.

*Q: Well then if you want to...I'm going to turn you loose. I may stop you from time to time, but if you want to use the notes that you've made from your diaries, and expand and go along with them, and then if you have any questions to me. Expansion is the preferable term.*

THOMSEN: One of the reasons I'm going to do it this way is because there are a lot of names that I think are worth putting on paper for future reference.

The Accords had been signed finally on the 27th of January, and on the 28th of January the cease fire began at 8:00 in the morning, local time in Saigon. I and elements that were ultimately 50 other Foreign Service officers arrived in Saigon on the 2nd of February on very short notice. Almost immediately were taken into a briefing which started with administrative in processing, then with political section briefings, calls on Joe Bennett who was the political counselor and on Ambassador Whitehouse who was the deputy ambassador, the title unusual they were still using in Vietnam. In the afternoon we were briefed by CORDS, that was the civilian, I don't even recall what the acronym stands for. Do you recall, Stu?

*Q: No...civilian something revolutionary development.*

THOMSEN: Essentially it was an amalgamation of CIA and AID stuff, and I think some military put in to provide province by province support for Vietnamese. It had been established just as I was leaving in '66 so I really didn't get to know it very well. The major in-country field operations coordinator, Jake Jacobson, was responsible for it and he briefed us in the afternoon. He, I think, expected that he would have a major role in the management of the Consulates general. He became established in the bureaucratic issues as to who ConGens reported to. Our purpose in Vietnam, as I indicated, was to observe the post cease fire situation, and we learned more about what that meant later on. We did meet Ambassador Bunker that afternoon as well.

*Q: How did Ambassador Bunker strike you at that point. How did he look upon this? Positive, or neutral...*

THOMSEN: ...conservatively optimistic, of course. He said that our purpose in being there was to get information one way or the other and to "call them like you saw them" because there was no other way to get a good judgment. If we came out as optimists, or came out as pessimists, we would not be doing our job properly. That was his approach, and it was kind of balanced. As you know he was very patrician, and very urbane, and very low key but that was the approach.

The next day was awakened. We met old friends. John Helble who had been my predecessor as consul in Hue back in '64, Tom Conlon, Shep Lowman, folks that had been involved before. That afternoon had a lunch with Steve Winship who was the political-military counselor, whom I had not known previously. That evening I saw Bob Shaplen whom I had known previously. Bob Shaplen was the well-reputed correspondent for the New Yorker magazine. His long, long thoughtful pieces during the '60s were some of the best reporting out of Vietnam. I don't know if I mentioned it earlier but Bob would come up to Da Nang, or to Hue in 1955-66, and share his information with me as much as I shared with him. I did everything with him off the record but he was always very helpful to me. Bob was unexpectedly optimistic about the possibilities, and knowing Bob I thought that was a very, very positive sign because he tended to be very skeptical. One of the rumors was that his chief stringer was in fact a senior Viet Cong official. I actually got a few insights that might not otherwise have been available from him, and some of what he had to say in retrospect suggested that he had some access to information not otherwise available.

On the 6th of February, I flew to Da Nang. We were still in the dark regarding most of the arrangements. We had no idea, for example, who was going to do our ERs...

*Q: Efficiency Reports.*

THOMSEN: ...what our per diem was going to be, how we were going to be maintained, all this was still being looked at. We were just kind of flung out into the outer darkness to

make our way. In Da Nang we were met. I argued successfully for being given the titles of consuls (detached) rather than simply as political reporting officers. We needed some sort of if not diplomatic, at least consular titles even on a short term basis, and that we were finally given.

*Q: That reflects a little bit when I was consul general in Saigon, Terry MacNamara head of the consulate there, which was considered a detachment from the consulate general in Saigon. It was sort of peculiar, sort of a Vietnam response.*

THOMSEN: Maybe that was right, I didn't understand it but I felt that was a fine approach but that we needed something. That is, we couldn't just be up there as civilians. Those who came with me to I Corps were Hal Colbaugh who had been with me in '66. Hal was a superb language officer and had been sent to Da Nang in the spring of '66 by political counselor Phil Habib to help me out because of an incredible amount of political activity which in addition to being political advisor to the Marines I was trying to cover. Lee Graham, Bob Carroll, George Moose who has gone on to bigger and better things. Together we were supposed to organize ourselves to cover what was called I Corps, the first military region which consisted of Quang Tri to the far north, Thua Thien province which held the former imperial capital of Hue. Quang Nam province. Da Nang city. Quang Tin province, and Quang Ngai. My first impressions of Da Nang were of the many refugees there. Da Nang was a frenetic place, my notes say that thoughts of an end of an empire. The Marine construction that had occurred while I was there in '65-'66 was beginning already to deteriorate, and of course the American military was almost vanished. On the other hand the Vietnamese I met seemed much more self-assured and competent, better trained than they had been back in the mid-'60s. It was an interesting change in that respect.

One of the implications of turning the consulate into a Consulate General where John Wolf had been the vice consul, and Craig Dunkerley had been the third officer as a political-economic officer. Now it had exploded because Fred was the consul general and instead of being a small consular office it was now the principal U.S. installation in central Vietnam. So Fred as consul general was now going to be supervising an FSR-2 AID officer who had been the senior person in that region as the head of CORDS. That was a very painful change. All of a sudden seven new officers were involved to try to do the political reporting, and Craig Dunkerley, who had been the political officer, was now a part of a large section that included Hal Colbaugh was going to be the head of the section in Da Nang. I was going to go to Hue, along with Bob Carroll. George Moose went to Quang Ngai, and Lee Graham went to Quang Tin. This was an incredible shift, and the small side street French bungalow that had been the consulate was now out of the way, and Fred moved into the biggest office in what was called the White Elephant right on the Strand on the river, taking the office of the CORDS director. A lot of drastic actions were taking place. A lot of feelings were hurt but there was no way around that.

In my own case I felt a little out of place. I had been the principal American in central Vietnam as a consul, as an FSO-5. And I was returning to Hue in a subordinate position.

Gary Matthews who had been the PSA (I think that's provincial senior adviser) and an FSO-4 or 5 now, later became head of the Senior Seminar. Gary was to be in charge of our operation until his departure which was not far away. And then subsequently Phil Cook an FSO-3 came in. Phil had not been in the initial levy, but he showed up, he was an FSO-3. So we had Sam Thomsen, an FSO-4, the former principal officer and Consul, with Gary Matthews, an FSO-4 or 5 in charge, and Phil Cook, an FSO-3 not very happy with the anomalous situation he was in. Part of my problem was that a lot of people remembered me and paid their respects to me as the consul at the same time I was trying to position myself appropriately among my colleagues. However, that whole process didn't last all that long.

The PSA was established in what had been the AID director's residence, and across the street was a huge warehouse and a new lodging for TDY folks. But I walked to the what had been the consul's residence which is now the USIS building. I went there to recall memories. My older son Sam was born there, and a lot of happy memories for my family were in that building. I was seeing old friends from the various parties and the religious groups, people who I had worked with before were making their way to say hello. One of the things, for example that happened was that the senior Buddhist from the Tri Quang faction, the faction of "radical Buddhists" as they are called who helped overthrow Diem, made a special point to see me and spend some time to assure me that the his group was very much in support of the government, were very hopeful for the success of the cease fire. So I was beginning to get this kind of feedback which was very, very useful.

Another couple of things. The old consulate, which had not been destroyed, was now the city hall. And the residence of the vice consul had become the provincial council headquarters. As I said, the consul's residence had become the USIA, and the bedroom where my son was born was now the USIS library. So things had changed in Hue.

Among the good things that we saw were boy scouts cleaning up. The boy scouts were Buddhists, interestingly enough, as well as Catholic. And there was quite a movement to kind of restore order, and allow peace to return to Hue. We were very struck by that.

One of the former consulate employees, Joe Nghia, had been drafted into the military, was now a senior corporal, and a TV producer of all things. And just to bring the story up to date, we believe that he's still doing TV productions under the new government in Hue. And I certainly wish him well in that.

One of my responsibilities in Hue was to be as principal liaison with the Joint Military Commission--which was the North Vietnamese-South Vietnamese; PRG, the old Viet Cong, and the United States Army. I was also to be a liaison with the ICCS, the International Commission of Control and Supervision, made up of Canadians, Indonesians, Poles and Hungarians, which was to be the guarantor of the cease fire.

On the 14th of February, this is now almost three weeks after the cease fire, the province chiefs hosted a dinner and the North Vietnamese showed up. The North Vietnamese had

arrived to be a part of the joint military commission, but PRC had not arrived, and in fact would not arrive for some time. On the same day, on the 14th of February, 175 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong prisoners of war were released in Quang Tri, the province next to the DMZ, and allowed to go across the river.

We were still having to make our own way as far as lodgings were concerned. I, for example, contracted with the former Vietnamese information officer to lodge in his home. We essentially took over his residence, and he moved over to a cousin's. But we were doing kind of our own contracting ad hoc. We didn't have FBO around, or anyone else to help out.

On the 19th of February, that's just less than a month after we arrived, Gary Matthews left. Phil Cook was then put in charge of the three of us, Phil Cook, Bob Carroll and myself. Bob was doing reporting on the Quang Tri situation, I was doing the ICCS and the political situation in Hue, and Phil was supervising us and doing refugees. That was how that little unit was working out.

*Q: Let's stop here. You'd been there about a month. What were you getting? What you were finding now at this initial stage what the ICCS was?*

THOMSEN: First of all, the Joint Military Commission was not working. The PRG, the Viet Cong, were simply not being helpful. And we'll see a little later on, they actually shot down an ICCS helicopter. So there was really a lot of resentment toward the PRG. The resentment was widespread in all parts. The ARVN and the government of Vietnam, couldn't stand the idea of allowing the Viet Cong to be free in the city. So they kept them under very close restriction, which of course was counter to the agreement. But finally a modus vivendi was worked out where they could go certain places, but they had to have escorts.

*Q: Were the government of Vietnam able to send their observers into where the Viet Cong were?*

THOMSEN: No. That did not happen. That was not a part of the agreement. It's an interesting question to look back on it, but everything that was going on was going on in what was government controlled territory.

*Q: That sounds like a recipe for disaster.*

THOMSEN: Well, eventually it was, yes. But the ICCS with Canadians and Indonesians, Hungarians and Poles, was also not working very well. It was clear that the Poles and Hungarians were both given instructions not to be cooperative. Their practice was to go to where there was a purported incident. They would be asked to go and observe it, and to identify that the cease fire had been broken at point A or point B. Now the Viet Cong were never going to call on the ICCS to come to their territory. That just didn't happen. But when the GVN called for them the Canadians would be willing to go, and the

Indonesians would be willing to go, but the Hungarians particularly would find a reason for not going. And normally, the way the Canadians explained it to me, they would just get into a long discussion of procedures. They wouldn't say, no, we won't go, but they would talk about what vehicles to take, and who would ride in which vehicles, and how long they'd be gone, and what the limitations would be. And they'd finally talk themselves out of going. That really almost was the uniform practice all the way through. Later on I'll get into one incident where the Canadians essentially tricked the other two parties into accompanying them on an observation of an incident. But by and large there were just so many problems in trying to get the ICCS to work. As I say, the Joint Military Commission just never operated.

*Q: I assume this was all being reported that it wasn't going anywhere. Was this having any affect on sort of the spirit of the work by the Vietnamese, and by you all?*

THOMSEN: Well, we kept trying to find ways to make it work, and I think probably that goes way beyond where we were. But my guess is that we were making representations in the capitals of the various governments concerned. We were still expecting that we could find a way to make the ICCS work. What was really going on, and the important thing in responding to the question that you asked, the public opinion in Hue, which is a pretty good bell wether, because there were a lot of oppositionists in the government there. There were a whole range of attitudes which I guess we could say was a positive thing. There were those who were very optimistic, and there were those who were very pessimistic, and there were those who had a wait and see attitude. But it wasn't entirely pessimistic which was a good thing. There was a lot of skepticism, and particularly a lot of skepticism about North Vietnamese ultimate intentions. How long they would go along with the game, and at what point they would return to the battlefield, which is ultimately what did happen.

In the meantime...I've got a little note here. Hue had been restored to the '64-'65 period. A lot of what had been destroyed during Tet '68 had been rebuilt by 1973. For example, the Citadel, which had been almost totally destroyed during house to house firing had occurred, much of it had been restored. The bridge that had been dropped, as they say, had been rebuilt. A new hospital had been built. It was much more modern than the one that I had known. Hue was again an attractive city. Now I understand that today it's even more attractive.

*Q: You say you were in Da Nang, but Hue. Were you really working out of...*

THOMSEN: I'm in Hue now. Canadians begin forcing the ICCS to operate. The U.S. still has enough military in place to support efforts to move people around.

A Buddhist Bonze visited and provided assurances that Buddhists were not communists. He also recalled helping to hide the Bullingtons during the Tet '68. Jim Bullington, who was my vice consul in '65 and '66 and stayed on, and married my senior local, Thuy Cam, who came from a prominent Hue family. During Tet '68 Jim hid in the rafters of the home

during the entire occupation. Now Jim weighed about 200 pounds, was about 6 feet 2. Jim has written this up I think either in the Foreign Service Journal or in State's magazine of about five or six years ago, it was a fascinating story. This Buddhist was a member of the group that had opposed the government during the mid-'60s, and helped bring down Diem, coming to volunteer the assurances that the Buddhists are very much in favor of what's going on in supporting the government. I was surprised at that, because they were never willing to put themselves on the record in the '60s.

On the 23rd of February I was called to Da Nang to replace Hal Colbaugh who had been in Haiphong. I would stay in Da Nang and take over the political reporting. That would allow Phil Cook to be in charge in Hue. I mentioned already that Da Nang was reorganizing. The AID/CORDS compound, which was big enough to be an embassy, was now under Fred Brown's control and responsibility. The compound contained apartments, a club, a swimming pool, a commissary. When I had been there previously there was no American civilian presence visible at all.

We're beginning to do extensive sitrep reporting, and I was responsible for...

*Q: Sitrep, means situation report.*

THOMSEN: Officers from all over I Corps would send in reports on different days; we'd be able to edit them and on a weekly basis, on Monday, we'd send in a comprehensive report. My responsibilities were to be the head of the political section, to be the principal ICCS liaison for I Corps, and to be in touch with the political activities within the city of Da Nang. Fred was still fighting with AID as to whether he was really in charge or not, or whether they were going to be a separate entity. Finally it was agreed that the AID director would be the deputy consul general for reconstruction and resettlement, and I was the deputy consul general for political and consular affairs. As I mentioned earlier, the AID director was very upset, very put out by all of this.

But what was interesting and I'll just make a very general statement on this is that most of his AID subordinates were delighted at having Fred take charge, and it created a different atmosphere for a lot of them because they felt that they were going to have a little more freedom of action.

A number of Vietnamese with whom I was beginning to meet had been very young officers in the '60s, now in the early '70s they were in positions of lieutenant colonel and major and colonel, and were becoming province chiefs, and were very impressive. Most of these people now were fluent in English, where before it was necessary to use either French or Vietnamese. They had been to various senior military schools in the United States and they were coming back. This is the cadre, or the core of the Vietnamese military that many people have commented on as having made an almost...almost made the necessary reforms to become a very effective fighting force.

John Helble came up in early March from Saigon. I was with him as he went to the ICCS. John was responsible in the embassy for liaison with ICCS. So his coming up gave him a chance to give them strong assurances of U.S. support. They gave him complaints ranging from communication problems to lack of a beach, everything from the ridiculous to the sublime. I urged Fred, and we gave them access to the American club at the consulate general and that helped with some of their morale problems.

James Jones, who wrote *From Here to Eternity* was at a party at Fred's, so we are getting a variety of visitors now coming through, unofficial as well as official.

*Q: With the ICCS, I assume you were able to sit down and talk to the Canadians. Did you make contacts and have dealings with the Indonesians, the Poles and Hungarians?*

THOMSEN: Yes, I did. In fact, I may just make reference to a few of the various social events, but I was in touch with all of them on a regular basis. And the Poles, although they wouldn't admit explicitly that they were under a tight rein, the relationship developed to the point where they at least be able to give me some innuendos, or some implicit comments that indicated that they were not free to be as cooperative as they might like to be. The Canadian, Ernest Ab was a Foreign Service officer and who we later ran into him in other countries. He was a very fine officer, and he was able to give us a lot of insights into what was going on within the ICCS. He was a little bit more pro-active than one might have expected in trying to get the ICCS to do certain kinds of things, and he was very critical of the Poles and Hungarians for not being as active as he'd like them to be. The Indonesian was willing to go along with whatever the Canadian wanted to do. He had no particular certain restriction of what he could do. He was not very pro-active but understood whose side he was on, so to speak, and was willing to do what he could to encourage the Poles and Hungarians to go along and be as helpful as they could.

At this time I had begun attending the I Corps military briefings. The U.S. military is still there, they wouldn't leave until the end of March, and AID was there in its own right. But I was beginning to assume the role of a kind of principal observer of the military scene, and sitting at the head table at the briefings. The briefings were very interesting. We were trying to get a sense of how much information was accurate. As far as we can tell the incidents were beginning slowly to decline in the I Corps area although the I Corps apparently had the highest level of incidents in the country.

*Q: When you say incidents, could you...*

THOMSEN: Well, actually both ways. First of all firing of artillery going back and forth, no military contact, but firing from one area to the other. And secondly, from time to time actual attacks by either the North Vietnamese against a friendly unit or the other way around. They didn't want to admit to us attacks by friendlies against the North Vietnamese or the Viet Cong. The I Corps was probably the most active Corps as far as friendlies regaining territory after the cease fire, and that was illegal. It was not supposed to be done.

*Q: Were you getting any intelligence of what was going on on the other side?*

THOMSEN: The intelligence we got was mainly aerial. We'd get a few reports from the Vietnamese and from CIA, with on the ground observations. Francis Fitzgerald who wrote *Fire in the Lake*, one of the kind of anti-policy folks, we thought, and still do think, she sneaked into Viet Cong territory and stayed with them for several days, and wrote a number of articles. She reported on life in Quang Ngai in the west, VC controlled area. She and a couple of others, all said that the Viet Cong propaganda in the villages was their intention to fight a political battle, and to put down their arms for at least the time being. That there appeared to be a good deal of relief that the war was over, at least for the present. That peace was peaceful. The implication being that they were preparing to deal in the political level, rather than back to the military.

*Q: You keep referring to the Viet Cong. What about the North Vietnamese army?*

THOMSEN: Well, the North Vietnamese army was still present. In fact, they had reinforced in I Corps. And apparently half of the North Vietnamese military in the south were in the first military region, some 80,000 was the order of battle that they gave. They're still there in their areas in the mountainous areas, but the areas that Francis was in had some of the so-called cadre who were from the north. She felt her Vietnamese was good enough so she could detect a northern accent in some of those who were so-called political educators. But they are ostensibly South Vietnamese.

I've indicated that we are now beginning to do a lot of political reporting, a lot of military reporting. I'm bringing back information from each of the morning briefings. The rate of incidents is going down, but I Corps still has the highest level of incidents in the country. The area north and west of Hue, and the area of Quang Tri near the DMZ are areas of fairly high activity which is indicative that the North Vietnamese are still moving troops south, and are still active militarily in the south.

In the middle of March NVA pressed hard against the airborne division in Thua thien, west of Hue. The NVA developed a salient between the Airborne and First Divisions south of Hue. In the area west of Da Nang itself, and south, ARVN were pushing out beyond the cease fire line and reclaiming territory that they felt was wrongly taken from them. The far west area of Quang Nam was extremely active. In Quang Ngai the enemy was seen improving roads in the west, strengthening supply lines and manpower against a widely dispersed Second Division. This is where George Moose was reporting.

A very critical area was Sa Huynh on the Quang Ngai - Binh Dinh border, and that was an area where the North Vietnamese came in just before the cease fire, and occupied an area down to the water's edge. If they had been allowed to retain that territory they would have had water access to their territory. But either at, or just before, or just after the cease fire, the South Vietnamese regained the community of Sa Huynh. This was one of the few incidents which the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong claimed was a government

violation and asked for an ICCS intervention. Actually as I said, the entire Lao border in the area from DMZ was being improved. Triple A was being installed, that was anti-aircraft was being installed along the border in the west and south Vietnam. I visited Sahuynh and the town was totally devastated but the damage looked like post cease fire, that is, like more recent battles. It looked like the North Vietnamese had captured the town which would have given them sea access. Some days later the ARVN retook it. People had come back and were rebuilding. This opened Route I all the way from Saigon to Hue.

I drove from Da Nang to Sa Huynh which was probably 100 miles south. I noticed the countryside bustling with activity, small shops with everything from tennis shoes to Coca-cola.

*Q: What were you getting from the people who came from Saigon about how the central government and the opinion of the analysts, and political reporters who were dealing with this sort of at the center of the thing, how things were going? This is March-April?*

THOMSEN: This is towards the end of March of '73.

*Q: What were the people coming up there saying?*

THOMSEN: The sense in Saigon was that the Thieu government was taking hold in the peace time era. There was criticism of Thieu. Thieu began forming a party called the Democracy Party. He tried to outlaw other parties, and was getting from my contacts in Da Nang and Hue that the old VNQDD, and the Dai Viet, these were the old non-communist nationalist parties, their old diehard leadership is absolutely refusing to go out of existence to allow the Thieu party sole possession of the right. But in spite of that, they were trying to maintain their identify and to retain their support for Thieu, and the government. They were in an anomolous situation. But from Saigon we were getting, I think general supportive sounds about Thieu. I think the embassy's marching orders were to support the government. And, although our friends were skeptical, or a little cynical, they were generally hopeful that the government is succeeding in establishing its authority. The military is holding its own pretty much countrywide. There was more pressure in I Corps, than in other parts of the country.

*Q: What were you getting in Da Nang? I don't know, maybe this is after the fact, but I kept hearing reports in other interviews about whether it was General Lam, who was the I Corps commander...*

THOMSEN: Oh, he was long gone.

*Q: Because he was considered a crook. A crook is the only term for it.*

THOMSEN: He'd been the Second Division commander in the '60s when I was there, and I read of his exploits from Laos as he became Corps commander. He was quite a clever

politician and he clearly took advantage of his senior position to be ruthlessly self-aggrandizing.

*Q: A plunder practically. Was there military corruption when you were there?*

THOMSEN: Well, maybe we ought to do is drop this and go into your questions because I find myself being bogged down a little bit. The Corps commander, General Truong, had been First Division commander, and was regarded by most Americans as the finest general in the South Vietnamese army. I was just glancing at Westmoreland's book before coming here, Westmoreland says there are American military officers who said that Truong was the only Vietnamese military officer who they would have entrusted with an American division. He had a tremendous reputation which was never sullied, even to the end. And Truong was responsible in '75. He was still I Corps commander, and he was the one who was whiplashed by Thieu and contradictory orders that caused the loss of Hue, Da Nang which began the roll-up from north to south. And Truong is in this country now, he's a computer programmer or something. Truong was an honest man in everyone's eyes. He was a total 180 degrees from Lam.

Now I got to know Truong fairly well. I had not known him before. He was probably only a lieutenant colonel when I was there in '66. Fred Brown the consul general who had been there longer and knew him better, had the same feeling. Truong was imposing a level of honesty that had not previously existed. In fact, there are a couple of incidents in which province chiefs were relieved during our stay for so-called corruption, or even the hint of corruption.

In one case there was as much evidence in one province that he was not corrupt, as that he was, but Truong relieved him because he had to be cleaner than he was. So I Corps was much better off that way than it had been under Lam in the late '60s. Truong was a man who was not suspected by Americans of that kind of thing at all. It was really a much different situation.

At the end of March, which was so-called 60 days after on the 29th, X plus 60 as they call it. The last military departed Da Nang...

*Q: You're talking about the American military.*

THOMSEN: The last American military departed Da Nang that day. An American Marine colonel, Homer Walker, was the commander of the last plane to leave Da Nang, on 29th of March. The last American POWs were scheduled to leave Hanoi. Colonel Walker was waiting for word that they had departed. And then he would board his DC-8 and fly out. The PRG, the DRV, the Poles, Hungarians, and Canadians were all standing on the tarmac waiting for the last American military to leave. Fred and I popped a bottle of champagne at the foot of the stairs leading up to the aircraft. We had a toast with Colonel Walker. And I remember the story if you recall it in August of 1964 my meeting the first young Marine captain intelligence officer who flew in a helicopter from Task

Force 77 in the Gulf of Tonkin to ask me where the safe secure area would be for an American military installation. I hoisted my glass to say goodbye to the last American Military to leave.

*Q: Did you notice any disquiet when the Americans pulled out among the South Vietnamese whom you were dealing with?*

THOMSEN: It's a very complicated question. There was a lot of self-confidence on the part of the Vietnamese that they could carry their own weight. But at the same time there was a feeling, especially on the part of some of them, that the departure of the Americans meant not just the departure of the military, but the departure of American support which they knew was absolutely critical to their survival. Here I'll tell a story that I don't know fits exactly here.

But it helps answer your question but I was now going to the I Corps daily briefings as one of two or three Americans.

*Q: I Corps being, of course, Vietnamese now.*

THOMSEN: It always was the Vietnamese I Corps, but in the mid-'60s there would be as many American military in the briefing room as there were Vietnamese, and the briefings were all in English. Now the briefings were in Vietnamese and it was a Vietnamese briefing with a couple of Americans watching. But Colonel Dang, who had been the First Division Chief of Staff when I was there in the mid-'60s, would only speak French or Vietnamese to me in that earlier period. He almost typified the xenophobic attitude that some attribute to the Vietnamese. He was cold and distant, and not very cooperative in terms of giving information. Then in 1973 it was entirely different I was the last American left briefings. Colonel Dang now the I Corps Chief of Staff, he takes me aside and in fluent English says, "what is Watergate?" And I tell him that Watergate is a function of the American political system. Colonel Dang who by then had a son getting his Ph.D. at MIT, and clearly had a total change of attitude, says to me, "I predict that Watergate will be the death of Vietnam." This was in the middle of my six month tour around mid-April 1973. We were all looking toward a bright future and this colonel who has changed from a xenophobic Francophile to an American slang-speaking officer with a son in school in the United States, was telling me a truly prophetic statement. I believe today the he was absolutely correct. Watergate was a critical component of the final act in Vietnam. So I would say there were some mixed feelings on the part of the Vietnamese, and some real confusion as to what our ability would be, or our intentions were to stay the course with them. I think that anecdote probably is a powerful statement of the complexities of what had happened over the previous years, and was going to be happening.

In a similar vein, Bob Shaplen and his stringer, whose name was Buong, came to Da Nang and took me to dinner. Now, Shaplen had a totally different perspective by now. Buong, his stringer, was saying the VC were stronger than ever and that if we suspect,

what I had mentioned earlier to be true, he was probably speaking with some good knowledge. He claimed that they would win a political struggle, and that there might on the other hand Shaplen felt be a major military attack in the near future. This was mid-'73. That did not transpire that early. It was clear that Shaplen's views had changed much since February.

I have now been given authority to brief the Indonesians and the Canadians on certain situations, and I did brief them on a weekly basis. When I was briefing the Indonesian Colonel Wardinan, he fed back to me that the Indonesians in Saigon were very pessimistic about the situation. At the same time the Canadians were beginning to talk about pulling out but they stayed as long as I was there although they left later. But they were beginning to talk about the ICCS being so ineffective that they didn't feel that their presence there was useful.

I've already mentioned that Francis Fitzgerald had been in Viet Cong hands in Quang Ngai. That incident created quite a political flap. It suggested that the PRG did intend to contest in the political arena.

I had lunch with three young Vietnamese administrators, deputy province chiefs from Quang Ngai and Quang Tin, and the deputy mayor of Da Nang, all bright, competent. These were all young military officers. They were very cynical about the formation of the Democratic Party, the Thieu party that they were supposed to be giving that their full attention, and they were being very unenthusiastic about it. In other words, the mid-level of the Vietnamese bureaucracy was not fanatically supporting the Thieu efforts.

On the 7th of April the PRG/VC shot down an ICCS helicopter near the Lao border in northern Quang Tri, and after a long toing and froing it became clear that the chopper was off course and that the PRG/Viet Cong, shot it down. The PRG were by this time in town. They were now participating in an inspection to a site to a distant observation post. The consulate general became a kind of a coordinator to help with the rescue mission. There were two helicopters flying in tandem, one was shot down, the other one landed to try to rescue the others and was captured by the PRG. This is in the far distant west, and these are people who are out of touch.

*Q: Were you having any contact with the North Vietnamese...*

THOMSEN: Very little. They were keeping very much to themselves, and they were very hard to get to see. They came out once in a while to either a Joint Military Committee meeting, or a diplomatic reception, and you could try to talk to them but they were not communicative at all. Hal Colbaugh was telling us what was going on in Hanoi where they were, I won't say effusive, but very interested and approachable

*Q: ...impression of the caliber of the Polish and Hungarian representatives.*

THOMSEN: They were older, mediocre officers. They were certainly not sending their best and brightest achievers to be a part of this. My feeling was that they were reluctantly participating. They were not eager to make any mistakes that could cause them irritation. Their personalities as well as particular instructions might have been responsible for this.

*Q: Sort of mid-level communist apparatchiks of the military types.*

THOMSEN: Yes, majors and lieutenant colonels. They were not young spitfires who wanted to make something happen. I don't know whether this is deliberate personnel policy on assignments, or whether it was the caliber that was generally available to them.

About this time General Truong was generally upbeat. He was more than content with the refugee resettlement in Quang Tri and he was happy with the was the Buddhists were cooperating with the government. He was giving me a general appraisal which was positive enough so that he could point to specific problems, and also point to real successes. He felt reasonably good about the situation in what is probably the most active military corps in the country. So things looked pretty good. It was about this time that the concept of a "third Vietnam," or the Viet Cong government in the west was beginning to take shape.

*Q: Up in the highlands?*

THOMSEN: The highlands and the high Piedmont, and in one conversation some of the Vietnamese are concerned that the "third Vietnam" might start encompassing part of Cambodia. In other words, they might really kind of carve out a larger communist entity in the southern part of Indochinese peninsula that would include part of Cambodia. The Vietnamese themselves were beginning to discuss this possibility, and it suggested that there was a kind of upbeat expectation that there might be a reasonable outcome to the conflict.

In the middle of May there was a consuls general meeting in Saigon. Fred was on leave, and I went there and gave a briefing on the I Corps situation which, as I said, indicated more military activity than in other parts of the country, and as a severe refugee problem as anywhere. Rice prices and inflation were beginning to be felt, this became a problem, at least later on even after I left.

Buddha's birthday, the 17th of May was celebrated with a lot of festivities. Again, there was a sense of some relaxation. The government forces had established a good level of security. There was little immediate concern about VC activity in the populated areas.

At this time, Hal Colebaugh returned to Thailand from where he'd been called. The political section was beginning to be a little short staffed. We were starting to lose people unexpectedly.

*Q: I was just going to say, here you're reporting on this, and we've been used to having very good coverage of Vietnam, of any country in the world. Yet, at the same time did you feel that you report and the State Department gets it, and they know, and in a way, so what? Did you think Congress has the power and this is being fought on other fronts. Did you have any of that feeling?*

THOMSEN: Lately in '73, when I had the Lao desk, the Vietnam working group was right next door and Watergate had completely incapacitated the department on the Vietnam issue. It was tragic to watch the desperate efforts on our part to get Congress to approve anything. The two links, I think, of the tragedy of Vietnam were Watergate and the oil embargo which doubled the price of petroleum products. Together, our inability to meet our commitments coupled with Vietnamese paranoia about us in the first place which was not inactive. Created an atmosphere where Thieu made very conservative decisions regarding his POL (petroleum-oil-lubricants) and ammunition.

*Q: The oil embargo came after the '73 war between Egypt, Syria and Israel.*

THOMSEN: And doubled the price of oil. It meant that all of the money allocated to Vietnam, which was for POL and if you look at the budget, again my friends next door later on were able to show this to me in detail. It destroyed our ability to give them a level of support that they needed. That's afterward at the moment we were still marching ahead. The Viet Cong was acting in its own area as if it might intend to stay there. We were seeing school buildings, hospitals, and what looked like airstrips being built. We were seeing movement during the day which didn't occur during the combat period. We were seeing things that looked like there had been an attempt to return to normalcy in the occupied areas. So, we were reporting in that way with a lot of detail. There was no grand overview that we were to give Saigon or Washington that the situation was improved. We were trying to make the point that the local situation was pretty stable. I think that would be a very shorthand way of saying it.

*Q: The critical element in this became Congress in a way. Were you getting Congressional visitors, and could you tell us about the ones that you...*

THOMSEN: The one I recall is one of Senator Kennedy's staffers.

*Q: In other words, Vietnam disappeared from the Congressional radar in a way.*

THOMSEN: Well, maybe they didn't want to have a report on the record on the way things were going. Journalists were present regularly, from Time magazine, from the Baltimore Sun, the Washington Post came through and were perceptive, and thoughtful, and maybe critical or skeptical, but they were basically balanced.

*Q: But you were also getting professional people as opposed to the youngsters in Vietnam during the height of the war. I mean, there were an awful lot of very naive young people going out to win their fame being war correspondents.*

THOMSEN: I had lunch with a Hungarian colonel, who was even more hardline than the Poles. At this time a critical area between Hue and Da Nang was in friendly hands. This situation goes back to '64; in July '64 when I first arrived in Hue an anthropologist from Cornell was there and gave me a first hand report on a major NVA attack on a Special Forces camp there. Now in '73 the friendlies had just taken Bachieu, this 4,000 foot hill, back from the North Vietnamese, having lost it a few days earlier. The I Corps chief of staff, Colonel Dang, was sending his twelve year old to Virginia to Annandale. Dang is the one who had earlier referred to Watergate as the "death of Vietnam."

I called on the Polish colonel, who made it clear that his instructions remained to prevent full effectiveness on investigations. Now what he meant by that was not absolutely clear, but essentially I think what he said to me was that he's been told that "every i must be dotted and every t must be crossed" on all the procedures before they're allowed to accept an investigation.

May 26th, had the lowest military activity since the cease fire. The ICCS was not moving in spite of a new Polish head looked like he might be more interested in doing something. The GVN was reforming its province level forces, the traditional parties were refusing to go out of existence. Al Francis arrived. Al had been my successor as political advisor to the Marines in 1966. Hewas assigned to Saigon as political internal chief. He revived the political reporting system.

A lot of activity was now going on in the development area. The new head of the Agency for the Development of the Danang area was trying to upgrade the Danang infrastructure. In spite of the rice shortages, in spite of refugees there was a kind of economic rebirth going on. Not just in the countryside, but in the cities too.

Al Francis was able to drive to Nha Trang, I don't know what it was like in the late '60s, but in the mid-'60s you couldn't drive anywhere. In the same time frame a young officer drove from Saigon all the way to Da Nang. So security had really improved.

On the 2nd of June I helped inaugurate a spur track through the main trunk between Saigon and Hanoi. A trip to Hue was 25 cents. The line to Saigon was not yet fully repaired but would be very shortly.

*Q: You were saying that the Lao desk was next door to the Vietnam Working Group.*

THOMSEN: It was a super office . A large part of their time was spent on the Hill, which responds to your question about congressional interest. They were up on the Hill almost every day fighting for support.

*Q: Were they talking about lack of support from congress and did they see it at that time.*

THOMSEN: Right. They were concerned that...I'm trying to get my chronology right. It was during this period when the oil embargo affects hit hardest, when the price of oil...

*Q: We're talking about the oil embargo which was a result of the '73 war between Egypt, Syria and Israel.*

THOMSEN: Right, and the outcome of that was that OPEC, the oil consortium raised the price of oil substantially. I'm not sure whether or not they also restricted the production of oil. It meant essentially that that portion of our aid, military assistance to Vietnam, which was devoted to POL...

*Q: The petroleum, oil and lubricants.*

THOMSEN: Right...was cut in half. The value of that money was cut in half, and that made a significant difference in terms of our support, and they were trying to get the difference back. Trying to convince congress that to maintain the level of support we had committed ourselves to, we needed more money, and congress was very uninterested in that approach.

*Q: Who was your boss at this time?*

THOMSEN: Mike Reeves, M. Lloyd Reeves, but Mike...

*Q: I've interviewed Mike. And the head of Far Eastern Affairs?*

THOMSEN: I don't recall who was the Assistant Secretary. Monty Stearns was the DAS, the Deputy Assistant Secretary, who I spent a lot of time with. Monty had been the DCM in Laos while I was there so we were very much in sync on a lot of the issues that I was dealing with, and a lot of times Mike would simply send me to see Monty on various issues. I know Mac Godley was supposed to take the Assistant Secretaryship but I think he got dumped. ...a Japan expert and I rarely saw him.

*Q: This was Robert Ingersoll.*

THOMSEN: Right, a political appointee.

*Q: So he just didn't hit your radar very well.*

THOMSEN: That's right. Monty was really on top of the Southeast Asia issues. That makes sense to me now.

*Q: Were there any major incidents or problems other than what you've mentioned dealing with Laos in this period?*

THOMSEN: No, it was just a matter of continually working to prevent Defense from seeking reductions in critical supplies like 75 mm howitzer ammunition. Fascinating small things ways in which they were trying to do what they thought they were being instructed to do. I would use every bureaucratic trick in the book to keep their feet to the fire. Used to call out to Vientiane to generate cables that would tell us one thing or another and would force DOD to respond.

*Q: It was sort of an interesting interplay that often gets lost in somebody looking at the record, and that is the desk officer, particularly the telephone now, calling up the embassy and saying, look, if I get a cable such and such I can wave this in front of the Pentagon, or wherever in any case. But anyway, the solicitation of reporting from the field that often gets lost when one looks at how the foreign affairs system works.*

THOMSEN: And today, of course, its even more dramatic. The use of E-mail to solicit responses is something that I'm not even fully cognizant of. I just imagine how valuable it is because essentially I can see the desk E-mailing out a full text of an message they want sent in. I know this is what is happening now. It's the way the bureaucracy operates at its best. The only other thing of any significance is that we did have, and I can't remember what the acronym stands for, WASG, Washington Action Group, did a study on the future of Indochina for which I was the rapporteur. That too took a lot of time mainly with CIA, AID and Defense. I kept the same theme that we better maintain our support strongly in Laos if we were going to have any chance at all of pulling it off, particularly in Vietnam. And we did prevail in the study.

*Q: You left there when in '74, and where did you go?*

THOMSEN: Left in July of '74, and went to Botswana as DCM. I was encouraged by some of the leadership to go to Paris as the head of the support element for the Kissinger delegation. But was taken with the idea of what they called GLOP, global outlook program, and thought that being DCM at a small African post would give me a perspective I wasn't going to get in Paris. So we went to Botswana and had a great two years.

*Q: You were in Botswana '74 to '76? Could you describe Botswana at the time? What sort of place was it, and what were American interests there?*

THOMSEN: Botswana was a tiny country population-wise. I thought Laos was the tiniest country in the world at two and a half million. I think Botswana was under a million. The main features were the Okovango swamp in the north and the Kalahari Desert in the west, there was very little rain. The capital, Gaborone was 50 miles from the South African border. It was actually a new city. It was built just before independence by the British, a well laid out modern community. I understand its now ten times the size it was when we were there. The kids would bicycle downtown without crossing a major thoroughfare. The Botswanan economy was dependent upon some of the best beef in the world which they sold to the Common Market. Copper, was being exploited in the east near Rhodesia

(later Zimbabwe). Our main interest in Botswana was that it was an interracial, what they called a non-racial society. President Khama had married a Britisher. And by example established a very positive non-racial environment which next door to Rhodesia, and South Africa, was a tremendous example of what's possible. Its economy was very stable. It used the Rand, the South African currency, until they established their own currency. When I was there it didn't have an army although it developed one later. It was a very peaceful community made up of about 12 small tribes which were really related, they had a common language.

*Q: So you didn't have one tribe dominating which traditionally sort of sat on top of the other ones?*

THOMSEN: There was one dominant tribe and it was the tribe that produced the president, Seretse Khama. It was a benign relationship with everybody. I think it outvoted all eleven other tribes. But Quett Masire, vice president who succeeded Khama, and is still the president, was from a small tribe. He has been a superb president after the demise of Khama.

*Q: At that time were there any concerns by pressure from South Africa, or Zimbabwe trying to either destabilize or do anything against Botswana?*

THOMSEN: Not significantly. There were incursions from both sides which were functions of the war going on mainly in Rhodesia. There would be so-called revolutionaries popping across the river which divided Botswana from South Africa in certain areas. Botswana was a fascinating country because it was a member of the South African Monetary Union. South Africa collected its import duties, and it was very dependent on South Africa. And it was able to use its landlocked position, and the reality was economic dependence on South Africa to get concessions for the rest of black Africa. The rest of black Africa could have boycotted Botswana for cooperating with the white regime in South Africa. But they got their point across in such a way that that didn't happen. They took full advantage of the industrialized South Africa. A lot of the imports came only from there if they didn't have a cross tariff border. They were really well positioned.

*Q: How about Namibia and Angola during this mid-'70s period? Were there any problems there, and did they get reflected in Botswana or not?*

THOMSEN: Barely. If you look at a topographical map, we're looking at a political map now, but a topographical map would show you that the border between Namibia and Botswana is very heavy dessert, its almost uninhabited on either side. If you go to the nexus of Angola, Namibia and Botswana, there is a major river. But there were some incursions where rebels would move across into Botswana to try to escape South African forces. But it was only temporary. The Botswanan were very careful not to allow themselves to be drawn into a significant cause celebre of some kind. They ignored a lot

of what happened on their borders just to avoid being drawn in. It was a very wise policy, and they did it very low key.

*Q: Who was your ambassador?*

THOMSEN: Dave Bolen.

*Q: And what was his background?*

THOMSEN: Dave was an economic officer. He had been a silver medal winner in, I think, the London Olympics, the '48 Olympics. His previous post had been as economic counselor in Belgrade, and he had gotten a major contract for an American company. I think because he was generally a good officer. His intention was to emphasize the economic and commercial efforts, although we really didn't have an awful lot of luck in getting major investment in Botswana.

*Q: Who was the investor? Was it British, South Africa?*

THOMSEN: British and South Africa. After I left diamonds were found in a couple of locations in Botswana, and the deBeers, Anglo-American, put a lot of money in there and that again added to the economic stability and well-being of Botswana.

*Q: How did you deal with the government? What was sort of a typical day, how could we get information? What would you-all do?*

THOMSEN: The Foreign Ministry was really a part of the presidency, the Office of the President, and staffed by about five or six young, bright Botswana, mainly British or South African educated. I hadn't been there too long before I realized that they had almost no files. So I started providing them with wireless file and other State Department material. Some of these country surveys, and I would bring them in and just chat with them about them, and leave them on their desks. And lo and behold a few months later I discovered they were pulling out a file, and the file would be the material I'd provided. On a personal level, I had a very good relationship with these five or six young men. On a policy level, the Botswana were, I think, were very sympathetic to the United States. They regarded us well. They thought of us a good friends, and they did, I think, as an offset against South Africa.

*Q: How about the president at the time? What was our feeling towards him?*

THOMSEN: Well, Seretse Khama was the son of the king of the largest tribe. Khama's great grandfather, called Khama the Great, had gone to Queen Victoria at the end of the 19th century and asked for British protection from South Africa. So when South Africa established itself, as the Republic of South Africa, Botswana, Swaziland, and Lesotho, which had sought and gained British protectorate status, remained independent, although they were among the smallest of the major tribes in South Africa. Seretse Khama was the

descendent of that lineage, and felt a very strong responsibility for his people. He was a very decent man, and he and his wife were devoted, as far as we could tell. He had an older son and a daughter (...we got to know the daughter very well, she was married to a Dutchman who was part of their development organization), and then two young twin sons who were in their teens when we were there. It was a wholesome family, and a wholesome example in Botswana.

*Q: Was there any interplay with Washington? Or were you pretty much on your own in this period?*

THOMSEN: Well, there wasn't an awful lot happening. We did get a visit from Don Easum, who was then an Assistant Secretary for African Affairs. And Kissinger almost got there on his trip through Africa, I think in early '74. We did political reporting, economic reporting, but there wasn't a lot going on that required significance guidance. A lot of multilateral stuff, a lot of international stuff, a lot of UN stuff and going in with demarches on our various policy issues.

*Q: How did that work?*

THOMSEN: Well, they were their own people. They would listen attentively, and if I left a piece of paper I would expect it not to be thrown away. And they were certainly more responsible in this respect in a lot of other governments I've dealt with. But they voted their own interests, and they had a pretty good sense of what that was.

*Q: Then you left there in '76. Whither?*

THOMSEN: Left for Lagos, Nigeria to be the cultural attaché .

*Q: That's sort of a switch, isn't it?*

THOMSEN: Well, it's an interesting thing and goes back a long way. When I went to India, you may recall, a project with India when I was in college, USIA was very helpful to us. They were kind of a sponsor for us. So I'd always been interested in USIA. And I was responsible for the USIS operation in Botswana, were there was no USIS officer. So I ran the library, hired my wife, she did a great job of decorating it and bringing it up to snuff. I ended a Fulbright program which cost us about $50,000 a year and got USIA to agree to give us ten leader grants instead. I saw the leader exchange program as much more effective. I used the wireless file for the first time at the post. I would cull the wireless file, and I had a communication assistant, a local, who would based upon my marking, would put articles in an envelope and address it to the president, to the Foreign Minister, to the Minister of Finance, to the local newspaper, and every day virtually I would spend a half an hour dissimilating information through that. And, again, got very good reaction from it. In many cases it was our point of view on an issue which they had gotten no other way. In any case, I saw USIA as being a very valuable tool. The post was inspected by USIA inspectors, and at the end of the inspection they encouraged me to

consider a USIA assignment. I'd always been intrigued by USIA, their possibility of an exchange assignment.

The next thing I knew they had offered me the biggest cultural affairs officer position in Africa.

*Q: Sam, so we've come to the point you were in Nigeria. You were there from when to when?*

THOMSEN: I was there from 1976 to 1979.

*Q: You were doing what?*

THOMSEN: I was the Cultural Affairs Officer.

*Q: What was the situation in Nigeria when you arrived there?*

THOMSEN: There was a military dictatorship, General Obasanjo, a Baptist Yomba, was the head of state, and they were beginning to move, as they would during the three years I was there, toward a civilian government, but it was still a military regime. However, most of the government was composed of civilians, and the people I worked with were mainly civilians.

*Q: Did you notice any fallout from the Biafran war at that point?*

THOMSEN: The Ibo, who were the losers in the war, were in some respect second class citizens although they were involved in government, and certainly in commerce. I would say the fallout was becoming minimal. It was reducing. It didn't interfere greatly certainly with what we were doing.

*Q: Who was the ambassador?*

THOMSEN: Don Easum.

*Q: And could you describe his method of operation, something about how you found the embassy there? You had come out of a different world.*

THOMSEN: Don as relaxed, highly energized, pleasant guy. He was a superbly effective ambassador. He had been the Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs just prior to going out. He was very comfortable with his role as ambassador. He'd begin early in the morning and end late at night. I was fascinated by his style. Just go from place to place, and be the ambassador in the best sense. He was a superb tennis player, and my cultural attaché position let me engage in cultural activities of an athletic nature. I happen also to be an enthusiastic tennis player, so we had that in common and did a number of things in

that area. He had very close relations with Obasanjo, and I think had a great influence on our bilateral relations in terms of trust and respect.

*Q: What did you see as your objectives? And how did you go about them?*

THOMSEN: First of all, our relationship was much dependent upon oil. We took about half of their oil exports, about a million barrels a day, and that accounted for about 15% of our oil imports. It resulted in a fairly significant balance of payments deficit on our part. I quickly saw my role in a non-traditional way as a cultural attaché , although I think I did a good job in the traditional role. But I really focused quickly on higher education. The Nigerians were very, very eager for American education and training, and I quickly established relationships with the vice chancellors of the 13 universities, and with the head of the National University's Commission who was a very, very impressive, Hausa, a man from the north. But he later became the oil minister which shows his influence and his growing importance in their government.

We established a relationship which allowed us to do a number of things in higher education. One of the strong thrusts regarded Nigerian students in the United States. You've heard the joke that half the cab drivers in Washington were Nigerian students. The Nigerian students had a terrible reputation in American universities for not paying their tuition. This was most often a result of the failure of the various state scholarship boards to provide them with their scholarship money. So one of our major efforts was to try to reform the systems in the national and the state governments to get those scholarships paid. I spent a lot of my time on this.

We had a major conference in Lagos in which we brought over the leadership of the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors and the head of the Institute for International Education. At the University of Lagos were convened the heads of the scholarship boards from all of the states, and other bureaucrats. The purpose of the conference was to try to convince them that they had to reform their system in order to keep their students in school in the United States. We're talking about millions of dollars, and a major component of our bilateral commercial relationships was the payment of those scholarships. It did not have a 100% effectiveness, but it, I think, went a long way toward improving it.

*Q: What was the problem?*

THOMSEN: The problem was bureaucratic. The state scholarship boards had bad records. They were not keeping track of when payments were made. They were making payments to the wrong students. Just everything that could possibly go wrong in a bureaucratic environment was going wrong. The intention was to get high level attention to the problem, and try to reform the systems in each of the states. The national government was not much better, but there was a substantial reform there. In any case, the focus was placed on that. The other side of the coin. I traveled to the United States to the national conference for the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors at Ames,

Iowa, and made a presentation on the subject. I tried to encourage the Foreign Student Advisors to be a little more sympathetic to the problems of the Nigerian students, and sensitive to the importance of encouraging them. And I was very well received by those officials. And again, the intention was to smooth out that problem.

Another area, a fascinating effort, and one which the ambassador was very supportive of, was to bring over American specialists on the American government system. They went state to state and met with the newly elected state parliamentarians, and the newly appointed civilian leadership to talk about the American system of government because this new civilian government was going to have an American style constitution. That was paid for by the Nigerians. That was worth a couple million dollars. Then we began a program managed by the cultural affairs office, to send whole state parliaments in a body to the United States under a cultural exchange, paid for by the Nigerians. They would visit several state capitals, and then spend some time in Washington visiting with congress, and with the executive branch to talk about the American system of government. Again, from a funding point of view, a significant profit for us. But also very important in terms of establishing relationships with the new civilian leadership that was to come in Nigeria.

A third area, mid-level manpower training, was worth tens of millions of dollars and would have been an AID project if there had been an AID mission there, was managed by the cultural affairs office. The Nigerians were very, very interested in what was called mid-level manpower development. They wanted to send high school graduates mainly, to the United States for training in all of the various mid-level skills: computer programming, metallurgy, auto repair, electronics, just anything you can imagine. Although I was the nexus on the legal side, AID was responsible on the Washington side. The Nigerians paid the entire cost. In fact, they would take over small manual arts schools in the United States and 200 or 300 hundred Nigerians would be enrolled in a particular school.

*Q: Would they come back?*

THOMSEN: And they went back, yes. They were on limited visas, and they were education and training visas. AID developed a special office of manpower training which initially was paid for by the Nigerians to take on this project. And subsequently that office took on the same kind of training for a number of other countries. But the impetus and the initiative started with Nigeria. So, as well as having the largest Fulbright program, 13 American Fulbrighters, as well as having 50 international visitors, the kind of traditional USIA cultural program, we got into this incredible, massive exchange toward the United States, paid for by the Nigerians. It kept me busy, and it kept me in the middle of the embassy's policies, and the embassy's stated priorities.

*Q: This was sort of the golden period, wasn't it?*

THOMSEN: It really was. It was a period that ended not too long after. But it was a period of close relationships in what you might call a love-hate relationship because they really admired us, and they were patterning their civilian government on ours. But they also wanted to stand independent of us, and they were very, very jealous of not being considered part of an American circle. They wanted to be very strong in the non-alignment movement. But they were very practical about it. And again, they didn't hesitate to take advantage of what we had, and for the cultural affairs officer it was a very non-traditional role.

*Q: What was your impression of the Nigerian universities? The reason I asked, I know somebody, Henry Maddox, who went to Nigeria after retiring from the Foreign Service in the mid-'80s, and found it awful because they were shut down, they were usually on strike, or something like that, so you really didn't do anything. We're talking about the '76 to '79 period.*

THOMSEN: This was a period of incredible expansion on the part of the Nigerian universities. The traditional universities, were first of all the University of Ibadan, which was the first university and was mainly an English-style system and the University of Nigeria at Nsukka, which was an American-style university and was the second oldest. And then there were the universities in Kano, and Kaduna, and then they began springing up all over, and they were putting hundreds of millions of dollars into these campuses. These were beautiful campuses. We had 13 Fulbrighters spread around and I tried to visit each of them. It was a very mixed bag. Ibadan in its traditions and its discipline, almost a British institution in terms of staying in school, and having pretty good discipline for the students. The Ford Foundation, which had a presence in Ibadan associated with the university and put a lot of money in over the years. So there was an American influence. The University of Nigeria at Nsukka had a large foreign faculty, and again was pretty effective. But the new universities were just thrown together so quickly that they hadn't really gotten organized, and gotten an established discipline. I think probably those were some of the institutions that most likely began faltering by the '80s. They really hadn't ever gotten organized and were a mess. I understand that by today even the best of them are in dire straights. The money has not been there to keep them up physically. They haven't managed to keep their foreign faculties which enhanced their local faculties. But you're right, the late '70s was a kind of golden age and this was a time when they were really trying to fly, trying to soar, trying to stretch, and feeling that they could do it.

*Q: Did you get any feel for the role of corruption at that time? I mean a lot of money was coming in.*

THOMSEN: Corruption was always present. It was something that even the embassy had to deal with. This is not unique to Nigeria but we had our so-called expediters at the airport. These were fairly good sized Nigerians who when you got to the airport to travel, whether it was in-country or internationally, you gave your ticket to the expediter, and he would use his influence, and if necessary his brute strength, to get to the ticket counter to get your ticket validated. And then he would escort you to the plane. They had mad

rushes to the plane, but these kinds of payoffs were going on everywhere and, of course, that's just a minuscule aspect of it. I wasn't involved in this side of things but it was recognized even then under the military, which was relatively clean I think, and not compared to the current regime which is even more notorious. But payoffs were just a part of life in Nigeria even in those days.

*Q: The Carter administration was going for most of this period. Did you feel there was any particular emphasis on Africa? Were people talking about the change from the previous Ford, Nixon administration?*

THOMSEN: First of all, Carter came to Nigeria in '78 for three days, in March and April. I guess a sidebar to this would be, I was the control officer for Mrs. Carter, and took her a number of places and found her a very energetic, and a very intellectually curious person who did very well. A sidebar to the sidebar is one of the little incidents with my older son, Sam, who was playing croquet with their daughter Amy. They were playing croquet, and Sammy hit her ball, and she flew into a total snit, and said, "Sammy, you get out of here. I'm not ever going to speak to you again," which is one of his strong memories of the Foreign Service. They had an effective visit, and as a result of the visit established a number of science and technology and educational relationships. They formed a Joint Commission on Economic Cooperation, and the ambassador, the economic counselor, the Ag attaché and I traveled to Washington with 20 Nigerians for a joint meeting of that commission, and some of what I've described to you came out of that commission meeting. As I would go on to become the officer in charge of Nigerian affairs in Washington some of these initiatives that were begun from the Carter visit played on substantially longer and helped strengthen those non-political, let's say, the technical, the economic, the educational relationships.

*Q: Did you do any training, or anything else get involved in what became sort of notorious around the world, and that was the harbor problems in Nigeria. You'd heard at that time they had a lot of money but ships were lined up and they couldn't get in, and they were...*

THOMSEN: I wasn't involved in it, but we certainly could see on the skyline in the bay dozens and dozens of ships were visible, and I think my recollection is that waiting periods were 30 to 60 days, and that the charges that were levied against the Nigerians by those ships in the harbor were hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

*Q: I think every day, if I recall, we're talking about $10,000-$5,000, something like that.*

THOMSEN: That's right, and then of course there were robberies and acts of piracy against some of the ships. But apparently the money was there enough to keep those ships coming. That's where a lot of the corruption was found in terms of getting those ships in faster, slipping a ship in ahead of its turn, and that sort of thing. A lot of corruption involved in that, yes.

*Q: Were there any other major things that happened during this period as far as you were concerned?*

THOMSEN: Well, actually just after I arrived, we arrived in September of '76. In early '77 it was called the Second Festival of Black African and Cultural (FESTAC). I was the coordinator of support for Americans. We expected over 600 Americans to be present for this and any number of VIPs and we wanted to put the best face on it. I had a motor pool, a radio net, security, consular officers were helping with protocol, political officers. I it think worked effectively. We got no negative reactions from the Americans. We entertained Andy Young, Stevie Wonder, and any number of VIPs.

*Q: These were almost all African-Americans.*

THOMSEN: And some of them were absolutely stunned at what they found. I went out myself to the FESTAC villages, as they were called, and the Nigerians had spent hundreds of millions of dollars in preparing for this event, to ensure that the American visitors who were going to be put up by the Nigerians would have adequate facilities. In some cases the Americans simply refused to accept them. I had no authority to make these demands. But we managed to get pretty good accommodations for them. And we put up a lot of them who were simply unable to take what was out in the village. And Don Easum himself put up a number of Americans who simply came in and said...

*Q: Why, was it too much sort of villages?*

THOMSEN: Or, no hot water, or the power would go off, or the food. There were large cafeterias and the food was pretty Nigerian, heavy on palm oil and yams. Some of them just had emotional problems.

*Q: Did you find...was there a sort of resident group of African-Americans who came back to find their roots who were there, or ones who maybe were expatriates from the United States who were looking for something else, and were anti-American.*

THOMSEN: There was no significant resident African-American population. We got a lot of African-Americans coming through for that purpose. But mainly they were spouses of Nigerians. And the Nigerians who they were married to were associated with the universities whom they had met while they were studying in the United States. Some of the Nigerian professors were absolutely superb, world class. I remember one whose wife was American, who spent half his time in Nigeria and half of his time going around the world because of his renown, and the respect for him in communications.

*Q: Was there a problem...I mean I've ran across this in other countries of American women particularly, who married Nigerian students or instructors in the United States, and then they come back, and they find they really can't take the society, and they've got children, and they want to leave, and the fathers won't let them, that type of thing. Was that a problem particularly there?*

THOMSEN: It was not a significant problem. There were cases of that. In most cases though the husband wouldn't prevent the wife from leaving. There wasn't the kind of issue that there was in Arab...

*Q: Yes, the Arab which I'm used to, that was a major issue.*

THOMSEN: There were cases of American...

*Q: But anyway, it wasn't...*

THOMSEN: We weren't required to provide succor or assistance for people trying to get out.

*Q: Do you have anything else from there?*

THOMSEN: I think I've pretty well covered it.

*Q: Well, 1979 whither?*

THOMSEN: In '79 I came back to take charge of the Nigeria desk. It was called officer in charge Nigeria, it was in the Office of West African Affairs. I had two junior officers, a political and an economic officer. I was also a de facto second deputy office director. There were a number of other West African countries each of which had a desk officer in some cases, but the desk officer would have a number of countries. But Nigeria was obviously the dominant element in the office.

*Q: And you did that from when to when?*

THOMSEN: '79 to '81.
*Q: Who was the head of African affairs at that time?*

THOMSEN: Dick Moose.

*Q: Dick Moose had sort of been in and out of the Department of State. In the first place, did you have any problems working with him as he had left I guess to work for Senator Fulbright who was very much involved in the Vietnam war. I mean sort of opposed to it, and here you had been dealing with the Vietnam war from a different perspective. Did this cause a problem?*

THOMSEN: No. My recollection is that Dick Moose and a colleague, Jim Lowenstein, from the senate came to visit us in Laos while I was there, and I was their control officer and got them around pretty well. They were reasonably sympathetic to the situation in Laos as compared to the situation in Vietnam. So when I came to the desk Dick recalled that, and we got along fine.

*Q: How did he run the office?*

THOMSEN: He was the assistant secretary.

*Q: He has had two incarnations as Assistant Secretary for Administration or...*

THOMSEN: I don't recall that.

*Q: Maybe he moved from AF to administration, I'm not sure. What was your impression of his interest and also the mood of the African Bureau?*

THOMSEN: It was pretty much keeping the engine running I would say. It was not an area of intense interest. I think Nigeria probably was one of the two or three areas where we had the most interest. I did have a presidential visit while I was on the desk. Shagari, the new civilian headquarters came to Washington. But by and large it was a matter of, I won't say not rocking the boat, but just keeping the relationships going. I don't recall any intense problems. I'd been the Lao desk officer, and I watched EA flap over various issues. I didn't see anything like that in the AF bureau. I had a number of significant visits both ways while I was on the desk and that kept me busy.

*Q: Could you explain how a significant visit keeps one busy?*

THOMSEN: Let's talk first about the Shagari visit, a state visit by a foreign head of state. I was kept busy with the Office of Protocol, with the NSC, with the White House staff itself, with what was then called ICA, the International Communications Agency, the former USIA. Partly as a result of my activities over the past several years, a lot of our relationships were in the education and cultural, and in the science and technology field which I had also kind of accumulated as a cultural attaché in Lagos. And a lot of work was done with ICA on that visit to strengthen a number of agreements and programs. And then with the Nigerian embassy of course, was an incredible part of this as it had been when Carter came to Lagos.

When Carter came to Lagos the pre-advance, and the advance kept the whole embassy busy. I remember one day being on a direct line to Washington, on a secure line, and we must have spent eight hours non-stop talking to the ambassador and the econ counselor, the DCM and the political counselor and myself on various aspects. Just trying to iron out issues that the advance team wouldn't resolve for us, and what we were doing was going back to the Department and asking them to intervene to try to sort things out on behalf.

The Carter visit, in that retrospect, the advance team was absolutely impossible in their demands on the Nigerian government from the embassy point of view. The fact is that they got about 70% of what they demanded, which was about 20% more than we would have guessed they would have gotten, but by their persistence, and by the Nigerian interest in having Carter come. They were fascinating to watch. These were all the

political folks in the White House, the political types, as compared to the bureaucrats. They just had absolutely no patience with any explanation by the Nigerians.

On our side when they came to Washington, we were absolutely the same way. We demanded everything. We pushed them again into our box of how we wanted the President of the United States be seen receiving a foreign dignitary. I was fascinated by the mirror image because we were the dominant factor in both cases, although the Nigerians were also very tough. They were not push-overs, but again it was the political types, absolutely relentless in demands on what would happen. In both events the visits were superbly successful in meeting their goals.

Every day I'd be out of the office, either down in the Office of Protocol, or at the Nigerian embassy, or over at the NSC working out some aspect of the visit, whether it was a side visit by some of his staff, or some of the members of the Shagari party, or whether it was who would go where with Shagari, or what Americans would be present at each of the events. These were all such important issues to the White House.

*Q: Well, Shagari was the first civilian elected president in some time, wasn't he?*

THOMSEN: Yes.

*Q: What was your impression of Shagari when you were in Lagos, and then what were you getting from the embassy as you prepared for this? What sort of person was he?*

THOMSEN: Well, he was an acetic. He was very withdrawn. And as far as we could tell, personally honest, and a good choice. He was a Hansa, from the north. But he did not get effective control. First of all, the army stayed out of his control. The army maintained itself as a power, and he never got full control of the bureaucracy. He remained president as long as I was on the desk, but it was not long after that that the army retook control. They were unhappy with what was going on. I think a lot of it had to do with the oil price reductions that were occurring, and the fact that they weren't getting as much foreign currency as they had, and there were economic pressures that the army reacted to. That's something I don't have a strong feel for. But Shagari was regarded as an honest administrator, and a reasonable leader but ultimately not up to the strains that occurred later on.

*Q: Were you on the desk getting emanations from the economic problems? How were we seeing the future of Nigeria?*

THOMSEN: We were seeing the future of Nigeria as problematic, and that oil was the crucial element, and as oil fluctuated their fate would fluctuate. Another major effort while I was there, was the whole question of the purchase by the United States of their liquefied natural gas (LNG)which would have been a huge operation if it had come to be. From a political point of view, the desk, the office, and even the bureau were very supportive of finding some way to negotiate an LNG agreement. We were talking about

hundreds of millions of dollars. The technology was a little bit problematic still, but the intention was that we would buy a lot of their LNG. Our experts in what was called FERC, Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, were absolutely adamant that we would not go above a certain price, and that we would make certain requirements. In the end we did not get a deal on LNG, and then subsequent to that the price of gas fell greatly. I think either we found new domestic supplies, or the world supply became so great that the FERC folks were absolutely right from an economic point of view in terms of national interests for us not to get hooked up to the kind of relationship that the Nigerians were angling for.

I guess I've made the points. They were our largest African trading partner. They were an important element in our oil imports. They had a beautiful sweet crude. They had some of the highest quality oil that you could get. They had established a new government based on the U.S. constitution. They were seeking our technology, and our education and our training, and all those were very positive things. Those are the things I emphasized while I was there. I went back to Lagos with Vice President Mondale during that period, and his trip followed the same line. A lot of the stuff I'd been doing were major elements of the bilateral discussion between the Vice President and the Nigerians. They included areas such as science and technology agreement, and education agreements, and that sort of thing.

Also during that time Ambassador Stephen Low was named to replace Don Easum and I was spending some of my time helping him prepare to go out. I always saw the desk as an appendage of the embassy, not without our own good judgment, but essentially to make sure the embassy's needs were met in Washington. And I found that a very rewarding aspect. I didn't use the phone as much as I had in the Lao situation because it wasn't necessary, but I wouldn't hesitate to call the political counselor, the DCM, or even the ambassador if necessary to iron out a situation, to make sure that we were all on track.

*Q: During the Carter administration he got hit with a rise in oil prices, OPEC, and there was an oil shortage. Did the rise in oil prices have any affect on relations with Nigeria?*

THOMSEN: Certainly our response to the OPEC boycott affected our relations with Nigeria, and we worked hard to explain the situation to them. They didn't like it. We put certain limits on imports from those nations which were boycotting Israel, and that did have an affect on our relations, but not a significant affect. It was a negative current in what was generally a broad river of positive relations. But it did have an affect, yes. It was during that period where I was emphasizing the LNG, even if it was nothing else than an effort to keep the talk positive generally. If we couldn't get their oil, if for some reason we weren't going to buy as much oil as they wanted us to buy, we'd at least be looking down the road toward future cooperation.

*Q: Were we concerned at all about Islamic fundamentalism in the north? This is '79, '81 was the time when all hell was breaking loose in Iran. Did that ever raise its head?*

THOMSEN: It was beginning to in terms of sporadic, isolated cases of fundamentalist activity in Kano and in some of the smaller towns in the north. But it did not play out in a way that affected our relationships with Nigeria. Our consulate in Kaduna would report on it, and we would certainly get the press play, but it hadn't reached the level where it was a major concern to us. We were concerned because there were some Muslim bashing of Christians in some of those situations. But they were mainly small groups of fundamentalists going after the larger groups of Sunni, rather than being Muslim against others.

*Q: Then you left that job in 1981. Where did you go?*

THOMSEN: Well, partly as a result of the science and technology stuff, for example, Frank Press, who was the President's second advisor, took another major trip to Nigeria which I helped prepare for although I didn't accompany him, established some science and technology relationships. During that process I got to know the OES folks...

*Q: That's oceans and...*

THOMSEN: ...and International Environment and Scientific Affairs. Tom Pickering, who I'd worked for in the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, was then the Assistant Secretary in OES, although he left shortly thereafter. But I was delighted to be working for Tom again, and I was offered a deputy officer directorship in what was called the Office of International Science and Technology Cooperation. This office managed the protocol and policy aspects of all our bilateral and multilateral science technology agreements. It was very programmatic, very action oriented. The expectation was that I would become the director when he departed, and that happened.

*Q: You were there from when to when?*

THOMSEN: I was in OES from '81 to '83.

*Q: Could you talk about your work, and also about the assistant secretary who was the bureau head? Was his name Malone?*

THOMSEN: Jim Malone, he just died.

*Q: I recall at one point I was being considered, among many other people, I was interviewed to be his executive director, which I didn't get but I was told he was a person who was not a good manager, couldn't make up his mind. It was not a well run bureau from a lot of people's points of view because of his lack of management.*

THOMSEN: I think that's a fair statement. He was a lawyer, I think he'd been an assistant dean at the UCLA law school. This was under the Reagan administration. He came in when OES had spent a lot of its energy on establishing improved science and technology relationships with the Soviet Union particularly, and with Eastern Europe, and with the

beginnings with China. And under Reagan very, very quickly much of this was dismantled. And Malone was responsible for executing that policy. That was his mandate, and also to improve and increase our emphasis on our own nuclear capabilities, and nuclear relations with our allies. When Malone came into OES, OES was very much pro-active in terms of our relations with the Soviet Union, for example, and a couple of DASs lost their jobs because they really weren't willing to tow the new line. They were overly sanguine that they could manage to keep things going the way they had been going, and they found themselves transferred on 24-hour notice, and our relations with the Soviet Union really virtually brought to a dead halt with except a couple of exceptions, outer space and a certain element of nuclear energy research that actually they were ahead of us, and we thought to our advantage to keep going.

The job of the office that I was deputy and then headed...my first job was to be the deputy for Eastern Europe, Soviet Union, and China. I had four desk officers for those areas. As I say, during my early tenure, we just about brought our Soviet relationship to a dead halt. But we were more active in Yugoslavia and Poland, for example. I made a couple of trips to Warsaw, negotiated a new S&T relationship.

*Q: S&T?*

THOMSEN: Science and Technology relationship with them. Our relationship with Poland was fascinating because we were still using PL 480 money, that is surplus foodstuffs sales had created a pot that was still several hundred millions of dollars, and science and technology relations, and education exchanges were the only uses of that fund. So we had a pot of money to use in Poland. And for a lot of American scientists, particularly National Science Foundation and the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration were very interested in doing research in Poland. And Poland was very interested in access to some of our technology. That was really a strong point around the world, access to our technology. So we negotiated a relationship which allowed us to send in our researchers with better access than we had had in the past. For example, it had previously been the case that they would be subject to custom duties on research equipment and materials. We managed to get that waived, and that sort of thing to improve the opportunity. This was during the period of Solidarity, so what we were doing in this S&T relationship was very much in line with our national policy on Poland. Subsequently I went back with a large delegation and initialed the new agreement, but unfortunately Solidarity was outlawed just after we initialed, so it was never signed. I initialed it, and brought it back.

The same thing was true with Yugoslavia. In Yugoslavia we were very interested in supporting them, and they were very interested in our science and technology. So we negotiated a new agreement. They had a little bit of money left from PL 480. But for the rest of the world we had virtually nothing to negotiate with except the willingness of American researchers to pay their own way because of the research opportunities in various countries. But we played on that, and had good relations, and one of the countries I visited was Israel, where we had two science technology joint commissions. I was the

U.S. director of both of them, where we did a lot of trading, and some of it was underwritten by our security assistance money. So that provided a vehicle...

*Q: Was that pretty much in the field of military?*

THOMSEN: No, it was very much applied science. That is to say as compared to basic research. For example, I visited two sites in Israel. One was a company hooked up with a telecommunications company in Los Angeles that was doing very high tech telecommunications production in Israel in cooperation with that American company. That was underwritten and encouraged by this agreement. The other was a huge field of solar energy collectors that was in an experimental mode but which could have application say in California where there is a lot of sun, and this could have been a very important energy source. Subsequently they used windmills instead. I don't know if you've ever seen those huge fields of windmills in California. The alternative would have been these solar collectors.

Well, I'm rambling a little bit, but essentially my goal as the deputy director and then the director, was to mesh our science technology capabilities with the country goals of our embassies and our desks. So I spent a lot of my time working with the desk. We became essentially a service agency for the geographic bureaus, and for the country desks to make sure how they wanted to play it, but to the extent that they wanted to play a S&T card that we tried to maximize the value of that card.

*Q: Did you find that with truly developed countries like West Germany, France, Great Britain, Japan, our science people and their science people had their own relations. Was this more pointed towards countries that did not have major science establishments?*

THOMSEN: With those highly developed countries, we had S&T agreements, but they were very much pro forma, you're right. With Japan particularly we had about eight different protocols to our science technology agreement. But they really were pro forma. The velocity of interchange with Japan was such that no one could ever try to keep track of it, certainly not manage it. But you're right, I'll use some examples, Brazil and Mexico in Latin America where I was very much involved in both cases in establishing, or upgrading, our science and technology relations.

My previous experience in cultural exchange gave me a view of what S&T cooperation really was, and I saw it as essentially a scientific exchange program. Where we had a role to play it was in facilitating the movement of scientists and technology people back and forth. And I changed the emphasis in that direction. We even created almost a mechanism where you'd have a visit from us to them, then an exchange visit here at a very political and at the diplomatic level. Then the third exchange would be our technology and science people to that country with several of us with them to try to work out some of the hassles. And then it would flow back and forth. It was really a useful process, the mechanisms as they developed were fascinating to watch. I regarded our access to their research opportunities as the quid pro quo for their access to our technology. My emphasis was to

create a collegial relationship rather than the USAID relationship which was always a that of a patron. In third world countries where they had dealt with AID to see this kind of a relationship being encouraged was positive from a political point of view because they really loved being able to have a relationship which we could call collegiality, where our access to their research opportunities meted out to their access to some of our technology. It was a two-way street. We emphasized that.

For example, in the field of agriculture research we took advantage of a Yugoslav seed bank (a seed bank is essentially a repository of seeds). In a case where we were having a very bad blight on corn in the southeast, it was access to a Yugoslav seed bank and the seed that allowed us to generate a seed that was immune to that particular blight. So there was a strong payoff for the United States economically. I think it worked very well.

*Q: Then you left there in '83?*

THOMSEN: I did.

*Q: This is the 8th of January 1997. Sam, why don't you talk now about dealing with the Micronesian situation. What was the period you were in that?*

THOMSEN: I was there under two hats. First from 1983 to '87, I was at the Micronesian Status Negotiations which was an interagency team, and I'll talk more about that in a moment. Then from '87 to '90 I was the United States Representative to the Republic of the Marshall Islands which is a part of Micronesia, with ambassadorial rank.

*Q: Let's start with the first part. Can you give some background about this whole Micronesian business, and then go into what you were doing?*

THOMSEN: During the Second World War we captured from the Japanese what is known geographically as Micronesia, that's the area west of Hawaii and north of Australia, east of the Philippines, south of Japan, an area about the size of the United States comprising dozens of island communities with minor ethnic differences. At the end of the war, under the aegis of the United Nations, the United States took responsibility for the area under what was called a Strategic Trust. It was the only strategic trusteeship in the United Nations. It gave certain privileges that other governments in their trustee relationships did not have, and so the Trust Territory of the Pacific was an United States responsibility after the war.

*Q: In the first place, the dates you were doing this initial assignment was from when to when?*

THOMSEN: '83 to '87.

*Q: What was going on? What was the situation, and what were you doing, and some of the people?*

THOMSEN: The relationship with the Trust Territory had been evolving since we took responsibility, first under Navy, and then under the Department of Interior. And just as an aside, it was probably a terrible mistake to put it under the Department of Interior but because the area was identified as a territory, I guess the folks who made those decisions put it with Interior because of its territorial responsibilities. It should probably have gone to the State Department. Eventually, because of circumstances in the islands, we began the process of establishing a different relationship with them. Under the United Nations charter, Trust Territories have the option of going three different ways. One is full independence. One is total integration into what is called the metropola or parent country. And the third was called "free association," and "free association" was not defined. From the early '70s we were negotiating with the leaders of these little entities to establish a new relationship. And fairly soon they became enamored of the idea of what they were trying to define as free association. On our side there were those who wanted us to integrate them entirely, and there were others who were prepared to let them become fully independent. But the idea of an intermediate relationship was kind of foreign to us. By the time I arrived in 1983, we had essentially completed the major negotiations, and in the process of having UN observed plebiscites to validate the new relationship, free association. In the summer of '83 I took my maiden trip out and observed the plebiscite in the Marshall Islands. The entities were called "the Commonwealth of Northern Marianas," which is the major island of Saipan and the island of Tinian where we launched our atomic strikes against Japan. The Northern Marianas voted to become a commonwealth of the United States. In other words to become integrated into the United States. The other three entities which we were dealing with were the "Republic of Palua," which is in the far west, not too far from the Philippines, and directly south of Guam; what was called the Federated States of Micronesia, which was a number of different linguistic and ethnic groupings in the middle of the Pacific. The island of Truk where we had sunk most of the Japanese navy, Ponape, Yap and Kossae comprised of four states of the Federated States. And in the east was the "Republic of the Marshall Islands" which is a homogeneous cultural grouping in two chains of atolls, with a population of about 40,000. So those three entities, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palua had decided they wanted to be freely associated. When I arrived on the scene just as they had begun voting to validate that relationship, and they all three did. And upon my arrival we were focusing on getting the United States congress to ratify the agreements and then to implement the compacts.

*Q: How did the assignment come about?*

THOMSEN: I was an old EA/P hand. I'd done my GLOP to Africa and then bounced around a little bit through the science bureau, and trying to find my way back home to EA/P. So I simply let it be known I wanted an EA/P assignment. It was as easy as that. My record included a lot of interagency activity, a lot of varied activity, and it seemed from the point of view of the decision makers that I had the kind of background that could deal with the very unusual circumstances of the Office for Micronesian Status Negotiations (OMSN).

*Q: What did the group that was dealing with...I'm talking about the American group, can you describe your office, and maybe some of the personalities and different currents within that?*

THOMSEN: Sure. When I arrived the President's Representative for Micronesian Status Negotiations was a man named Fred Zeder. Zeder was a close friend of the then Vice President Bush. He'd been his campaign manager in his only losing congressional campaign. He was a very wealthy man in his own right. He had been the head of the Office of Territorial Affairs in Interior in times past, so he had some experience with the area. He'd been a fighter pilot in the Second World War, an interesting guy. I was the deputy, my title was Deputy President's Representative. My predecessors had included Dick Tease and Phil Manhard. The Defense Department was represented by Al Short, an Army colonel who managed the office administration, with the title of office director. His most illustrious predecessor was Admiral Bill Crowe who became the chairman of the Chief of Staff, and now is our ambassador to London. We had a Navy commander Howard Hills as our legal counsel. A Navy chief petty officer, Denny Dolan was the administrative assistant who ran what must have been one of the earliest local networks for computers. We had a superb executive secretary, Colleen Greer, her title was secretary to the President's Representative. She's currently secretary to the principal DAS in IO. This was a super team. The linchpin of the office, Jim Berg, a GS-13 when I arrived, had the title of political adviser. He had been a Peace Corps volunteer in years past. Today he is the executive vice president for Europe for one of the major paper firms. He left government after this all was finished. It was a tightly knit office. We had our computer set up so we could interact with each other constantly. We had fax machines before anyone else had faxes. We had an office on Saipan, I shouldn't neglect that. Two FSOs on Saipan, who were kind of our leg men out in the area, and we used faxes to them. That's how we communicated long before anyone else thought of long distance fax. We were interacting mainly with Defense, with Interior, within the State Department the legal advisor's office, EA/P, Consular Affairs, with congress, with two principal committees, not Foreign Affairs, but Interior committee in the House, and Natural Resources on the Senate side. Both had oversight because the islands were under the oversight of the Department of Interior. Even though we were negotiating international agreements, the committees on the Hill were the ones who had a parochial interest in Interior matters we dealt. With the White House itself and OMB almost constantly. Our overseer was the counselor of the Department, and our line of authority went through the IG system to the White House.

*Q: IG?*

THOMSEN: The Interagency Group system which coordinated foreign policy and national security matters among the several interested agencies. The Counselor of the Department of State was the chairman of the senior IG for the Trust Territory. I was the Executive Secretary of the Interagency Working Group. We did most of our interagency work through that mechanism. But when we had to we could convene a senior IG and the

Counselor would chair it, and Under Secretary level people from all over government would convene to deal with the issues.

*Q: I wonder if you could talk about some of the currents? I think of the Department of Interior...one always thinks of the Bureau of Indian Affairs which since the Civil War has been a mess. I mean its always been very controversial. I think of the Navy...they don't want to give up anything that has water around it. And then you get into old congressional people who'd maybe like to fly out to places, or something like that. And State which I would assume would just want to get rid of the whole damn thing. I may be wrong. I don't the current. We'll talk about dealing with the Micronesians later, but let's talk about dealing with Washington, Congress, State, Interior, maybe Treasury.*

THOMSEN: Treasury had an interest and we'll get into that. But you quite well characterized the range of interests. I think the State Department...I would give us more credit than simply wanting to get rid of it although that has tended to become our attitude subsequently. But at the time we were looking at the national interest, and we were paired with Defense. The critical concerns we had were that we not create a situation where we would lose the ability to prevent third country military forces from having access to that area, having won it in bloody battles. The main concern, not just the Navy, but of the Defense Department and joined with the State Department, and supported by the White House, was that we should create a situation where we could prevent any third military force from having access to the area.

*Q: We're really talking about the Soviets.*

THOMSEN: We were certainly talking about the Soviets.

*Q: And maybe in the future the Chinese Communists.*

THOMSEN: Well, today when you look at the region you're looking at Japan and at the Chinese. The second concern was the Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands. The Kwajalein missile range, which is a DOD facility managed by the Army interestingly enough, is the splash down site for our intercontinental ballistic missiles. And that meant not only the experimental stuff, but operational testing of ICBMs. They'd take an ICBM from North Dakota...

*Q: ICBM?*

THOMSEN: Intercontinental Ballistic Missile, which was our main defense in the strategic, MAD, mutually assured deterrents. The heart of our defense was the ICBM with the nuclear warhead, or multiple nuclear warheads. Operationally they'd moved them from South Dakota by train to Vandenberg Air Force Base north of Santa Barbara on the coast in California. And that same crew would go into the hole and go through a real launch. I can tell you today, I couldn't have told you several years ago, that those warheads would splash down within 50 yards of the target in the middle of Kwajalein

lagoon. The Soviets had a very sophisticated electronics gathering vessel in sight of Kwajalein, and although we would protest, we didn't hassle them, but we made it clear we weren't delighted to have them there. We really weren't all that unhappy to allow them watch the efficiency of our operational testing. But in addition to that we did a lot of very sophisticated testing. An estimated nine billion dollars of the most sophisticated radar and electronics equipment was located on Kwajalein. The population of Kwajalein was 5,000 Americans, including dependents. Only about 25 were in military uniform but Massachusetts of Technology, GE, our most sophisticated electronics and weapons people were on Kwajalein dealing with these critical national defense issues. Those were the two critical issues from a security point of view. More broadly we obviously wanted to leave Micronesia with a good taste in their mouths. We wanted to be able to show that we'd exercised our responsibilities for the area responsibly. That we weren't leaving them as an economic basket cases. That we had given them the economic and political and social development that we committed ourselves to when we took over the Trusteeship in 1945. That was the underlying framework.

The Department of Interior and the House Congressional Committee, Subcommittee for Interior Affairs, was opposed to anything other than total integration into the United States. The idea that we would release these islands was an anathema to them.

*Q: Why?*

THOMSEN: Well, I think it mainly was bureaucratic. These were areas under their authority, and under their control, and if they were no longer in territorial status, they would no longer be under their control. I think a secondary issue was a kind of condescending - we know how to do it better than anybody else- approach.

*Q: I think we'll treat each one of these separately. With Interior, what was your impression of the competence, and from what you were beginning to gather, the administration of Interior?*

THOMSEN: Interior was pretty much...I don't know the right word to use exactly, but mediocre in its accurate sense of just average competence. They weren't incompetent. One of the interesting things though, in regard to this, and I mentioned it earlier on in regard to where responsibility should have rested. But if you look at the constitution of the United States, and we as retired Foreign Service officers recognize the Constitutional authority of the President in the work of the State Department, as being unquestioned, direct, and clear. And that's true. The constitution gives the authority for foreign affairs to the President. But the constitution gives the authority for territorial affairs to Congress. So the Department of Interior in administering its territorial responsibilities was torn between its table of organization responsibilities through the hierarchy of the executive side, and its relationship to Congress which had the constitutional authority for oversight over territories. Now that's why I say this "territory" should never have been placed in that context. But it was.

So the committees in Congress who had responsibility for territorial affairs oversight put the Trust Territory of the Pacific islands in the same category as its responsibilities for Indian tribes, and for the territories as they had once been constituted. It was a terrible place to put a situation where we really had international responsibilities. The Senate committee was very even handed, and very broad minded, and very understanding, objective about it. But the House committee, particularly the chairman of the subcommittee, John Seiberling, really saw the Trust Territory of the Pacific islands as its bailiwick, and really resented the idea that anybody would try to take it away from them. From the time I arrived there were 22 hearings in the House on the "Compact of Free Association," the document embodying the agreement. The purpose of the hearings were to undermine the concept of free association which had been negotiated, and had been passed by plebiscite. Ultimately it was Steve Solarz, who was the chairman of the East Asia subcommittee on the House Foreign Affairs Committee who caused the compacts to be approved. Steve Solarz' threatened to call for concurrent jurisdiction over the matter, which brought it to a head, and finally caused Seiberling to report the document out from his committee. In the 22 hearings they couldn't break the rationale for the agreement on free association. And Stan Roth, Steve's Chief of Staff, was personally responsible for getting that action done.

*Q: How did you feel about Seiberling? I mean, what was your appraisal of him?*

THOMSEN: He was a courtly and dignified individual, from the Seiberling tire family, obviously well off. I think he had a very strong sense of being a patron of the islands, that he was their hero, and provider, their benefactor through his committee largess, and that there should have been some reciprocity, that there should have been some recognition of this, and that therefore they should not have voted to be freely associated, but should have wanted to become a commonwealth so they could remain under his generous oversight very paternalistic.

*Q: Did he go out there much?*

Thomsen: Not a lot. His staff was out there frequently, and of course, they were the ones who were prodding and egging on. On the Republican side, Congressman Lagomarsimo of California was a champion for free association. But even in his case, one of his principal staffers was in the same mold as Seiberling, and would try to subvert even the Republican support. It was a fascinating Machiavellian exercise to get this through the Seiberling committee. In some cases we'd have more than twenty executive branch agencies sitting at a table in front of Seiberling, saying that this was the best solution for our relationship. And he would try to find ways to disapprove that, but he never could. In fact I think there was also when the full committee chairman threatened to take it on himself and take it away from Seiberling and that helped to kind of move it forward.

*Q: What about the Department of Defense? Obviously we're concerned, was it strategic denial...which means basically keep the Soviets from taking advantage of one of these small countries and buying their way into a port.*

Thomsen: What the compact itself said is that the Micronesian authorities, the three separate authorities, each agreed that they would allow no third party military forces into their territorial waters, or into their region without United States approval. In other words, they would seek our approval before inviting anyone in, even an Australian patrol boat. This did happen in practice subsequently. But, of course, by the time it came into practice the tremendous Soviet threat was already diminishing.

*Q: This meant that you had basically the Navy on your side.*

THOMSEN: Well, the whole Defense Department. This was a Defense Department issue, and we had active play, not only the office, International Strategic Affairs, which is their little State Department. The Department of Defense Legal Advisor's office had one of their lawyers as a constant participant in everything that we did. The Army, because of its strategic defense interests in Kwajalein, ( and there was a separate Army Strategic Defense Command, separate from the Defense Department's Strategic Defense). The Army's Strategic Defense Command headquarters in Crystal City, also had people sitting with us constantly.

In one case there was a labor dispute on Kwajalein. The Marshallese workmen were threatening to close down Kwajalein. That helped advance the process of turning the islands to Marshallese government because that would create a new relationship involving the government of Marshall Islands taking responsibility for the issue rather than having it be a U.S. military responsibility. We would be working several layers down within the Defense Department. They were on board with this approach. Although you might expect that some of them would rather have a territorial relationship, have them integrated into the United States. But there seemed to be a good deal of understanding that this was the optimum relationship from our strategies point of view.

Treasury's interest was complex. The compact had several provisions which were intended to provide mechanisms to bring the freely associated states much closer to the United States than they might have been otherwise, or in fact, they became. And those were tax provisions; specifically, one in particular would mean that an American citizen, who resided in Micronesia, in any of three freely associated states for 181 days would have no tax liability to the United States. His only tax liability would be to that freely associated state. Now, the intention here was to encourage wealthy individuals to create a residence in the islands. If they were to spend over half the year in one of those island states, then that island state would be the recipient of their only tax liability. And the hope was that there would be some wealthy people who would decide to make their homes out here for that purpose.

This, and a couple of other similar provisions fell afoul of the Reagan tax reform. The Secretary of the Treasury, who later became Chief of Staff and Secretary of State, .Jim Baker, as the Secretary of the Treasury, and Dan Rostenkowski as head of the House Ways and Means Committee, were very much opposed to these provisions. Congress

took these negotiated compacts, which had been approved by the Micronesians and United Nations observed plebiscites, and rewrote some of the provisions. And they rewrote them in this way. They would add an article on, and that article would say article so and so, the tax provision, shall read as follows. So it wasn't a substitute. It wasn't incorporated. It was an add-on as a part of the United States law. But the same article gave them ten million dollars each to provide a development fund, which was intended as an offset to the tax loss.This action then forced the island governments to revisit the United States law, and decide whether they would accept these provisions or not, and they ultimately did. It was a fascinating thing to watch because the House Ways and Means Committee, under Rostenkowski, was an absolute juggernaut. There was no dealing with him except on nuance, and I say that, because we were successful in making some changes; we would spend the night next to the floor of the House writing on backs of envelopes substitute language which would be sent on to the floor and be submitted to be an amendment. They were willing to listen to us. But the essential principles they absolutely refused to modify, and Treasury was really on their side. They felt that these were exceptions that could destroy the sense of the unity of the tax law.

*Q: Your Secretary of State was George Shultz, who had fought and been wounded in Palau, which meant that he knew the place, and you had George Bush as Vice President...*

THOMSEN: ...a close friend of Zeder.

*Q: And also had been a Navy pilot in that area. We're still talking about World War II generation that had intimate experiences and strong feelings about this whole area.*

THOMSEN: Strong sympathies. And both Secretary Shultz and the Vice President were very sympathetic to what we were doing. And Baker was too, it was just that this...if you recall the days of the tax reform the intent was so absolute to exclude any tax breaks, that they saw these as being too much precedent making, which would allow other similar precedents.

*Q: ...and they're probably right. Once you open it up, why be nice to these islanders, why can't we be nice to our people in Puerto Rico, or Arizona.*

THOMSEN: It was inevitable that that would happen.

*Q: We've touched on it, but how did things proceed?*

THOMSEN: Well, when I arrived, we were thinking for U.S. congressional approval. Congressional approval for the compact of free association was both the approval of a treaty, an international agreement, and an appropriation's act because within the compact of free association there was language which called upon the United States to provide funding for the island governments over a 15 year period with "full faith and credit." Full faith and credit means that the appropriation was for 15 years.

As I indicated, Congress did make a number of changes which then required it to go back to the island governments, and it did, and they approved it. And then the next step would be for the United States, and the island governments, to announce a date certain for the implementation of the compact. Now a complicating factor here is, that although the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, had completed all of their process. The Republic of Palau had in its constitution a requirement that to allow the presence of nuclear weapons in its territories required a vote of 75% of the population--approval of 75% of the population. The compact of free association among its other strategic elements, which I've discussed, allowed us to transport through, or to store in, their territorial waters weapons without distinguishing between nuclear and non-nuclear. That provision of the compact was interpreted by a U.S. judge in the Trust Territory to mean that that element of the compact required a 75% approval in Palau. Now Palau had approved the compact by about 67% already once. But that judge's interpretation--by the way he, Bob Hufner, was a fraternity brother of mine from UCLA, a fascinating coincidence--his interpretation meant that that 67% approval was not an approval. So what we had thought would be a simultaneous transition among the three island states to free association, was not to be. We're talking now about the '85 period. Palau went through a series of agonizing re-votes and renegotiations with us until finally about 1990 they passed a compact that met the judicial standards. But by that time, in 1986, for the reason I described earlier, the Kwajalein labor dispute, and the pressures from the two island governments that had already gone through their process, we terminated the Trusteeship for the Commonwealth of North Marianas, which had been in abeyance for several years. They had approved commonwealth I think in the late '70s. And then for the Marshall Islands and for the Federated States we terminated the compact in October of 1986 but the Trust Territory hadn't come to an end because Palau was still a Trust Territory because they hadn't approved the compact.

The critical aspect of this gets into a very arcane issue with the United Nations. And that is whether we could terminate the compact in part, or did it have to be terminated as a whole. There we had a fight within the United States government which included our legal advisor at the United Nations. They did not want us to try to terminate partially, and that finally had to go to the President of the United States for a presidential determination that we indeed would, against the best judgment of our legal advisors in New York, terminate partially. The reason for the problem was some governments would not accept that we had terminated partially. That you could not terminate a Trusteeship partially. You had to terminate it all at once. But we did terminate it, and we simply informed the United Nations that we had done this, and then we prevented the counter effort by the Soviet Union and others to try to say we couldn't do it. We simply did it.

*Q: Why didn't they want you to do it?*

THOMSEN: Well, the Soviet Union particularly, but China kind of passively and quietly did like the idea of free association. They wanted to force us, and they didn't spend a lot of effort on this but they wanted those countries to be independent. They didn't like free association.

*Q: By the time you came on board, had it already been determined by plebiscite or however, that there would be Saipan, the Marshalls, the Federated States of Micronesia, Palau, that these would be separate? Had we made any efforts earlier on to get them all together?*

THOMSEN: We had intended they would be together, and the compact of free association was called in the singular the "Compact of Free Association" right up until the end. Even though by the end there were three different compacts already being negotiated. But our intention was from the beginning that there would be a Federated States of Micronesia which would include the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Northern Marianas. The Northern Marianas possibly because of being so close to Guam, and seeing the advantages of citizenship, fairly early on said they did not want to be a part of the Federated States of Micronesia, but they wanted to be a part of the United States. So they opted out kind of unilaterally, and although we put up a fuss, maybe pro forma, maybe more than that. Ultimately we acquiesced to their plebiscite, and they had a plebiscite. The relationship with the Northern Marianas is in a document called the covenant, which gave them U.S. citizenship, and established them as a commonwealth of the United States, with some advantages which you'll be interested in. One is that they have control over their own immigration process. That is to say, they can let anybody in they want without regard to the United States immigration laws. You may know that today there are more mainland Chinese on Saipan than there are Saipanese.

*Q: I think also we had a lot of problems, didn't we, because all of a sudden wealthy Iranians were coming in and getting visas that would allow them to get to the United States.*

THOMSEN: It got very, very complicated. I should mention with regard to the freely associated states, a part of the compact says that citizens of the freely associated states can enter and reside in the United States without a visa or residing documents. Of course, they can obviously provide citizenship to anybody they want to. But anyone who obtains citizenship of any of the freely associated states with the purpose in mind of gaining access to the United States under the special relationship privileges shall not be admitted to the United States. And it's up to the consular officer's judgment as to whether or not that holds. Particularly with the Marshall Islands, I spent a lot of my time trying to convince them not to sell passports to Chinese in Taiwan, or in Hong Kong because they were not going to go any further than the Marshall Islands, no one in my embassy was going to issue anybody a visa for access to the United States to anyone who by any means had gotten a Marshall Islands passport, and hadn't spent at least seven years there. They never gave up. I think to this day this is an issue. They are selling passports and hoping that somehow they'll finally be able to get them through United States immigration.

*Q: During this time, we're still talking about the '83 to '87 period, what about dealing with the various groups. I assume that as you worked with Congress you had to keep*

*going back and forth. One, who was representing them here in Washington, and how did this cooperation or negotiations work out?*

THOMSEN: That's a good question. The Marshall Islands, just after I arrived when we began the congressional push, sent over their Chief Secretary, which is the equivalent of a prime minister, and their Attorney General, who was actually an American. They resided in Washington. Later on they also sent a full time representative although he did not have diplomatic status to be in Washington with them. The Chief Secretary and the Attorney General operated out of our offices, and we became a team. The Federated States of Micronesia was more arm's length. They had quite an effective counsel in Washington. They also had a very effective legal counsel, an American, Jim Stovall. That team also worked closely with us.

*Q: Because the basic issues had all been resolved.*

THOMSEN: We were now working together to try to get this through congress. Palau was more arm's length even yet. But for most of the negotiations a man named Lazarus Salii, a brilliant man, was their president, and we were on the phone with him almost daily working out the elements of the relationship. Although Palau ultimately got on a totally different track, so we were talking about different things entirely with Palau than we were with the other two. For that reason it wasn't as urgent for Palau to be physically present.

*Q: During the negotiations, this is I think before your time as I recall, there was somewhat of a scandal about bugging the negotiations. Could you talk a little about that?*

THOMSEN: I can tell you what I know, and that is it's quite likely, or I suppose virtually unquestionable now. I mentioned President Salii. Prior to that he was their chief negotiator, in fact he was one of the principal architects of free association. When they were negotiating on Saipan...Saipan was the headquarters for the Trust Territory, and there was an American bureaucracy on Saipan. They were not employees of the United States government. They were employees of the Trust Territory administration. They had quite a complex. It had been a Navy headquarters after the war, and often the negotiations would occur there. Well, one night apparently Laz Salii knocked over a table lamp and under the table lamp was a microphone. It was quite a scandal at the time. It set us back, but sadly enough it simply confirmed what a lot of them suspected, that we were using other means besides simple across the table negotiations. The fact is, as far as I know, that there was nothing ever said in the proximity of that microphone of any value. But one of our intelligence agencies was resident on the island doing mainly operations regarding Taiwan, and apparently they got bored. I can't imagine how they got authorized to do that, or what value they thought it would be. But yes, that did occur. And it still pops up from time to time.

*Q: During this time then your main negotiation was with congress. You had your team together.*

THOMSEN: It was a Democratic congress. It was the Reagan administration. We were dealing with a Democratic Congressional leadership. However, the compact as it was negotiated out was virtually identical to the compact that had been negotiated in the Carter administration. Peter Rosenblatt was the President's Representative at that time. What happened was that when the Reagan administration came in they had a full blown interagency study of that language and came up with very few changes. So there was a lot of continuity, and the Democratic congress also provided that continuity. On the senate side we had very strong support from Senator Bennett Johnson and his staff.

*Q: He was the senator from...*

THOMSEN: From Louisiana, and he was a very strong advocate for the compact relationship and would sometimes lean on his colleagues in the House, or through his staffers. But to talk to the staffers on the House side to try to get a little sense into the situation.

*Q: Were you able to work through the Foreign Affairs Committee, their staff? Because this is really where the thing should have been.*

THOMSEN: That's right. Stan Roth was the chief of staff for Steve Solarz. Stan is now set to become the next EA Assistant Secretary. His name has been mentioned. Stan was a very strong friend. And as I said earlier, it was really the threat by that subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs committee that energized the Interior committee to finally bring it to an end. And Stan Roth and Steve Solarz were very strong supporters of what we were doing, and critical to its outcome.

*Q: You've alluded to it, or mentioned it, but just to sum up this thing, what brought the whole thing to a head, and to a successful conclusion?*

THOMSEN: On the congressional side it was essentially that the House Interior subcommittee finally ran out of steam. They had 22 full hearings. They simply had no more issues to have hearings about, although they were threatening more. So they published their report. As I say at the same time as the House Foreign Affairs committee began sounding like it was going to claim concurrent jurisdiction. On the senate side, Bennett Johnson had one three hour hearing where he gave everyone who wanted a chance to put their point of view on the table. At the end of that hearing he simply declared that his committee was supportive of it, and would report a favorable outcome to the senate because actually there was no subcommittee, it was the full senate committee.

*Q: During these hearings was there an opposition group coming from the islands saying, we don't want this?*

THOMSEN: Yes, there were. Some wanted full independence, some wanted commonwealth status. Especially in front of Seiberling they were allowed to make their points very clearly and fully. But they couldn't claim to represent any significant numbers

of people because the plebiscites had been held, and their points of views were simply taken note of. The new ambassador designate to the United Nations, Bill Richardson, was also very helpful during this process.

*Q: A congressman from New Mexico.*

THOMSEN: He was the congressman from New Mexico and we spent some time with him. I didn't realize it at the time, I was interested in why a congressman from New Mexico would take an interest in this. But he was very interested, and quickly grasped the issues, and was very supportive. I have personal friends who are members of congress, and I would go to my own friends and say, can you give me a lead into other members who might have a direct interest. We really canvassed congress. And, of course, Fred Zeder, who had his own contacts, we were very active on the Hill. Much more active than anyone I know of in the State Department has ever been for any issue that I've seen.

*Q: This is the advantage of having a team outside the State Department.*

THOMSEN: That's right. We were very much without the kinds of restrictions that other agencies had.

*Q: How about your home bureau?*

THOMSEN: EAP was always on board. The first DAS during my tenure was Bill Brown, and the first Assistant Secretary was Paul Wolfowitz. I would go over once a week at least and brief them both on where we stood on various issues, and make sure that they knew what we were doing. The Office of Pacific Affairs-Russ Serber was the office director at the time. He was very closely involved, and very much a supportive colleague in most of what we did. We spent a lot of time together. The Army colonel and the Navy commander with Defense and I with State, spent a lot of time making sure we kept our home bases fully informed. And the counselor's office was kept informed too, as well as the legal advisor's office. We tried to make sure that we weren't going to surprise anybody who was a friend.

*Q: When did the final vote take place? How did it play out?*

THOMSEN: In the spring of '86 we actually thought Palau would have a successful plebiscite in time. But in the spring of '86 there were the labor problems on Kwajalein. There were some nuclear issues, and I haven't touched on those yet. But Bikini, of course, and Eniwetok were the sites of a lot of U.S. nuclear testing during the '40s and '50s. And there were legal issues coming up with regard to United States responsibility for damages there. For a range of reasons we felt by the spring of '86 that we needed to terminate the Trust relationship and establish the compact. Each spring there was a Trusteeship council review and we went to that...

*Q: This is at the UN.*

THOMSEN: The UN Trusteeship Council, and we went to the UN in New York. I was there for two weeks. We devised the strategy with the agreement of the USUN, our mission to the United Nations, that we were going to announce our intention to terminate the compact at a certain date. At that time we thought it was going to be all three and it would be a final termination. But over the summer Palau fell apart. In late summer we decided we had to terminate the two Federated States and the Marshall Islands. So in early October, after having gone through the interagency fight with the legal advisors at the UN, with the presidential decision, we announced that as of October 21st for the Marshalls, and October 22nd, for the Federated States that they were no longer a Trust Territory. That they were now freely associated with the United States. Shortly thereafter we opened offices of the "United States Representative." We actually already had two officers, one in Kolonia, FSM and an officer in Majuro. They opened missions which were designated as the Office of the United States Representative. Mike Wygant and I were nominated to the Deputy Secretary's committee for transmittal to the White House to be the U.S. representatives. The Secretary's committee said that they needed additional candidates and other candidates were found. The Secretary's committee then validated our nominations, they went to the White House. The personnel committee there looked around for political nominees, such as orange grove owners in California, or whoever, and no one was found who wanted to be a political appointee to these states. So Mike's name and mine were sent to the Senate Foreign Relations committee, and we had our hearings. Mine was held in June '87, along with Nick Platt going to the Philippines, and a couple of others. Jesse Helms and Clairborne were in the chairs. They asked me a few benign questions. I was sworn in on the 8th floor of the Department on June 17, our 25th wedding anniversary and by July of '87 I was in place in Majuro as the United States representative.

*Q: This is before you go there, what were you getting? You'd been out there, hadn't you?*

THOMSEN: I'd been out there several times.

*Q: And also from the other members of your group. What were you thinking about whither these places? You'd done your duty, but what did you think about the future for these countries at that time?*

THOMSEN: Well, part of the intention was that over the 15 year period of the compacts we were putting a lot of money in, about $1,000 per capita annually, that we would help them achieve some form of economic sustainability. That was a part of what the 20 million dollar development funds were for, to help them. You'd asked me about the Department of Interior. For the whole time that we were present in Micronesia we did virtually nothing to create self-sustaining free enterprise-based economies. We did a wonderful job of creating a political system that was democratic. But we did virtually nothing to create an entrepreneurial class, or to create an understanding of the value of the private sector. It was virtually a total government state in Micronesia. And that's what we turned over to them when they became freely associated. The process during free

association was supposed to allow them with the funding that we provided, to bring themselves to some sort of economic sustainability. There was a certain amount of skepticism about that, but a certain hope that there were certain assets that they had they could maximize. We can get into that in the next session when I talk a little bit about being out there.

I must tell you that as of today, they're virtually in the same situation they were in when we ended the Trusteeship.

*Q: I spent a week on Ponape, and I must say that it's very sad. I mean one had the feeling that eventually they'll sort of end up right back where they started when the gas runs out, and the pickup trucks rust away.*

THOMSEN: Back to their sail boats, and spear fish.

*Q: And they'll probably survive and maybe the rest of us won't. But it doesn't look like it's going anywhere. Before going out, I mean this is a whole new business, and State now had the responsibility. What was the apparatus you had in Washington? And how was that set up? And then we'll talk about your time out there.*

THOMSEN: In '86 after the congress had approved the compact and supporting legislation, there was not really a call for an Interagency Group any longer. The organization of OMSN went to State and worked with the executive director in EAP and the Assistant Secretary and the Under Secretary for Management, the central management system, Ron Spiers. We transposed this Interagency office as a "super office" within EAP. By super office it was Jim Berg, who had been the GS-13, had gotten promoted to GS-15 by then, and we got him a super grade as office director.

*Q: This is a Civil Service...*

THOMSEN: A Civil Service position. The Army colonel became the military deputy director and there was a State deputy, a legal counsel, and two desk officers. We were provided a suite, by EAP/EX which included a small conference room. We moved over our fax. At that time, I think, the Operations Center, the Secretariat and IO had faxes. We essentially moved ourselves into a suite and began operating within State. By that time I was nominated to go out, so I detached from the office as a nominated chief of mission to be. And Jim Berg took over as the office director.

Just as a quick ending to that. After I went out, and when Bush was elected, Zeder was named to be the president of the Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC). Jim left State and became the executive vice president of the OPIC. The Navy commander resigned from the Navy and became the legal counsel. The Navy chief petty officer retired from the Navy, and became the office manager. And the secretary, who ultimately came back to the Department in IO, was the executive secretary to the president of OPIC. I was sitting out in the Marshall Islands by this time. But essentially the same team that had

gotten the compact for free association through the negotiations and Congressional approval was now running OPIC. They were having as much fun with OPIC as they had had with the negotiations, and they did some fabulous things. OPIC became involved in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and in Africa. They were trying to transform it into kind of a Merchant's Bank, into a real entrepreneurial exercise in getting good investments.

So, by the time I went to the Marshalls there was an office in the State Department that ran Freely Associated State Affairs. Today its been downgraded and subsumed within the Office of Pacific Island Affairs. There is still a military deputy, but it is now a part of the whole Pacific islands office, and it has kind of assumed its rightful level within the foreign affairs organization.

*Q: On the Marshall Islands from when to when?*

THOMSEN: July '87 to July '90.

*Q: When you went out there did you have an agenda of things that having dealt with this and other aspects, that you wanted to deal with during the time you there, before things sort of happened.*

THOMSEN: You know when an ambassador goes out he gets a letter of instruction from the Secretary. And what happens really, or it should happen, in my case I wrote that letter. It was essentially an agenda for the system to approve, and having approved it by getting appropriate clearance it was sent to me as an instruction. The instruction was to guarantee our access to Kwajalein, and to implement the compact. That is, to make the compact work. To have the compact establish a structure of relations which were attractive to the Marshallese, and which advanced all our broader national interests. Integral to success was the whole issue of Kwajalein, but the basic concern was to advance their capability of being sustainable economically.

Before I went out, and again this is something that ambassadors can do before they go out, I brought together a group of academicians and entrepreneurs under INR aegis. We had an all day session at AFSA. We mainly looked for ways in which we could enhance their economy. Marine resources became the key from our point of view. Tourism was a possibility. But we really saw the ocean as the source of their economic sustainability, and tuna being the primary resource. So what I tried to advance while I was out there was to develop a tuna industry, including obtaining American style trawlers, developing Majuro as a base for all American tuna vessels, and try to get some sort of tuna processing out there. We came very close. To answer your specific question, I did have an agenda. It was one that was carefully thought out, and vetted around government, and given to me as an instruction. I think in terms of process, I proceeded along those lines. In terms of goals, I kept Kwajalein accessible, and I did have some problems there, and we did certainly a valiant effort in tuna. I had some pretty specific goals.

*Q: We'll talk about that in a minute. Could you in the first place describe when you arrived the state of...in the first place the geography of what you had to deal with, your embassy, and the people of your area?*

THOMSEN: The Marshall Islands is an oceanographic area about the size of the United States east of the Mississippi. The total square miles in land is I think something less than one-third of Rhode Island. It's minuscule. It's 24 coral atolls (an atoll is a necklace, think of it as a pearl necklace with a couple of breaks in it to let water in and out) with populations ranging from 50 to 20,000. The capital being 20,000, and the smaller atoll population being maybe two or three clans. Kwajalein was the second most highly populated. But Kwajalein atoll is the largest in the world. I think probably 70 miles by 20 which gave a splash down area for intercontinental ballistic missiles of a great range. The Kwajalein military base was on two islands, U.S. Army, Kwajalein Atoll (USAKA). They had developed two islands and tied them together, and a third island in immediate proximity called Ebeye was the residence for 7,000 Marshallese, many of whom worked on Kwajalein on USAKA. USAKA was an important strategic installation for the United States. The relationship between the American military administration at USAKA and the civilian population next door was very important.

The problem I had discussed earlier was that the Marshallese still owned Kwajalein and were leasing it to us. And their leasing system was different from ours. The local chief had the authority to abrogate any lease he wanted to. That was done with some frequency among themselves, but to challenge United States government that you might break a lease was a totally situation. And that was the kind of problem I would deal with from time to time, was trying to keep a relationship going with the local leadership on Ebeye that would cause them not to carry out their various threats. Either a threat to occupy Kwajalein, which they had done once in the past, or to try in some way to bring operations to a halt. Obviously in the end we would use whatever force was needed to keep the base operating, but we obviously didn't want to have to do that, we wanted to be able to deal with them. So that kept me busy.

My relationship with the leadership in the Marshall Islands had been developed during the negotiations with congress. So we had a collegial relationship. I had developed their trust. That meant they sought my advice on issues, that they would listen to me, and I think during the three years I was there that didn't change. They often would make fairly substantial changes in policy based upon advice I would give them.

*Q: Was there a Department of Interior presence still there?*

THOMSEN: A Department of Interior presence had long gone. In 1979, the islanders formed their own constitution and became self-governing. I think the last of the permanent Interior presence left shortly thereafter. So by the time I got there it was seven or eight years since there had been any permanent local American presence. Interior would manage its relationship with them through that government, and by means of frequent visits from United States. There was a Trust Territory regime on Saipan that was

responsible to Interior, but the Marshalls were so far away that they rarely visited. They spent a lot more time in Palau and on Saipan itself, and in the FSM. Even while I was there previously during the Trust Territory period, there wasn't very much Interior activity with the Marshalls.

*Q: So you just arrived and it was already an operating system.*

THOMSEN: It was already an operating system, that's a good point. They had their president, they had their parliament, they had their ministries. They had been operating as a self-governing regime for about seven years when I got there. I wasn't helping them set up a government. The most important thing about my arrival was that I represented the State Department, and that the State Department was now who they wanted to talk to. They didn't have to talk through Interior anymore. That was really an attractive element of my arrival.

You had asked about facilities. While I was in Washington waiting for the nomination process to be completed, I designed the residence by fax with a local contractor. I placed it on the lagoon so that it looked like the prow of a ship sticking into the lagoon on concrete pillars. The same contractor had built a 13-room house out of re-enforced concrete on the highest point in the island. We sent a State Department team of communications and security officers through Micronesia in 1985 to see what was available in the way of residences and offices. This residence home was regarded as the finest structure in all of Micronesia from a State Department security point of view. After some bureaucratic complications we ended up in a beautiful facility. The residence has been enhanced as it always is. But it's still the same location with the same fabulous view. So we were able to prepare in advance.

*Q: Let's talk about two major things, and then we can move to other things too. Let's first talk about tuna. How did that work out and as a paradigm for the rest of trying to establish business.*

THOMSEN: Before I left Washington I had been meeting with a major agency within Commerce that has the ability to make loans to Americans to buy fishing vessels. They had agreed that for this purpose the citizen of one of the freely associated states would qualify. Within a week of my arrival a tuna boat came in from San Diego with a Portuguese-American captain, a real character. One of the first acts I performed after presenting credentials, was to board that tuna boat, introduce myself as a fellow Californian, and say welcome to Majuro. Because I was trying to attract these people. Well, we had a friendly conversation and he offered to host the president for dinner. I recruited the president and the chief secretary ( the prime minister), and we came back for dinner. The crew provided a great American style steak dinner. And before the evening was over they were talking seriously and in detail about creating a consortium in the Marshall Islands and have that captain be the manager. And that subsequently occurred. The Marshallese bought that boat, it was a beauty. And they subsequently bought a second boat with the same kind of financing. The sad story is that subsequently the price

of tuna went down 35% which destroyed the profit margin for them. So they had a very difficult time making their payments on the two boats. They finally sold the boats, not at a loss, but without any great profit. In the meantime though they'd learned a lot about modern tuna fishing and the tuna industry. At the same time they did start attracting tuna boats, and Majuro now is a major port for the American tuna fleet. First of all tuna is highly migratory so it may be in one part of the western Pacific one year and a totally different part the next year. But there is a lot of tuna in the vicinity of the Marshall Islands. So it is attractive for tuna boat owners, and tuna boats do fish in the Marshall Islands.

*Q: What's in it for the Marshallese?*

THOMSEN: The profits from selling provisions and fuel, and what is spent on shore by the tuna boat crews. There's no great additional advantage. Two tuna boat owners have almost constructed processing plants in Majuro, but different kinds of problems came up and prevented them from doing it. Among other things there's a terrible problem with water. Any low lying atoll has a terrible water storage problem. They have almost no permanent water storage. So they're dependent upon rain water, or desalinization, which is becoming more prevalent throughout the Pacific. And it would require a huge desalinization capability to provide the amount of water needed to do the traditional tuna processing. So at the end of the day the tuna effort has had mixed success. It still has potential. There's still a possibility that if the tuna price went back up, they could get back in the business.

*Q: We're talking strictly about the time you were there, '87 to '90. Japanese fishing has been known as sort of predatory. They go in and they have long lines, they sweep everything up, and they process things on their own ships. I know when I went to Truk, I just flew in there, the place was loaded with Japanese fishing boats which were just on their way, and I think they had planes that were flying sushi to Japanese restaurants in Japan. It struck me that this is not a very profitable thing. I mean, these people come in, they almost deplete your fishing resources, and sort of go on their way. Did you find in your area the Japanese fishing, and the methods were a problem?*

THOMSEN: Very much the same situation. I wouldn't say that they deplete. The "long-liners" which is what you're referring to, the long-liners go after the big eye and the bluefin tuna, the sushian quality tuna, which are very deep. But there aren't enough hooks in a long-liner to deplete a fishing population. What are really dangerous, and the Koreans began doing this, are some of the very fine netting that they stretch for miles. They have finally been convinced not to do that anymore. In fact the Japanese were doing it too.

The American purse seiners, these trawlers that reel out, are also pretty large scale catchers, and a fleet of ten American purse seiners in one area can take care of a large school of tuna. But the long-liners are not as dangerous as that. The problem with the Japanese is that they would try to avoid paying the various license fees that were

associated, and they were pretty much self contained, and did not put much into the economy when they came in.

After I left, the Marshallese signed agreements with the Mainland Chinese. When you say that, they did not go to Beijing and sign an agreement with the government. A fishing company out of one of the coastal ports in Mainland China signed a kind of commercial agreement. And they came in. Actually they've come in with up to 100 fishing vessels at a time, and there is more money now for the Marshallese with the Chinese.

*Q: But this is after your time?*

THOMSEN: This is after my time. I've just read about it. Actually, I saw them on a couple of trips out there.

*Q: Did you work at that time with the Marshallese, or had it already been done about a fishing zone? This, of course, was a big thing in Peru.*

THOMSEN: The Marshallese and the Federated States of Micronesia, and Palau, had claimed 200 mile economic zones. They claim the right to require licensing for anyone who fishes within that area. In fact all of the oceanic communities do. One of the big issues while I was out there was the Kiribati, which is the old Gilbert Islands just immediately south of the Marshall Islands, captured an American tuna boat and held it for ransom essentially. And the Americans, mainly from State and Commerce, who were working on the problem had to travel in and out through Majuro as the fastest way in. So I got familiar with that situation. And the Marshallese would capture Japanese unlicenced vessels and hold them for up to a hundred thousand dollars.

*Q: Did they have a patrol?*

THOMSEN: They had two patrol boats that we had left them. One of the things I managed to do was get them a few U.S. military surplus items, and they got a couple patrol boats through that. But the Australians gave them, brand new long range patrol boats which were much more sophisticated and much more up to date. But they were also very expensive to run. They gave them the boats but they didn't give them the wherewithal to operate them. They operated them unfrequently, but they have used them to stop unlicenced fishing boats within their economic zone. The FSM is much more aggressive than the Marshalls at this. I think the FSM has gotten a couple of million dollars out of the Japanese for a couple of the boats that they have held until ransomed.

*Q: How about Kwajalein during your time?*

THOMSEN: Kwajalein had a long and checkered history of community relations. The Defense Department has an office of community relations which has a little bit of money that it passes around wherever there are communities associated with American military bases. The same office was able to provide some funding for the Kwajalein area, and they

put a little bit of money in on community activities. the relationship would be the result of the attitude of the base commander, generally an Army Corps of Engineers colonel. I was very fortunate during my three years there, two of them were assigned and were both superb. They were both very, very willing to cooperate. First of all, all of their resources were available to me which was a real blessing. Second, they wanted me to be involved. And I would fly over for a monthly meeting, of a "community council," which was made up of five of the senior staff from the Army, a couple of the senior civilian leaders from the largest corporations, and then a dozen or so from the Marshallese community. This would be a time to vent concerns. And the Marshallese would say, you aren't providing enough jobs or we want more access to your community facilities. They could go across on barges, or on our taxis, they could go to the coffee shop without any restrictions. They wanted more access to that, and they wanted access to a few other things, and some of the things they couldn't get access to, but a few things they could. So those kinds of things were worked out. The Army started encouraging the people on Ebeye to open little curio shops on there. The American community was encouraged to go across and get to know Ebeye. Ebeye was once called in a National Geographic issue, "the slum of the Pacific." After a couple of years of a variety of efforts, including some money coming in from the Defense Department under community relations, Ebeye cleaned itself up. The Corps of Engineers went over and helped them develop some parks, built some schools. We even had a civic action engineering team that came in and spent a year next door. A lot of things happened that were very positive. In spite of which there was still labor unrest, and other problems. They all were held within reasonable bounds. Tennis was a big thing out there interestingly enough. The Kwajalein-American community used to send over a team to Majuro and they'd play a match and then have a feast of some kind. And then the Kwajalein team started coming over as a joint Ebeye-Kwajalein team. It was no longer the Americans on Kwajalein. It was the folks who were from Kwajalein, and there were some really good tennis players on Ebeye, so Kwajalein-Ebeye started beating Majuro. These were good things. In any case, by the time I left I think that the community relations aspect was quite strong.

There was another problem though. And that is that Army regulations, or I guess Defense Department regulations, give American companies a 15% advantage over any foreign company in bidding on a military construction project. The compact of Free Association explicitly says that Marshallese, or Micronesian companies, would be encouraged to be involved in construction with American firms. The Corps of Engineers would not recognize the compact, and continually allowed American construction companies to overbid Marshallese companies for construction on Kwajalein. And because one of the Micronesian contractors was a close friend of the president, this became a political issue.

By the time I had left, that Marshallese company was in the final bidding process for a multistory apartment building on Kwajalein worth several million dollars. I had asked legal experts from the Defense Department to have conversations with the Corps of Engineers people, to explain to them that this was legally the right way to go. But finally, that was one of the single successes, finally the Marshallese contractor, who happened to be an American citizen, but who was employing Marshallese subcontractors and

employees and they were good, was going to get the contract. This again marked a major change in the relationship. One of moving toward real equality and cooperation. I felt good about that, and I felt good when I left that pretty much I had met the objectives of my original agenda. Our relations were good, the compact was working. There were problems on the tuna side, although the tuna boats were still operating. But things were going in the right direction. It was my last assignment, so we came to the end of a career.

*Q: You can really look back on something, by God, you've done something. One issue, what was your impression of the government that you dealt with?*

THOMSEN: First of all, the president was the grandson of the great high chief who had managed the takeover by Germany at the end of the 19th century. Kabua, the president who just died, was the strong traditional, authoritarian leader. He was a bright guy; he'd been educated by the Navy. He was a teenager during the war. One evening on Kwajalein, he told the story of what happened when the United States came in. He helped load bombs on American planes. As soon as we came in, he was there trying to beat the Japanese. He was the father figure for the country. He was always elected by the largest number of votes of anyone. He was a very strong leader, very much revered and admired by the people. So he was able to act as a cohesive force.

Most of the ministers were young, in their late 20s and 30s. Self-governance was a whole new concept for them. They soon learned, and I don't how, maybe by rubbing shoulders with other governments, but they soon learned the elements of corruption.

And they're not very efficient. I guess I should also say that. It's an inefficient bureaucracy. They have a few strong leaders who get things done. The chief secretary, who I have mentioned a couple of times, was really a straight arrow. He was what he called "U.S. Navy trained." He had worked for the U.S. Navy for a long time, and he really was a capable administrator. And when he was the chief secretary, he could keep his finger on the ministers because they were all younger than he was. And when he finally retired, they all gave sighs of relief because they were now out from under his control.

On balance, the three years in Majuro were a perfect conclusion to a varied career. I was able to use the knowledge, skills, and experience acquired around the world. My wife, Judy, enjoyed the lifestyle and the many friends she made there. She started a small bible-study, which continues to this day- light years after our departure. My only regret is that we were not able to find the key to a viable economy for a tiny island community isolated in the middle of the Pacific.

*Q: Well, thank you very much.*

*End of interview*