



AUSTRALIAN COMMANDO ASSOCIATION VICTORIA

AUSTRALIAN SPECIAL WARFARE ORAL HISTORIES

Interview Number 11. Lieutenant Colonel Barry Petersen, MC MID, Australian Army Training Team (AATTV) and attached to the US central Intelligence Agency (CIA)

Commentator. Originally a National Serviceman, Barry Petersen commanded an infantry platoon on anti-terrorist operations in Malaya. In 1963, as a member of the AATTV, Petersen was sent to Dak Lak (Edit: other variants are "Dar Lac" and "Dac Lac") province in the southern central highlands of Vietnam. He was given the task of supporting and supervising the operations of paramilitary political teams of Montagnard's. The "Tiger Men" of this Truong Son force developed into a highly efficient fighting unit, respected by Allies, and feared by the Viet Cong. Petersen was accepted as one of their chieftains. His action in quelling a revolt between the Montagnard's as the original inhabitants and the new Vietnamese settlers earned the Military Cross. At the height of his influence, Petersen led an army of more than 1000 men that he had recruited, organised and trained. Despite his success, American and Vietnamese suspicions led to him being removed from the highlands in 1965. He returned, however, five years later as Officer Commanding Charlie Company, 2 Battalion, Royal Australian Regiment (2 RAR). He's talking with Chris Johns

Chris Johns (00:01:23): This afternoon it's my pleasure to introduce Colonel Barry Petersen. Colonel Petersen, through a long and prestigious military career, saw active service in Malaya, Borneo and twice in South Vietnam. We're here specifically today to talk about his experiences in working with mainly indigenous peoples in Vietnam and specifically the Montagnard's. Colonel Petersen, how did it come about that an Australian Army Captain found himself virtually on his own dealing with an indigenous group in South Vietnam?

Barry Petersen (00:02:07): Well, Chris in those days, this is when we put the first Australian Army Training Team Vietnam (AATTV) into Vietnam. Un be knowns to the Army and indeed to all but two members of that first team, there were those two members who were, had received Special Operations training, and who were loaned to the American Central Intelligence Agency. It just so happened that I was chosen to replace one of those first two back in 1963, August 63. The situation as it was in Vietnam then and I'll just draw your attention to the map - there was Saigon as it was, Viet Nam, North Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand. The situation as it was then in the highlands where I went, there's a great deal of animosity between the Vietnamese and the highland tribes. In the early days, the only people into the highlands were the French and they took some of the best Montagnard fertile land, and turned it into plantations - tea, coffee, rubber. But after the defeat of the French and the establishment of the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, it was decided to thin out the coastal areas of Vietnam of the pro-communist Vietnamese. They were overcrowded areas and what the government did was forcibly remove those people into the highlands of South Vietnam, taking the best of the Montagnard land and establishing what they called "land development centres". And all this did was antagonise the Montagnard, and also the Vietnamese who didn't want to leave their



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traditional villages, their families, their clans, and most importantly, an area on the coastline where rice was cultivated in paddy fields. And they had two, sometimes three rice crops a year, and here they were forced to live in the drier highlands where they had to grow what is called dry rice and only get one crop a year. They also had to live among the Moi as they called them, the savages, so you can imagine the animosity that existed.

Chris Johns - there was dissatisfaction from both sides, neither party was happy?

Barry Petersen - No, that's right, and of course the communists were exploiting this animosity. Now the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and its forerunner the OSS¹, had been involved in Vietnam from the beginning of the Second World War. We had the OSS in there supporting the Vietnamese resistance movement under Ho Chi Minh against the Japanese occupation forces and the Vichy French government administration and there were OSS advisors with Ho Chi Minh's forces, and they allowed Ho Chi Minh to believe that he could arrive at independence following the war, a successful conclusion of the war against the Japanese. (00:05:32). This didn't occur of course, but when Ho Chi Minh and his Viet Minh forces, then fought the French who returned to Vietnam, the Americans didn't call out their OSS people. They still had Americans in there as observers. And those people later became CIA agents. So right from those very early days, the CIA was involved in Vietnam. And when the country was partitioned, the CIA was heavily involved in North Vietnam and trying to persuade, indeed frighten people to move to the South and in turn the communists in the South were taking young people, young intelligent people, mainly recruiting in high schools and so on from not only among the Vietnamese, but from among the minority groups in the highlands and moving those people to the North. It's estimated that about a million, correction, a hundred thousand moved North and a million from the North to the South.

Barry Petersen (00:06:28): So, as you can imagine, a lot of preparation was done by both the communists and the CIA and of course at that time Ngo Dinh Diem was in America and the CIA put him up as their ideal man to govern South Vietnam. So right from those early days, you had, you could almost say, an American-installed government in South Vietnam. Now in the early 1960s, the CIA raised its own private army, American army, the American Special Forces. They decided to put those people into South Vietnam in 12-man teams to organise, to recruit, train, and organise the Montagnard tribes to establish defended hamlets, strategic hamlets. And they also organised, from the cream of those people, reaction Strike Forces to go to the aid of those hamlets. What they were doing in effect was producing the civil irregular defence force and producing what later became static targets, which couldn't effectively be defended.

Chris Johns (00:07:47): They were just another type of strong point, a type of blockhouse sort of mentality.

¹ Office of Strategic Services



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Barry Petersen - It was a blockhouse mentality, but of course, if you can imagine no tribal village is as small as a hundred meters by a hundred meters, and just to defend a village, a perfectly square village, a hundred meters square you're going to need a machine gun on each corner at least, two men on each machine gun multiplied by four, multiplied by three to give you three shifts, plus your gate. You're starting to look at a platoon just to man the gate and four machine guns - about 30, 32 men. And no village can afford to allocate 32 men or, worse still, more just to defend the village. They all have their role in harvesting, planting, hunting, and so on. So, these villages, these defended villages just became targets for the Viet Cong and the American Special Forces bases became defended bases generally established on a Montagnard village or around a Montagnard village and the Strike Force companies they (00:08:59) numbered about 350 to 400 men. Their role was, as I said, to react to a village under attack from the Communists. What of course the Communists did very often was to carry out a mock attack on a village and draw these Strike Forces into an ambush and what this resulted in was the Americans refused to move under darkness for fear of being ambushed and they refused to move in daylight without air support, air cover. So, they became ineffective Strike Force units. So, the province that I was put into became, they called it the ordnance depot for the Viet Cong because of the number of weapons falling into Viet Cong hands. Now that was the situation as it was when I was prepared for Vietnam.

Barry Petersen (00:09:58): I was selected for Vietnam because of my experience in Malaya, as it was called during the Emergency, the counter-insurgency against the communist terrorists there. I was selected for my role with the Americans and my training in Special Operations because of my experience with the minority groups in Malaya and back in 1963, I attended a Special Operations course, which was sponsored by the Australian Secret Intelligence Service and that prepared me for my work with the CIA. Of course, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service, being a sister intelligence service to the CIA. I believe that the CIA really thought that we were ASIS operatives when we worked, and this is why I really feel that we gained such entree into the CIA system. (00:11:04): Now I arrived in Vietnam to replace a person who had been on loan to the CIA and he and the other officer were located in Da Nang in the North. Unfortunately, the Americans treated them rather like mushrooms. They weren't given much of an insight as to what was really going on and this annoyed certainly the commander of the Training Team, then Colonel Serong, now Brigadier Serong retired, and either through him or on Serong's initiative, the Australian Secret Intelligence Service insisted on the Australian being given his own program in the field to run and I was to be the first and the trial one.

Chris Johns - Do you know why? Did they explain?

Barry Petersen - Well, Serong² said to me, right from the start as soon as I arrived, he said, "Look, I don't like the way the Americans have been treating the two officers we've had in here up in Da Nang. They haven't been given a chance to prove themselves. I have insisted", but of course Brigadier Serong always used to say "I have insisted". "I have insisted that we be allowed to have a man running his own

² Brigadier Ted Sarong



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program in the field and as a result, they've decided to put you up in Ban Me Thuot in the Highlands, in Dak Lak." (00:12:30). Now, I guess the Americans chose that because it was the one where really, I wouldn't have much effect on any of their programs and they decided to put me up there to monitor the programs they were supporting in the highlands, financially supporting - paramilitary political action programs, teams of men who were supposed to get around among the villages and disseminate propaganda, collect intelligence,

Chris Johns - the intelligence from propaganda teams

Barry Petersen - Hum, armed propaganda and intelligence teams is what they called them in those days. Now the minority groups in Vietnam, these areas show the various tribal groups. Now they're quite distinct from Vietnamese. They don't even look like Vietnamese. If anything, they look more like Malays or Filipinos. The Vietnamese first settled the coastline, but it was only when they started to resettle the highlands that they moved into these tribal areas. Now, Ban Me Thuot is here and the main tribal groups in my area, first of all, the Rade predominated. Then we had some Mnong in particular Mnong Gar and some Jarai, to the North.(00:13:49). Now I was introduced to my controller, a handler who was a CIA man, an operative. He'd already spent 12 years in Southeast Asia - a very, very experienced man who spoke Thai, Lao, French fluently and his name was Bryan Mills³. Now my briefing from Serong before handing me over to Brian Mills was - "You will be answerable to the CIA, not to the Australian army. However, whatever you tell them, I want you to tell me, I want to be kept informed of everything you do, for obvious reasons." I would assume that Serong would pass it back to our Australian Secret Intelligence Service.

When Bryan Mills took me over, he took me to meet Ban Me Thuot and his briefing to me was very simple. (00:14:52): Brian was a very easy going fellow and when I said to him, "Well, what do you want me to do up here?" He said, "Oh, find yourself a house, you can't stay in a Vietnamese hotel all the time, look for a good interpreter, try to pick up the local Montagnard dialect and get to know people". And that was simply my briefing. That was it, and he said here are 35,000 Piastres and in those days the equivalent of 350 American dollars, which was quite a bit in those days in the early sixties.

Then he said, "I'd like you to stay away from the American Advisors. I don't want you to be seen to be part of the American advisory effort. I want you to be quite distinct and operate on your own." And I was pleased he said that because it proved invaluable to start off on my own. (00:15:37) Now I then said to him, "Well, is there anything else?" He said, "Oh, well, I'd like you to find out how many of these men we are supposed to be supporting financially really exist." These were the armed propaganda and intelligence teams. There were a hundred under the control of the National Police and there were supposed to be 200 under control of the province chief. The province chief was very cool towards me. He could only speak French and Vietnamese, and he really didn't want to know me, all he wanted was the money to continue coming and the money was being channelled through a brother of the President, Ngo Dinh Can in Hue,

³ Bryan Mills, CIA Covert Action officer, see *The Tiger Man of Vietnam* by Frank Walker, page 49



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up in the north. Ngo Dinh Can was head of the Ministry of Information, the propaganda. He was in fact, the Minister for Propaganda for the Diem government.

(00:16:30): Now that was, it was because of that. The non-existence of people like the 200-man Force Populaire, supposedly under the province chief. I found nobody existed in that organisation. And it was because of that sort of thing going on in the country and the animosity among the Vietnamese between the Catholics and the Buddhists, created mainly by the repressive measures introduced by Diem's brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, an elder brother (Edit: open source notes he is a younger brother of Diem) and his wife Madame Nhu, plus of course, all of this graft and corruption all the way down, that the Americans had decided we would like a change of government. Now, one of their agents, in fact, a number of their agents, but one in particular had served in Vietnam from the days of the French Viet Minh war. His name was Lucien Conein and during the French Viet Minh war was a Major and he served as an observer alongside Vietnamese majors who were in the French army, fighting the Viet Minh, their own people, and among those majors were people like Major Don who later became (00:17:51): General Don, General Dinh, later Nguyen Khanh who later became Prime Minister. So, at this time leading up to the coup d'état which overthrew Ngo Dinh Diem, he had entree to these generals and indeed they had entree to the CIA and, through the CIA, the American government to test the water before they conducted a coup d'état. They had the nod of agreement from President Kennedy through his agents, through the CIA, and the Americans from the President through his Ambassador, to the CIA men on the ground knew of the coup d'etat beforehand and Lucien Conein was at the Headquarters established by the military junta at Than Son Nhut airport on the afternoon the coup commenced. What upset President Kennedy, as we know now, and a lot of Vietnamese is the following morning when Diem and his brother Nhu were captured, they were both assassinated.

(00:19:01): People hated Nhu but not Diem, so we were left in this turmoil, but what led to that was the CIA cut off all funds to everybody in their programs. As well, all funds to the Vietnamese Special Forces who were not actually operating in the field were cut off, because Ngo Dinh Diem was using a lot of those as his presidential bodyguard. Now this hurt a lot of people, it had a lot of people from Ngo Dinh Can right through all the ranks to the very poor people on the ground who suddenly found there was no income, and of course the only solution was get rid of the government and that's why the coup d'etat was so easy to engineer. Big Minh (Duong Van Minh) who headed the military junta.

Unfortunately, the Americans (Edit: presumably "Minh", not "the Americans") was inclined to consider negotiations with the Communists for a peaceful solution to the conflict. The Americans were aware of this and shortly afterwards when General Nguyen Khanh asked the Americans if they would support him, if he can successfully conduct a (Edit: another) coup d'etat, they said, yes. And the military junta only stayed in power for a very short period of three months. And then General Nguyen Khanh flew down from Second Corps and took over the reins of government and became Prime Minister, appointed himself Prime Minister. And the Americans continued giving him support for right up until early 65.



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Barry Petersen (00:20:38): So we had that hotchpotch situation and a politically unstable Vietnamese political situation. What I had to do during that period, the hundred men I found did exist, which are under police control. Their money was suddenly cut off and I couldn't legally pay them. But what I could do with the operational fund that Brian Mills left me was I could buy food and clothing, the necessities of life for them. So I became their provider much to the annoyance of the actual police officer who controlled them, a man called Truc. Truc was head of the secret police, the Sureté as they called themselves and he looked on these hundred men as his own private army, his own intelligence collection agency. They were Montagnard and there was one Vietnamese among them and he was an agent of the of the South Vietnamese police, but it transpired that he was also an agent of the communists. It turned out he was a double agent as I later found out.

Barry Petersen (00:21:47) Brian Mills said to me, "Well, they're going to be ineffective unless you take over control. So, take over control."

Chris Johns - this being in a situation where you could buy them food and the necessities of life. Was that a sort of foot in the door?

Barry Petersen - It was a foot in the door, but I began to realise that I was their real supporter. And I got to know them much to the annoyance of Truc, the Sûreté Chief⁴. When we approached the Vietnamese Director of National Police, he was a replacement director, he was a former Sûreté man himself. The previous director, with whom I got on very well, was imprisoned after the coup d'etat, but the new director I approached him and said, "I've been given instructions from Saigon to take the operational control of these hundred men." (00:22:48). He said, quite coolly, "I've received no such instructions." and so I passed this on to Brian Mills. So what Brian did was forge a letter from an official in the American Embassy, thanking the Vietnamese Director of National Police for their cooperation, full cooperation with me in the handover of those hundred men to me, and then flew to Ban Me Thuot and together, we went to the Director and Brian Mills said, "Well, look in Saigon they believe that you have handed them over. In fact, I have a letter of appreciation here from the American Embassy." This confused the Vietnamese because the Vietnamese chain of command and channel of communication sometimes was a bit haphazard and he managed to trick the Director of National Police, one of the four most powerful policemen in the country into believing that there was such an order somewhere in the pipeline.

Barry Petersen (00:23:50):The problem I faced of course is we had a brand new Province Chief because the former one tried to resist the military junta and was arrested at gunpoint. In fact, most of the leaders under the Diem regime were out of office and were in prison. Also, unfortunately the new Province Chief was not on talking terms with the Director of Police, they hated each other, and what I needed to do was to get these hundred men out from under police control because the police had moved

⁴ Sûreté (French lit. 'surety', but usually translated as "safety" or "security" is, in many French-speaking countries or regions, the organizational title of a civil police force, especially the detective branch thereof.



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them into a compound immediately behind the police headquarters. So. I started this work when I was still fully supporting them, before approval was given to reintroduce their salaries and persuaded the police that we should find a new location for them. And perhaps the semi-deserted village of Buon Ea Naw (phon.) about six kilometres out of Ban Me Thuot was the ideal place.

(00:24:49):It was one of the places used in earlier American Special Forces training programs and it was partially deserted. Now this I pointed out would allow them to have their own chickens and ducks and pigs and vegetable gardens, and so on. I convinced the police of this, but then I had to convince the province chief that he allow us to have the village. So, the province chief agreed and with his officials sent me out to do a stocktake of the village and made me sign for it. And then we move these people out. Then we tricked the police into handing over control to me. Now, this, as I subsequently found out, made Truc lose face. I knew at the time I'd upset him, but what I subsequently found out from some of his former agents was that for the following two years I was in the highlands he made several attempts to have me killed because I had made him lose face and something I shouldn't have done, but it was very hard not to. He was aggressive little man, a bit of a drunkard, as well.

Chris Johns - so, the importance of face to Asians ?

Barry Petersen - Yes, you must be very careful not to make them lose face. But I can't see any other way I could have gained control. It was one of these things I blissfully went on, unaware that Truc tried several times to murder me and indeed an attempt to poison me that I detected about halfway through my two years. I thought at the time, (it) was an attempt by the communists, but in fact in retrospect now with this recent information, I believe it was probably one of the Truc's attempts to poison me.

Chris Johns - With your pet ?

Barry Petersen (00:26:29). Yes, I had a pet leopard, and I don't think they thought that I was going to give the food to the pet leopard and they thought I was going to eat it myself. Now my controller Brian Mills, a very experienced man, very quiet man began to encourage me to expand. He said his first words when I took over control, "Expand to 350", and I said, "Come on I want to get these trained first" and he said, "Yes, but you have authority to go to the 350." Now in order to train these, I just didn't have the time to do it all myself. So, I borrowed a Warrant Officer from the Training Team. I asked Colonel Serong for one, an Australian Warrant Officer, and he concentrated on full-time training and minor tactics, weapon handling. And he, whilst doing that, he actually picked, at my instructions, the better young fellows, so that we could form own training cadre later and make it easier for us because we couldn't be committed ourselves, just two of us to try to train these people (00:27:45). The answer was to build up the nucleus of the training cadre and this we did. When Serong saw that I could do with the assistance of a Warrant Officer assistant, he later gave me one full time, Bevan Stokes. At this stage, in the recruiting of these 350, what I could see happening in the province, I could see these armed villages slowly but surely being disarmed by the Viet Cong. After each attack, I could see the Strike Force as being partially or very much immobilised by the threat of ambush if they reacted. And I could



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see our role, as Brian suggested, getting out and about among the villages as being partially effective, but providing no security to the Montagnard villages. And I do know that they wanted security, they needed security. They asked for it, they wanted me to lead these teams and their areas to protect their villages.

(00:28:54): And I couldn't do it. It was a very large province, as you can see, it was the largest province in Vietnam at the time, Dak Lak province compared with Phuoc Thuy province, where the whole Australian Task Force operated later. And here we were with that large basically uninhabited province in the Highlands. Just before I get off the training of these people, all of the equipment was provided by the CIA, from their warehouse in Saigon. They used to purchase the uniforms, for example, from Taiwan or Hong Kong - camouflage uniforms. The weapons were obsolescent American weapons, a range of them. And I had to be very careful in arming these fellows because the last thing I wanted was such a variety of weapons that logistics support with so many different calibres of ammunition was a real problem. So I had to restrict it to as few calibres as possible.

(00:29:56): The logistics support, no problem at all. The CIA was absolutely superb, and I give them full marks for it. Anything I wanted they gave me. Air support, everything was flown to the province. Nothing was brought up by road because of the insecurity of the situation, except larger trucks later. And the CIA used to use a Frenchman in Saigon. The French were very much in league with the communists during the war and this Frenchman owned a garage in Saigon, and he found it quite simple to take these old discarded American army signals trucks, they were signals vans. And he used to bring them from Saigon up an inland route near the Cambodian border up to Ban Me Thuot and he'd pay the Viet Cong checkpoints, and he'd arrived generally by night, sometimes with bullet holes in the vehicles, sometimes no, and he'd tell me what his fee was. (00:30:56). He'd hand me the Viet Cong receipts because the Viet Cong were quite meticulous. They would give receipts for the money they'd demand in toll en route, and I'd reimburse him out of my CIA funds. So, in other words, the CIA were paying the Viet Cong to enable us to get our vehicles to the Highlands.

Chris Johns - Would he have been aware of that or just acting for mercenary reasons ?

Barry Petersen - He was aware of that. The French were fairly clever, they had their own external intelligence service operating very, very effectively in Vietnam, even though they were no longer in any position of control. Their French intelligence service was quite widespread in Dak Lak province. For example, I found it warranted a resident, their equivalent of a Consul. So, I had really an unofficial French Consul in Ban Me Thuot and that Consul even had a Cultural Section representative who was a representative of the Cultural Section of the French Embassy in Saigon. Cultural Section was their cover for their own external espionage agency, and so they knew how the Americans were operating and they were prepared to cooperate in some things that kept them in the picture as to what was going on.



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(00:32:17): I dare say that this man from Saigon who was delivering these trucks was reporting back to their own Embassy, their intelligence organisation. The air support I had for air resupply both in bringing equipment up to me and bringing jeeps up to me and later parachuting in supplies to some of our forces in more remote areas was provided by the CIA-sponsored Air America and Vietnamese Air Transport. Supposedly two private companies, but in fact, controlled by the one operations officer in the CIA section in the American Embassy. They had a range of aircraft for any task. They were all unmarked and these aircraft did everything from supporting activities within Vietnam to activities within Cambodia and Laos, and to insertion of stay-behind groups to special operations teams into North Vietnam, selected Vietnamese night parachuting into North Vietnam.

(00:33:21). The aircraft were piloted mainly by non-Americans, third country nationals either Chinese from Taiwan or Turks or you name it, but very few Americans.

Chris Johns - That was their policy, wasn't it?

Barry Petersen - Yes, so that if an aircraft was shot down, the American government could deny ownership. They even at one stage in Vietnamese Air Transport used a pilot by the name of Nguyen Cao Ky, who later became Air Vice Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky the Prime Minister of Vietnam. He was actually a pilot working for Air America, one of the CIA's private airline. My relationship with the various groups in Vietnam in Dak Lak province in particular. I mentioned that right from the start, Brian always said to me, "Stay away from the American advisors. I don't want you to be seen to be part of them." (00:34:27). I had no option, but to have something to do with the Vietnamese advisors, advising the province chief, because the people and the police, because the people I, or the Vietnamese I had to deal with, I really also had to deal with their American advisors, but I merely kept the American advisors informed. I didn't ask them for permission to do anything. I dealt directly with the Vietnamese. I chose in taking over these 100 men from the police, I realised it was a very dangerous thing to do because I was a foreigner, a "third country national", as the Americans called it. And here I was going into Vietnam and taking over control of one of their minority groups without their having anything to do with it. Now that that's a very dangerous situation. I knew that if I wasn't careful, they would very quickly put in a Vietnamese team, as they had done with the American Special Forces to command and control and I would be relegated to being a supplier of funds and logistic support, an advisory role as the American Special Forces were.

(00:35:41). To avoid this, I went to the province chief and said, "Sir, I've been directed to take over operational control of these men. I would like you to be the Commander in Chief." He felt very important being Commander in Chief. (00:35:58). I also knew that he was a very busy man, the Province Chief. He was responsible for the security of the province, the military security of it. He was also responsible for the civil administration and he had his own provincial army, the Regional Forces and Popular Forces and he had his own Provincial Police Force. Province chiefs were really very busy men and a lot of responsibilities and so I knew he couldn't personally interfere. I always kept him informed on what we were doing and how we were operating and



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suggested areas we operate in. And I went through five different province chiefs during the period I was there and I never had any trouble with any of them except before a Montagnard revolt, but that's a little later. My relationships with the Training Team were nil, except Serong. I only dealt with Serong, everything I was doing there at the time was secret, my relationship with the Vietnamese, with the Montagnard. I went in by myself initially. Once I found a good interpreter, he started to take me around the villages and introduced me to people. And they could see me as a lone Australian. And I think that because I was a loner, they tended to get to know me a bit better. I had no one to turn to there, except Vietnamese and Montagnard, I had no fellow Australian initially until I got Bevan Stokes. And then when I did get Bevan Stokes, because part of our operations in the southern part of the province, the area occupied by the Mnong, an ethnically different group from the major tribal groups in Dak Lak province, I decided to put that Warrant Officer (00:37:38) down there to oversee the operations in Lac Tien (phon.) district with the Mnong. So really for a short period, when we were training those first 350 men and producing our own training cadre, that was only time Bevan Stokes and I were together.

(00:37:53):It was during that period we got all 350 men almost ready for operations and Bevan, almost ready to head off to Lac Tien, when a Montagnard revolt broke out. The animosity between the Vietnamese and the Montagnard had built up to such a stage that the Montagnard had had enough, they felt they were armed sufficiently by the American Special Forces and their earlier CIDG program to take on the Vietnamese administration and the (Montagnard's from the) American Special Forces camps closed in on Ban Me Thuot and besieged the town. I was involved in the revolt, to the extent that although my men were prepared take part in the revolt, they actually didn't carry out their role because there was actually a stuff up in the final signal for the attack on Ban Me Thuot. And because it was never fired, three mortar rounds sent to the heart of the town of Ban Me Thuot, my people didn't move into position and take over the town airstrip and the radar station and a radio relay station. And as a result, the Vietnamese and Americans still had contact with the outside world and still had a means of flying in reinforcements, which the Vietnamese did the following day.

(00:39:15). It was the afternoon of that revolt. I evacuated Bevan Stokes and his interpreter I Tin (phon) to Saigon with news of the impending revolt. And I wanted the news to get to the CIA through Colonel Serong, and I didn't want the Vietnamese to know what I knew, but that afternoon, the Vietnamese director of police and the Province Chief each paid me a visit in turn and made it very clear to me. They first questioned me on what I knew about a demonstration, a Montagnard demonstration, which was to take place the following day. Their intelligence sources obviously picked something up and then they made it very clear to me that if anything was to happen or if anything did happen, I would be held personally responsible. And I would be expected to bring my men in to help the Vietnamese in the city.

(00:40:10). How long had you been there at the time of the revolt?



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(00:40:17). About 12 months, would you believe, at that stage? That's how long it took me to get going. So it just doesn't happen overnight. And this is why I can understand why the American Special Forces in the early stage spending only six months there and then later spending only 12 months there just couldn't win the confidence of the Montagnard.

Chris Johns (00:40:36). Yeah. Even at that stage, you still had where you had developed considerable standing with the Montagnard. We'll touched later on your standing when you left, but still that they came to you and expected the ...

Barry Petersen (00:40:58). Not with the revolt. They didn't tell me about the revolt. I had to pick that up through the activities of our own men. We suspected something on the Saturday morning, the revolt was to break out at two o'clock on the Sunday morning. And the forces were closing in, on Ban Me Thuot under cover of darkness on the Saturday night. We knew on the Saturday morning that something was afoot because in our own base at Buon Ea Nau, our own training base, we found them digging trenches and issuing ammunition. And I knew something was afoot.

Chris Johns (00:41:33). A bit of a give away?

Barry Petersen (00:41:35). Actually Jut (phon.) my young interpreter who's still alive and in America now, he told me that there was to be an attack by the Viet Cong on the city. He must have been sworn to secrecy at the time, but he was trying to give me warning that something was going to happen, but he wasn't allowed to say it was to be a Montagnard revolt. So, I hadn't won the confidence of the Montagnard sufficiently for them to bring me into their plans. But once we realised what was going to happen, that day we happened to be taking two aircraft loads of weapons and ammunition, and I allowed them to arrive in Ban Me Thuot and allow them to be taken to Buon Ea Nau to our base and then evacuated Bevan, I Tin and the Filipino radio communications instructor (00:42:24) I was using to train our communications operators in CW, Morse, for his own safety. So, we did that and we rigged up a dummy ID card for Tin as a Filipino to make him it look like a Filipino, because I didn't know how widespread the arrest of the Montagnard would be the following day. Anyhow, the following morning, when the Vietnamese realised that the town was under siege, all of these groups had closed in. What the various dissident (Montagnard's from the) Special Forces bases had done. The Montagnard had disarmed the Americans and held them as hostage back in the bases and they had in a couple of instances executed the 12-man Vietnamese team by firing squad or cutting their throats.

Chris Johns - The Americans were American Special Forces?

Barry Petersen - They were American Special Forces, and they were disarmed and held as hostage. At no stage were Bev and I ever disarmed, we had won the confidence of our men to that extent. Late that afternoon after the threats by the province chief and the police director, and you might recall that even though the province chief was proud of being the commander in chief, that afternoon, he ceased to be. He insisted that they were my men, not his men. So, I knew that the situation was very dicey for me. I went out to Buon Ea Nau again, and I found that a meeting



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was in progress, of the rebel leaders. And I persuaded the senior man present, a man held in high esteem, he had been imprisoned by the Diem government for his autonomous aspirations and for his part in an earlier, aborted revolt back in 58 and he was therefore martyred as a result of that.

(00:44:20). I advised him not to take part because it would lead to widespread arrests. Anyhow as it so happened, the Vietnamese flew in an airborne regiment the following morning on a town airstrip, which my fellows were supposed to secure and prevent. And the commander of that regiment became province chief. The earlier province chief was dismissed summarily. And I was asked by the corps commander who flew down from Hue, General Co (phon), who later became deputy Prime Minister to bring in the rebel leaders to negotiate with him. That was a feat in itself because they thought they were being taken to the lion's den. But as it transpired, we eventually persuaded them. And the revolt was bought to a fairly successful conclusion except for the interference by one American senior officer who tried to take control of one of the dissident groups and refused to allow the leaders who'd spoken to General Co the previous night to talk to them and brief them on the preparedness of General Co to grant some of their demands. So that led to an official surrender under the advice of this American colonel about a week or so later, the initial surrender of this particular group, all the other groups were prepared to go back to their base and wait and see, but this group was persuaded to surrender, which was the loss of face to the Montagnard, and an American had persuaded them to lose that face and they lost confidence in the Americans and in particular, Colonel Freund (phon.).

(00:46:09): The effect of this. After the revolt was over, I decided that Buon Ea Nau was too close to a Ban Me Thuot for comfort. I moved Bevan Stokes down to Lac Tien with his Mhong Gar section, about a 25 to 30% of the force we had, to establish a camp and to build an airstrip, which he did. I located another base for the main operational base. And Buon Ea Nau was relegated to being a base for dependants and for a school for the kids of our men. We established a hospital there where we could keep our wounded because we could give them better treatment than they would receive in the one and only Vietnamese hospital in the province. We only had one doctor, one Vietnamese doctor in the province. Which made it pretty difficult. Anyhow, I established my main base about 15 to 17 kilometres East of Ban Me Thuot, out of artillery range for the Vietnamese, because the revolt caused the Vietnamese to become very trigger happy. They weren't prepared to stand any more nonsense from the Montagnard.

Indeed General Co wanted to napalm the Buon Xa Pha (phon.) base. And the only thing that stopped him was the presence of this American Colonel in the base. The American Colonel who insisted that he be held as hostage and the other Americans could be released. And he tried to become a hero. He made himself a hero, but that saved Buon Xa Pha from being bombed and napalmed by the Vietnamese, but they weren't going to put up with another revolt and that's why I moved our main operational base out to what became Dam San (phon) camp later out of the artillery range. It was about that time I decided that the best way of recruiting further men, because all this time, Brian Mills would say to me, recruit more men recruit more men.



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(00:48:05): I already, we already had a training cadre established of Montagnard and we were training our own radio communications operators. So, I decided to recruit from areas under Viet Cong control, recruit young men from each village. I find a complex of four or eight villages. For some reason, I can't really remember why, I decided on eight-man, highly mobile teams on foot, of course, as a sort of mobile defence, rather than a static defence. And I'd look at an area and decide which four villages or which eight villages we'd use as an area. And I'd recruit proportionally equal number of men from those villages and their task was to collect intelligence on their visits to their own village. Because you had a team in a complex of four villages, you had a team comprising, two men from that village, if they visited a village, who would immediately pick up information from their own clansmen. As well, their role was to ambush by night approaches to the villages. They were told not to stay in the villages and certainly not to stay in any one place, two nights running. Now, I knew that they would go and stay in the villages overnight, but I had those directions and by making the composition of a team representatives from each of the villages, it would make them move around.

(00:49:45): I found in an area where you had four villages, you might get away with something like five or six teams. So you're looking at about 40 or 48 men as distinct from maybe 30 to 100 men to defend one village. And the enemy never, ever knew where they were going to be at any one time. It made the Vietcong realise that if they wanted to go to a village in that particular area, they stood the chance of running into one of our ambushes. Or if they did get to a village, a little buffalo boy would slip out, find one of our teams, tell them about the Vietcong presence, radio message to the other teams and they would close in and ambush the Viet Cong as they were leaving. Of course, this made the Viet Cong carry out reprisals on the villagers. But all this did was even more turn the villages against the Viet Cong. It's a hard way of fighting a war because you're having people maimed or killed, but they're going to be killed one way or another, whether they're defending their own village or being injured by reprisals. And of course, what we did was made the areas insecure for these roving Viet Cong units, which were predominantly Vietnamese. What the Vietnamese, what the Viet Cong were doing is they were moving Viet Cong units from the coastal areas of Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Quang Ngai and Quang Nam, the very areas that these resettled Vietnamese came from, the ones who were settled in the land development centres in the highlands. They were moving units from that area up to the Highlands. And there you had, virtually a nephew seeing uncle again, after all these years, and the Vietnamese land development centres were becoming fortified, Viet Cong hamlets. and the enemy were moving even 82 millimetre mortars into there. And they were digging tunnels systems and bunkers and telling the people that the government forces were going to attack them and whether the people liked it or not, they'd dig the trenches and tunnels and bunkers. And the Viet Cong were operating from those secure bases, which the land development centres were becoming for them, out attacking the surrounding Montagnard villages. Now, the province chief tried to retaliate by sending his regional forces in to attack villages, but they were very, very much a conventional army and they had their artillery and their mortars and their road-bound vehicles, and they would invariably be mined or ambushed on the way.



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(00:52:23): So the province chief at that time, this ex-airborne regimental commander said to me, we're on a well, first name basis, one side, and he'd call me Pete and I'd call him, sir. So, he said, "What about it Pete? Would you like to have a go?" Now, this was really verboten, Montagnard attacking Vietnamese, but he gave the green light and we did it. What I was able to do in attacking these land development centres was our mobile eight-man teams in that area. I could close in at a certain time by radio contact as blocking forces around three sides of the village and with an assault force of maybe 60, 80 men who'd just finished their training, approached the village on foot through the hills and mountains, and then assault the village. And if we didn't kill the Viet Cong in the village, we'd certainly get them as they were trying to escape.

(00:53:21): The instructions from the province chief were to round up all of the young men within military age. That meant everyone from 15 to about 40 or 45, because these people are pretty old when they were about 40, 45. So really we were becoming pretty effective in securing that area, and we were becoming effective as a strike element if we needed to be used in that role, but I didn't want them to be used in that role except on specific directions of the province chief and only in exceptional cases, but it became fairly common. We attacked a number of communist-occupied land development centres.

Chris Johns (00:54:03). I always found it an interesting point and sort of reading your experiences with the Montagnard's that we were able to really beat the Viet Cong at their own game. The Viet Cong more or less had written part of the book on guerrilla warfare and revolutionary guerrilla warfare, but yet in this situation, it was used effectively against them and they didn't seem to be able to counter it in that situation.

Barry Petersen (00:54:28). What we had done is we'd turned the tables on them. We were the ones who had the people's army and not they any longer and to make sure their forces were secure in moving through our areas they would increase the size of their forces. We had little eight-man teams, which would hit, run, hit, run, and do a little bit of damage here a little bit there, and really caused problems for the Viet Cong and the Viet Cong countered this by increasing the size of the units to 30, then later 150, and on one occasion about 300, a battalion. And they're pretty easy to pinpoint. And the only guys in a force that size are the ones up front and the ones down the back, the ones in the middle are switched off, like lots of soldiers.

(00:55:17): If you hit from a flank with eight men, you can do a lot of damage to their command structure and buzz off before they can react. On one occasion, one of my eight-man teams actually accidentally stumbled across a linear ambush being put in by the Viet Cong. As we found out later from the positions they were digging, there were about a hundred odd of them, and they were ambushing a district headquarters, which was being withdrawn from an insecure area of the province back into a more secure area. This was a new district which had been established in a remote part of the province and they had to come back through swamps. They had to use elephants to drag the vehicles through the swamps, and they are pretty low, lumbering convoy of vehicles and officials and their protective elements and so on.



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(00:56:14): This hundred-man ambush set by the Viet Cong were going to hit them as they passed. And one of our patrolling eight-man teams suddenly came across one end of this and, little realising there were a hundred men involved, decided to assault these few Viet Cong. And as they started to assault through it, they found it was never ending. They kept going and going and going. And surprisingly, they ended up getting through unscathed and the Viet Cong gave up the ambush site. And on later examination, we found a great deal of blood. Now, I don't know whether or not any were killed, but certainly quite a number were wounded at least. So that was a sort of thing our fellows did. Sometimes they would take on more than they could chew. They'd bite off more than they could chew. For example, there was a Viet Cong battalion position and there was a machine gun position in part of that. And one of my eight-man teams decided they were going to capture themselves this machine gun. Well, there were quite a number of wounded in that and they learned their lesson. They were always told, never to take on anything big like that. The hit run, harrass and so on. That was our method of operation. And it gained recognition from the Vietnamese government, national recognition, and from the American Ambassador later. But I'll cover that fairly shortly. About halfway through my two years there, Brian Mills suddenly left the scene, no explanation was given to me. I've never been able to trace him to this day and he was replaced by a fairly flamboyant American called Stu Methven⁵.

(00:58:04): I got on very well with Stu initially, but then Stu on one of his visits to the highlands said to me, "Now look Barry, I want you to start some counter terror teams." And I said, "Well, what are they?" And he said, "Well, you know how the Viet Cong get around and they knock off village chiefs and their families and government agents and so on and they put their heads on poles or they cut off the breasts of their wives or cut their stomachs open. We want these teams to do the same thing to Viet Cong infrastructure and Viet Cong supervisors." I said, "No way." I said, "What you're doing is you're creating professional assassins." I said, "Look, if, if the Province Chief fingers somebody and wants him knocked off, I'm sure we can find the men to do it." And in fact, on occasions, we did hit pro Viet Cong people as a warning, not with the intention of killing them, but of frightening hell out of them (00:59:03) and making them realise that we knew what they were up to. And if they carried on, they would be killed. But Stu persisted with this, raising these counter-terror teams and these counter-terror teams were the forerunner of the Phoenix program, the infamous Phoenix program, which led to the execution of 50,000 Vietnamese many of whom were innocent people, victims of old family feuds or grudges or whatever. Now that's when my relationship with the CIA began to sour, there was a new head of the Covert Action Branch of the CIA in Saigon. He was a fellow called Tom Donahue, and Tom was a type of fellow who didn't like getting his hands dirty and he was a smooth, but callous operator. Stu could be smooth and callous as well, but generally he was rough and callous. They made it very clear to me that I had to conform, but I refused and what I did was I spoke to the Province Chief about it and said, "Look, this is what we're creating. Do you want these counter-terror teams in the province?" and I convinced him that we really didn't need them, and he backed me to the hilt, much to the annoyance of Stu Methven and

⁵ A CIA Covert Action officer who wrote of his Vietnam experiences in "Laughter in the Shadows: A CIA Memoir"



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his immediate boss Tom Donahue. Having the Vietnamese on side, they really couldn't insist any longer.

Now, before I go on with further developments there, one of the aims I had in mind for all these Montagnard, these roving Montagnard I had was the day might come if this country ever fell to the communists and one of their roles, and they knew it, was to cache ammunition and weapons and in the event of that sort of thing happening, to do just that, to capture as many weapons and equipment and as much equipment as possible from the Vietnamese and form a resistance movement. And 10 years later, that's exactly what they did as the Vietnamese were fleeing the highlands. Our people, the Montagnard were attacking them and retrieving weapons and radios and ammunition (01:01:16) and they managed to form, after the communist takeover, a Resistance Movement totalling 20,000. Initially very effective, but not so these days.

Getting back to the souring of my relationship with the CIA, which led up to my ultimate removal, I was called to Saigon on one particular day and when I arrived of course I made it a double trip. I used to go down every month or six weeks to replenish my operational funds and put in my indents for more ammunition, equipment and so on and put in my report and also to brief the Commander of the Training Team, who later became Brigadier Jackson. I was reporting direct to Brigadier Jackson and he later became the Commander of the Australian forces and there was a new commander of the Training Team as such, but I still reported to Jackson.

(01:02:17) Now on this particular occasion, I tied this visit to Saigon in with one of my money and equipment replenishment trips and it was to prepare a briefing for the American Ambassador and I said, "Well, will I give the briefing?" and Stu Methven said to me, "No, we're going to give it." I arrived there on a Thursday morning and I didn't like going to Saigon. I wanted to stay in the highlands, and I booked my aircraft with Air America to fly back on the Friday morning. I sat down in the American Embassy and the Covert Action branch, part of the CIA, which was in the American Embassy building. That was the earlier one before the one that they later built and finally evacuated in 1975. I prepared the brief as Jim Methven and he briefed the Ambassador who was then General Maxwell Taylor that night on a Thursday night.

(01:03:13): I later found out that Maxwell Taylor pinned them down. The briefing was essentially about the programs sponsored by the Covert Action Branch of the CIA in the highlands of Vietnam. And mine, apart from the school they had up in Pleiku, was the only active program in the highlands. And at this stage, it numbered close on a thousand and I'd been given approval to go to 1200 and we were rapidly doing that. And he, after intense questioning of Stu Methven, he finally gained the admission that it was a Captain Barry Petersen who was running this program of theirs. Well, who is this Barry Petersen ? Finally he found out it was an Australian. Now I returned of course to Ban Me Thuot the following morning to find the American advisers saying the American Ambassador is coming up for a personal briefing from you tomorrow morning, Saturday morning. (01:04:14). Well, that day the Americans on board a Hercules flew in military police vehicles and military police and the Vietnamese flew in military police and the place was swarming with police, civil and military police, to



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protect the Ambassador. They even flew in a car for their Ambassador with his pennant.

So that Ambassador Taylor could ride from the airport from his comfortable Air America aircraft in style to the American advisory compound, which they considered the most secure place for the briefing. Now I briefed the Ambassador Taylor essentially on our programs and he slapped his thigh and said, "Well, this is what should be happening." As he turned to the Vietnamese generals around him and others around him, "This is what should be happening throughout the whole country." I didn't agree, but I didn't say that because you see, I had tailored our program to what our problem was in the highlands, not what I thought was a national solution

Chris Johns - To a distinctive social group?

Barry Petersen - That's right. You see that same sort of program wouldn't have worked among some Vietnamese or amongst most Vietnamese, but the Americans always, if they find a program working somewhere, they always try to implement it throughout the nation. It's good medicine here, so it must be good medicine everywhere. It's very much like their own foreign policy. The American way of life is best and so it must be the best for everyone else. Anyhow, he then, as I found out from one of his aides later, Stu Methven incidentally flew up to sit in on this briefing to make sure, I think he was rather put out that the Ambassador wanted a personal briefing from me, after having received a briefing from him the previous two nights previously.

(01:06:01) So he sat in the background and as they were walking out across the veranda of the bungalow, Ambassador Taylor turned to him and said, "Don't we have an American capable of running this sort of program?" In other words, why do we have to use Australia to do this? It's an American supported program, but we have an Australian running it. Well, this made the Covert Action Branch resolve to replace me. At this stage, the end of my second year was approaching and I'd already got Tom Donahue and Stu Methven offside because not only did I refuse to create counter-terror teams, I had also refused to adopt some of their other programs, which I felt were inapplicable to our area.

(01:06:53) The first I knew of their plans to get rid of me, and I suspected this, was when they said, "We'd like to see you down in Saigon." And Stu had said to me, "You know you've spent a long time in the highlands here, two years as a field officer is long enough for anyone." and I thought "Ah ha, something's going on." They had already once sent a young man up to me, a young civilian from the CIA, to spend a few weeks with me and, in retrospect, I think that might've been their first effort to groom a replacement, but he really upset the Province Chief, insulting the Province Chief to his face and I had to remove him from the province with a bad report and this again annoyed Stu and Tom Donahue for reporting poorly on one of their career officers. Anyhow at this stage, the CIA was directly liaising with the Montagnard rebel movement, which after the uprising had moved across into Cambodia and created the government-in-exile, the FULRO (Edit: "Front unifie de lutte des races opprimees" -



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United Struggle Front of the Oppressed Races) movement and that later became the nucleus of the stay-behind organisation because my people defected to that after I left.

(01:08:18) Anyhow just as I was to go to Saigon to hear this news I'd expected, emissaries from this rebel movement in Cambodia suddenly appeared back in Dak Lak province, and so did three of their battalions. They were reported by intelligence sources as three Viet Cong battalions. But in fact, they were three battalions of rebels, Montagnard rebels from the FULRO movement. And these messengers from them came in to see me and said, "Look, we have messages from Y Bham Enuol." Now Y Bham Enuol was a distinguished old gentleman I told to stay out of things during the Montagnard revolt. And during the revolt, he was abducted. And then he was taken into Cambodia, and he was used as a figurehead. I tried to get him back by using his brother, but they poisoned his brother before I could undertake the operation. And as it turned out, my next move was to try somebody else. But what they did was they abducted Y Bham's family and took them to Cambodia. The next move was to assassinate Y Bham after I could establish a new figurehead for the Montagnard in Dak Lak province, but that fortunately I never had to do. But anyhow the Montagnard wanted to fight the Viet Cong. They'd realised that the Viet Cong were harming their villages and they wanted these three rebel battalions to come under my command. Well, that was the kiss of death. So I managed to talk them into speaking to the senior Vietnamese in the province and arranged a meeting. And, oh, we had an unsuccessful meeting, which was followed by a more successful one and they later came under control of a Vietnamese.

(01:09:59) But then I had to go to Saigon to receive my news and they decided to, they first told me, the Americans first told me that I'd had long enough in the province and that I needed a good break. And I said, no. Then they said, "But the Vietnamese want you out." Now, this had never been indicated to me by the Vietnamese and they said American sources had informed them of this. I went with Brigadier Jackson to the Australian Ambassador who advised us not to create waves as best to avoid souring relations between Australians and Americans in general, and to withdraw. So I agreed to leave the highlands and later Vietnam. The Americans tried to put in a civilian and that was unsuccessful, and the Vietnamese wouldn't have him and wouldn't allow him to stay in the province. And my force, after I left, was taken over by the Vietnamese and then began to defect to the FULRO movement. And one of my young offshoots in the training cadre later became a Brigadier General with the Resistance Movement, the 20,000-man resistance movement after the fall of Vietnam to the communists. So basically, that's the story. Fairly lengthy, I'm sorry, Chris.

Chris Johns (01:11:24). That's fine. I just have two or three questions. How is it possible for a foreigner to move in, work his way into another social group, to the position where he's revered, he can control and he can command another social group of people in that situation?

Barry Petersen (01:11:50). There are a number of ways. First of all I think I was very lucky in being sent up among these tribal people by myself initially, because anyone who appears among foreigners by himself receives subconscious, shall we say,



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sympathy, pity, support. People subconsciously feel a bit sorry for him and think that he's a little lonely and they try to keep him company and look after him. If you go in in pairs, they seem to think, and this happens in our Australian society if we have foreigners coming to our military schools, military establishments, we tend to say, "Oh these two Malays are company for each other." So, we leave them to keep each other company, but if they're on their own, we tend to take them under our wing and look after them. I was very lucky in going in initially by myself and then Bevan Stokes, although he was with me for a while, he then went off on his own down to Lak Tien district and his replacement replaced him in Lak Tien district and so it happened with his replacement. And we were both developed a rapport with the Montagnard that way. In addition, I didn't go in there for a specific period. You see the American Special Forces would go in. And, as we all know, they used to have these calendars of a nude female broken up into 365 segments and that would mark off their year and they'd colour in a section at the end of each day with the obvious section being the last to be coloured in. And that was how they kept track of when they could go home. Now, they had their Montagnard interpreters and would invite them into their own little compound to have a Budweiser or a Schlitz beer with them.

(01:13:32). They'd see them marking off these days. In other words, they'd see that these Americans were looking forward to the day that they'd be returning to America. In my case, my blokes would say to me, particularly after the first year passed, "When you going home?" And I'd say, "I don't know." I just seemed to stay on and on and on like a bad smell and then later I found that when we were establishing the major operational base 15 kilometres East of Ban Me Thuot, one of my Montagnard officers referred to it as Dam San base. I said, Dam San, what does Dam San mean? and he said, "Oh, that's your name, sir. We named it after you." And I said, "Me, Dam San?" and he said, "Oh, that's the name of one of our legendary warriors."

(01:14:20) He said in legend, he was invincible in battle. Nobody could beat him. But one day he tried to spear the sun and he ran to the top of this very big rock. It was a big rocky outcrop near a Montagnard village, a village called Buon Yang Ray (phon.), he ran to the top of the rock and threw his spear and was struck dead by the sun. And I thought to myself, well, I wonder if this has a message in it for me. And it probably did because I really took on the CIA and they got rid of me. But I think it was because I find it very easy to mix with Asians and I find when you smile at an Asian, they'll instantly respond and smile back. Where you smile at a Caucasian, they look at you suspiciously and say, what does he want? What's he after? We're suspicious by nature. Asians aren't. You smile and they'll warm to you straight away, they'll respond to you and they're very easy to get on with. Once you get to know their more childlike sense of humour and don't tell jokes which are too subtle for them, they will accept you and of course you accept their way of life, you eat their food, you live with them.

Chris Johns (01:15:35). Do you think that a person who is able to be successful in that situation, do you think that they're born or made?



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Barry Petersen (01:15:46). I think a lot of them are born and they're not necessarily very stable people. They're generally very sensitive people because, sensitive in that they can sense when they're likely to upset the other person and they'll skirt it. They're very conscious of the consequences of their actions and what they say. You get people like Lawrence of Arabia. In fact, the Americans used to call me Lawrence of the Highlands, old Stu Methven before the situation soured used to say, "Ah, here's Laurence of the Highlands." I think I'm fairly sensitive to other people and I can detect when I'm hurting your other people. Sometimes I'll do it deliberately, if there's a need to do it, but with Asians I understand their situation and I think it's, they can sense that I'm sensitive and I try to be modest with them. I try to be polite, I respect their customs, and I think you've got to be prepared to do that. And the average gung-ho soldier doesn't worry about that sort of thing. And as a result, he's a good stamp of a man, but he just doesn't go over with minority groups.

Chris Johns (01:17:12). So to a certain extent he's trained against it from the start. On a completely different line. Politically you were in a very difficult situation. You were working with a minority group within another social group that the Australian Defence Force was seen to be supporting. How difficult did you find that with a group within a group?

Barry Petersen (01:17:41). This is working with the Montagnard minority among the Vietnamese majority. Well, I knew it was a very tenuous situation I was in as a foreigner. That's why I established this relationship with the province chief and his staff. And I really did, I really was very open and honest with the Vietnamese in most things I did, except of course, when I was reporting on them and their conversations or eavesdropping on them, you know bugging them and so on. Then I had to be very circumspect. But that's the only way I could keep track of some of the very lengthy conversations with them. And that's the only reason I was doing it. I wasn't trying to be nasty. But I was picking up intelligence from them and reporting that and that to record it accurately I'd bug it. So I wouldn't be frank with them in things like that, but I was very frank with them in our operations and in our problems. And I think they respected me because of that.

Chris Johns (01:18:47). So you steered clear of intrigue and that sort of thing, where possible?

Barry Petersen (01:18:50). No, I was involved in intrigue whether I liked it or not. We had, during the Montagnard revolt, for example, we had General Lu Lan who later became a friend of mine. He later became a divisional commander, but at the time of the revolt, he was the Deputy Corps Commander under General Co. And he was at the meeting in the palace, in the government palace in Ban Me Thuot that night with the rebel leaders. And I was told after I published "Tiger Men", after "Tiger Men" was published, by one of his former aides that he actually said to General Co that night, "I believe that Captain Petersen is a CIA agent behind the revolt, and I think he should be killed". And General Co didn't object.



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(01:19:44). So obviously orders were out to arrest Jut and myself and the plan was evidently to take us to a remote spot and shoot us and shoot up the vehicle and make it look as if we'd accidentally run into a Montagnard rebel ambush. But the Vietnamese soldiers who were given instructions to arrest us arrested the wrong people. They arrested Bevan Stokes and I Tin within an hour of their returning from Saigon. And they realised their mistake. They couldn't very well execute them. The American Senior Advisor negotiated for their release. I was unaware of all this at the time because I wasn't in Ban Me Thuot, I was out in the field. But what happened was General Co the corps commander suddenly got cold feet and said to General Lu Lan, "No we'll call it off it could create an international incident." So that was the only thing that saved me from death there. But in addition, I found that I'd so soured my relations with elements of the CIA, not all of them, I was very good friends with most members of the Covert Action Branch, but there were maverick elements in the CIA. I subsequently found out subsequent to the publication of my book, who had plans to stop me from leaving Saigon alive in October 1965 and I can only assume that the way they would have gone about it was the way I would have, and that is to use one of the less important Vietnamese agents to make it look like a Viet Cong assassination or a mugging to kill me while I was in Saigon. And then in turn to have that agent killed by a better Vietnamese agent of theirs, because a lot of Vietnamese agents worked for the CIA. And in that why it would never be traced, but I am quite sure that they were maverick elements. I won't say who they are, I think one should read "Tiger Men" and you know the story you could probably put two and two together. And I think and I've since spoken to Dennis Warner who knew the people involved and he assured me that one of them was apt to do this

Chris Johns (01:22:02). I'm afraid we're very quickly running out of time. Just one final question, if we could cover quickly. In a recent interview on Channel 9 Major Peter Young made a comment that he felt that you'd lost sight of the aim. Would you care to make a comment on your aim in the area?

Barry Petersen (01:22:22). Well, no aim was given to me by either the Americans or Australians. I think I formulated my own aim during my blundering around from the time I was left in the highlands like a shag on a rock by Brian Mills right from the start. and I think I evolved my own aim in due course. I've had discussions with Peter who did have entree to the CIA. He actually worked for the CIA as did I, and he was one of the first two. In fact, he was one of the first Brigadier Serong said, who were treated like mushrooms. He didn't use those words, but Peter was over there, but Peter did return to Vietnam just after I left, the December following October I left, as Assistant Military Attaché and had entree again to the CIA. He was possibly our unofficial ASIS representative in Saigon and reporting the CIA activity.

(01:23:27). Now, Peter has said to me that he felt that I was a bit too conventional. I was too much a British-type officer particularly a Gurkha-type officer with my soldiers, that I really had lost it. I really wasn't doing what the Americans wanted me to do. Of course, I wasn't doing some of the things the Americans wanted me to do. I was collecting intelligence for them, I was effectively combating the Vietcong and to me that was the aim, no other aim was ever given to me. So, I really don't know what he



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was getting at by the aim. It could be a bit of sour grapes involved as well. I don't know because he really was, he and the man I replaced were really treated like mushrooms.

Chris Johns (01:24:13). Well, Colonel Petersen. We'll have to wind it up I'm afraid. Thank you very much for this opportunity for this discussion. It's been an honour and a pleasure. Thank you.

Barry Petersen (01:24:23). Thank you very much, Chris.

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