2-26-2008

Interview with Shepard "Shep" Lowman

Paul Hillmer

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26 February, 2008 – Fairfax, VA
Interviewer/Transcriber/Editor – Paul Hillmer

Mr. Shepard "Shep" Lowman graduated from Harvard Law School and later attended the Graduate School of Public Administration focusing on Economic Studies. In 1974 he was a political officer at the United States Embassy in Saigon, Vietnam. After the fall of Saigon, he assisted with the evacuation of Vietnamese in Saigon and was later given the "Superior Honor Award" for his tireless efforts. After 1975, he dedicated his time to Asian communities, working as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Asian Refugees under the Bureau of Refugee Programs in Washington, D.C. During his six-year term Mr. Lowman developed and managed programs that assisted in the resettlement of 168,000 refugees per year in the U.S., including tens of thousands of Hmong. Once again, he was awarded the "Superior Honor Award" for his creative management response to crisis. He is currently a board member of Refugees International Emeritus and works as an independent consultant. Mr. Shep Lowman currently resides with his family in the state of Virginia. In 2005, he was recognized with the National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies' Lifetime Achievement Award.

Our time together was limited. While Mr. Lowman's work in Vietnam alone could have been discussed for several hours, we focused the time we had on his work in Washington, D.C. on behalf of refugees.

Addendum: Mr. Lowman died in 2013. Here is an appreciation by a former colleague:

http://www.afsa.org/sites/default/files/flipping_book/0613/files/assets/basic-html/page41.html

(0:14) If you don't mind, I'd just be interested—because we've never met, obviously; I've only heard about you through other people—could you just talk briefly about where you were born, raised, and educated, and what led you on your career path?
OK. Born in New York City, raised in Texas—Oklahoma and Texas. Parents were both professional people. And I graduated from the University of Kentucky, and the Harvard Law School. Went in, after some initial wandering around, wondering what I wanted to do, I went into the State Department, took the foreign service exam.

(1:08) Had anyone in your family been a part of the foreign service, or was this new?
No, it was new. It was new. I was working for a small but good stock brokerage in San Antonio, just getting started in that, and finding that was not what I wanted to do. And I decided I wanted—I had some time overseas before I settled down to do that. So I thought, 'I want to go back. I want to get involved in overseas situations.' And I was doing some research in the local library on international companies, and the librarian was quite helpful. She found out what I was doing, and

she said, 'Well, you know, have you ever considered foreign service? My son took the foreign service exam, and it he didn't pass it, but it seemed like it would be an interesting career.' 'All right, I'll'…

(2:30) A tip from a librarian! How interesting is that? [Laughs]
Saying that, 'Well, where can I do this? I'll take the exam,' you know? I took the exam and I passed the exam, and I thought when I got to Washington—I was so stupid. They told me, 'You passed, but there are security clearances and medical clearances, and then just generally, you have—so wait until you hear from us.
Now what year was this?
This was '56. And it turned out later on, I really was dumb, because I quit my job, and went off to visit my parents before I went overseas—you know, it was just so automatic. It turned out that people waited years sometimes. But for me it worked just fine. I—just about the time I had a couple of weeks with my parents, they called me and said, 'Come down to Washington.' I had already shipped stuff there. I had already shipped what little gear I had, [Chuckles] and so when I got down there, I said, [Phone rings] 'Here are the costs for me to'— Let me just [Goes to answer phone, interviewer pauses recorder]

(4:16) Anyhow, that's how I got started. And I expected when I got—when they actually took me on board—by this time I—between law school, and I had been in the navy for a couple of years, right at the end of the war—this would be World War II—I'd had a couple of years in the navy before that was over with, so by the time I got out of law school, I was about [Pauses] Let's see. [Pauses] I must have been about 26. And so when I got—and I did a few things and I ended up and I passed the exam. And I had every expectation when I got down that the entering class—my classmates were about 30 officers coming on board—were probably all graduates of the Foreign Affairs School in Georgetown or something, you know, and had been dreaming of doing this for years. It turned out [Chuckling] that most of them were just like me. They had done other stuff and then gotten in, so—but at any rate, I had a career in the foreign service which I found very fascinating and rewarding.

(5:51) It was probably an asset, don't you think, that these people came in with life experiences and—
Oh yeah, I think so, and I think the State Department thought so, too. That's how they let me in. So I started off as—I had several jobs in Europe. The first post was in Vienna, and went from there, and so I was sitting there in [Pauses] 1965. It looked like I was headed to being a European specialist, especially in trade and economic matters—expected to go and be a member of the GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] team in Geneva, and I was sitting there in Washington one day, and across comes this little flyer from personnel saying, 'Looking for people that are interested in going to Vietnam and being advisors—on loan to USAID as an advisor to a province chief—so a field job. 'That certainly sounds interesting. Maybe I ought to just do a little detour and do that.' So I did. And stayed in Vietnam and Southeast Asia from then on.

(7:46) Do you happen to remember the name Erland Heginbotham?
Who?
Erland Heginbotham?
I want to, but I can't place it.

Well, I'm staying with him and his wife Eleanor, and he was USAID in Vietnam. And when I mentioned <u>your</u> name he said, 'Boy, that name sounds familiar.' So maybe you crossed paths somewhere along the line.

I think that's probably right, yeah. Certainly an awful lot of people out there!

Oh, yeah, I'm sure.

So I did that, did that for four years, and ended up with—I don't know if you've heard of the CORDS operation, [Civil Operations, Revolutionary Development Support] but…

I've <u>heard</u> that…

Well, that was the—they finally decided—it was a good plan. They took all of the field elements: military, USAID, intelligence, the whole schmear, and put it in one field effort. And I ended up, my last job, my last six or seven months out of that four years I was the senior advisor to the—what do they call it? The CORDS Senior Advisor. But the job was to be—to run that kind of a team in Da Nang city, which was an interesting thing to do, too. I went back and had some other jobs to do with the Philippines and so on, and in '73, I went back out to Vietnam on six months in the embassy this time, watching the play-out of the so-called peace agreement. And my job there—because when I left Vietnam I spoke fairly good Vietnamese, but never had much formal training at it. But I did—but three months, which for Vietnam doesn't quite hack it. So my job—and they brought back—my god, they must have brought back 30 or 40 foreign service officers—pulled them out of the jobs they were in out there, and most of them had had good training and spoke excellent Vietnamese. So they put them out in the field, and they were sending in—so my job was to sit in Saigon with a small group—four of us, and put together a daily report and a weekly report, which was very interesting. It gave me a very—kind of good, overall picture of what was going on. At the end of that time, I went back to my job—or no, went on to a job I had been getting ready for when they pulled me up to do that in the political section of the embassy in Manila. And I was there about a year, and a job opened up as director of the internal affairs unit of the political section in Saigon—the job being to follow political events in the government. And I jumped at that, 'cause I wanted to do it. I stayed there, then, until it came time to leave [Pauses] by helicopter.

(12:10) So in a way you had a pretty intimate understanding of what was going on and events that led to this—as they keep referring to it—the largest air evacuation in world history.

Yeah. So I took part in that and got back to Washington, heartsick, of course, as most of us were. And I really didn't want to get particularly involved. A lot of the guys did, but I wasn't really looking to get involved in the big resettlement effort, which was run by Julia Taft.

Right. Inter-Agency Task Force.

Yeah. In any case, besides that there were Hiep's parents and sister and brother-in-law and child, a couple of other people temporarily, along with ourselves and our five kids, to get resettled here, so the department was very—they didn't know what to do with half of us, anyway. A lot of people coming back, so I had a fair amount of leave and then after that, sort of [Pauses] So I reported and checked out again for several months. And we got our house fixed up and built four rooms in the basement for people, that kind of stuff. But they asked me to come in and get involved in the office of the [Pauses] I've forgotten its title, but its job was the senior advisor to the secretary on refugee matters. And this was the element within the State Department that was doing that for the State Department. And I believe that we made contributions to what Julia was doing on her Inter-Agency Task Force. But this was a more permanent thing, 'cause she was—she checked out at the end of the year—and did a wonderful job. She got everybody out of those camps by the end of the (***) or about six months. But the job that I had and that I did want to do was to try to make sure that all of the former employees, that <u>did</u> get out—those that got out and were here, were given all of the

assistance that we could give them, all that they had coming, and as much as we could do for them. So I was doing that, and then the Task Force was just in the process of closing down, and Lionel [Rosenblatt] went back out on a trip. He's probably described this to you.

Right.

And he came back and gave a report that said that there were many people out there to whom we had an obligation, whose history was very strong in terms of our obligations to them. And these included Hmong, but also lots of others. Some—many of them Cambodians and Vietnamese.

(17:09) Lao and Lao Theung and maybe some of those other ethnic groups?

A little bit. But from all three countries—had ended up in different places. Most of them were in Thailand, but they were also scattered around other places around the region. But less—that became a much bigger thing later on. So Lionel was saying, I think estimating 10,000 people or so, in places. And my reaction to—I was looking at a job in Chicago in the economic section. And he knew that. So he was very disappointed in the attitudes and reaction to these problems in the embassy in Bangkok. The guy that was doing refugees didn't want to be doing refugees. I guess he was somebody in the political section that they'd sort of assigned to do that, but he didn't want—he wasn't interested. The embassy itself was very lackadaisical about that subject. But Lionel wanted to go in there, and he said the only way—and we agreed about the only way that [Pauses] Well I guess maybe I said it. Anyway, we agreed that there were not going to be any possibility [of success unless Lowman stayed in Washington and backed up Rosenblatt's work in Thailand]—'cause we'd had some blowback already from the immigration subcommittee in the House. I can't even remember the man's name now. I think he was…

(19:33) Oh, yeah, I think Lionel mentioned him. I can't think of his name at the moment.

He ran into some big legal troubles later on, but [Chuckles] But at that time he was a very powerful man. So he had—the original, I guess, 130,000 figure was all the people that came out by boat and all the other—whatever. And we went back for 3,000 numbers for Hmong. I think that was done before our office of State became involved in those matters. We knew about it but I don't think we made it happen. But they took it back up—I guess Julia must have taken it back up to the hill, and 'All right, 3,000 more, but that's it, and I don't want to see anything more of you.' [Interviewer chuckles]

A real charmer.

And here has; he wanted 10,000 more. When I think of it, I think I made the point to him which he—I think he accepted that there was no chance of just walking up to the hill and saying 'Give us some more.' We would have to have a very deliberate census of the people in the camps and be able to go back to them and say, 'We have 300 of this and 2,000 of that' and really speak with some authority about what it was we wanted to bring in and where those numbers would go. And he said, 'And then the problem is getting the embassy to do that.' I said, 'I know. I think—the truth is that unless you went out there yourself and took this on, it's probably not going to happen.' At this time something bureaucratic—and I can't remember the exact details, but something bureaucratic had happened to suddenly get me involved in that—I guess because the Inter-Agency Task Force had shut down. But there was a lot of money left, and that money was in our bank account, so we had control of it, bureaucratically.

(23:17) Now when you say 'our' you mean the state department, you mean your office?

Well, basically in the office that I worked for, yeah. And there was a lot of it left, but it had to be spent by…

Maybe June 30th of the following year?

Yeah.

Something close to that, anyway.

June 30th of…

'76?

Mm-hmm. Yeah. So I said, 'We have money, but unless you go out there and do something to make it happen, it probably won't happen.' And Lionel said to me, 'Well, it's a little bit the same here in Washington. If I put together all these nice media [meaty?] reports, there's got to be someone here to read them!' [Both chuckle] So if I go out to Bangkok, will you stay on this job for a while?' And…'OK.' So that was the beginning of a—'cause I didn't know Lionel very well. I knew him, but I hadn't—we both had served in Vietnam, maybe even at the same time, but I never met him the first time around. I didn't really—I don't think I had met him until he made his famous trip over there, and [Pause] You know—oh, I wish I could remember for sure which floor—I don't want to get the floor wrong, but the ambassador was on the third floor or the second floor, and we in the political section were on a different floor. If he was on the third floor, we were on the second. And Washington had sent word out, 'Find that guy and his partner, Craig [Johnstone] and put him on an airplane and send him back here.' 'Cause he came out of the… Craig was—the two of them had been working for senior officers on the seventh floor of the State Department.

OK.

And they jumped in an airplane and came out to Vietnam to round up some of their—'cause they saw it coming—to round up some of their close people that they felt an obligation to, and to try to do what they could do get them out. So Washington found out where they'd gone and told the ambassador, 'Find those guys and put them on an airplane and send them back here pronto.' So Lionel was in and out of the embassy, but he was never on the ambassador's third floor—he only came to the political section, second floor. [Both chuckle] But we made that agreement, and kept at it for—I stayed in that job five years. And he was pulled out—he had an assignment to go to Chinese language training. So he had to break out of that about '77, and Tom Barnes took it over temporarily, but we managed—which is a very difficult thing to do—we managed to break his assignment—

Wow.

—out of Chinese language and brought him back again when it became obvious that there was going to be a major problem. But anyway—

(28:30) It was <u>your</u> office that did that? That got him out of his—

Aaah… Well, we did a lot of stuff that we didn't—weren't really authorized to do

[Chuckles] Most good work is done that way. [Both laugh]

So we (***) him for it and got people that were able to do that.

(29:01) So what was the name of this area of the [State] department you were working for at this time?

Well, it was the office of the—one of those bureaucratic elements that was within the office of the Secretary of State.

OK.

And, as I say, I can't recall the exact title, but it was like Senior Advisor for Migration and Refugee Affairs or something like that.

OK. I'll find it. [He worked at the Office of Asian Refugees, now the Office of Population, Refugees, and Migration, in the Bureau for Refugee Programs]

And I can't remember the name. When Jimmy Carter came in as president, he appointed as the senior—this job went to a human rights lady—a woman advocate of human rights, very well known.

I mean, that's the kind of thing that bothers me that I can't call her name up. I worked for her, she supported me in all, and I just can't pull it out. Maybe it will come to me as we talk. But she was very interested in making human rights a part of the considerations that are taken account of when you're dealing with international policy. And she really didn't have time much for refugees. That wasn't her main thing. I was a fairly junior officer at that point; I was a Class 3 officer and she was—you know, it was upper middle grade but not senior, certainly. So I inherited—I was sort of the guy who was in charge of the unit that did migration, which was mainly just keeping track of the people coming in—Jews from the Soviet Union and other—that was one of the biggest groups, but it wasn't really large compared to this sort of thing that came later. And it was an established program, so I sort of inherited that unit at about the time that all of this came about, and then stayed with it. That activity was taken out of the Secretary's office and put into eventually—this took a while for this to happen—it was put into a new Bureau for Refugee Affairs. But in the meantime they were sort of—but they were very supportive. So I just was doing a lot of stuff that my grade of officer wouldn't have an opportunity to do, because it involved a lot of money and so on. And it was just sort of—I inherited and stayed with it for five years. And we built a huge program. By the time we finished we had about a half a billion dollar program in 1975 dollars. And were moving, at the end—it peaked in '79 and '80 and we were moving 14,000 a month out of Southeast Asia and into the homes of Americans.

(34:10) So was there much Congressional interference or attempted oversight of what you were doing, or were you pretty much—

Well, there was [Pauses] I'll come to that.

OK. [Chuckles]

So that's the bureaucratic thing, but it started out very small and grew to this major activity. And I had the good fortune to not have it taken out of my hands and given to somebody else. I've had bosses imposed over me, but they never really got in my way.

They probably for the most part assumed that you knew what you were doing and…

Well, I was—yeah. So here we were. Lionel was out in Southeast Asia. He agreed. We came to an agreement on that. And he had a good piece of good fortune, because there were a bunch of Peace Corps types that were mostly young ones in those days, Peace Corps volunteers, who were just coming to the end of the tour in Thailand. And he recruited the whole crowd. And [Chuckles] you know, they spoke Thai, and they didn't speak Vietnamese or—they might have [spoken] maybe some dialects and some Hmong, but they could get around the country and they were very committed, and so they went out there and they put together this thing, and they really did get a census. And we had [Pauses] I wish I could remember a little more certainly about—but I think that we had already had a hearing in April, I think. I know it was—we really had to push. I believe it was in April, but I'm not sure—and went back to the hill. And we had Phil Habib at that time, and very committed to the refugees. We had a lot of people like that in the department, very senior people; that's what made it possible for us. We lived on the support of the senior officers who had been involved in Vietnam for quite some time. Eventually we outgrew that, but… So he was the one who testified before the House subcommittee. And they were pretty grumpy about it. But we had it packaged, so it was pretty hard—Lionel's package was pretty hard to deny. What I don't know, which would be of interest to you—maybe you could go back to Lionel on this. I don't know whether Hmong were included in that.

(38:35) He said that they were never separated as a unique group. They were just kept as part of the ex-Lao population.

But whether there were Hmong that were included in that 10- or 11,000 that we got…

I think that 11,000 included a good number of Hmong. 'Cause I know he said they went around to the camps and they interviewed a lot of Hmong people so they could get them processed by that June 30th, '76 date.
OK. Then that was Hmong.
Yeah.
OK. Well that's what I thought, but I couldn't remember for certain. So once we got a go on that, we had to just go like crazy. And over the years, there were three of us that really worked so closely together that you could say—I was the guy that was in charge of the office. But Lionel was in charge out in Bangkok, which was always the biggest center of refugee activity, although it became very urgent in other parts of Southeast Asia over time. And Hank Cushing, who was an AID officer whom I knew from Vietnam, and I recruited him as my deputy. And the three of us stayed in that, except for a short period of Chinese language training, but other than that, the three of us stayed in that until [Pauses] Well, I stayed until '81, and Hank stayed until a few years after that, and Lionel actually left a little earlier to go be Counselor General in Ottawa, I think. But for four or five years we worked that problem. And I gave Hank the job of getting these people in and approved, but it was just an absolute mare's nest, because there was no structure to handle that kind of thing, and they had us get—fortunately, they had a—what is it? IOM—International Organization for Migration, I guess. They call it ICMC now, I think, but anyway, it was IOM—had a very seasoned old man there, and so the way it broke down was Lionel—and Lionel was in charge of the whole thing; he sat over it…

(41:53) [Reaching for his bag] I'm just jotting down a note of things to ask you later as they pop into my head. [As it turns out, his pad is out in the car. Mr. Lowman gets him a pad of paper.]

(42:32) So, in fact some of those Peace Corps volunteers went to IOM and some stayed in Lionel's operation. But in terms of the breakdown of the jobs, which became much more formalized later—but IOM people took on, I think, even then, the medical checks and the transportation.

(43:09) And that, I think, got some help from this guy Albert Corcos in ICEM?
Albert! That's the seasoned guy I'm talking about.
OK. I think it might have been called 'ICEM' back then.
At that time?
Or maybe he was a part of more than one organization.
No, no. it keeps changing its name. I'm not certain. At point it was IOM, one point it was ICMC, ICEM. I-C-E-M, maybe?
'European Migration' I know was the 'EM'. I can't quite remember the—anyway, that was Albert Corcos.
Yeah.
OK.
We kept drafting him back. He kept trying to retire from ICEM and go and play golf and boat in France, and we'd haul him back to do another—yeah, he's great. He's still around.
Yeah, he's in his 90s now, I think.
He's in his 90s—pretty well into his 90s and still pretty active.
I think John Tucker said he had some amazing house with a spiral staircase and a beautiful view.
I've never seen his place, yeah. Did you have a good piece of time with John Tucker?

We spoke over the phone, but for three nights in a row, so yeah, we probably talked for five hours or more total.

Good. That's good.

(44:47) Well anyway, let's see. Where are we?

Moving refugees through—

Yeah, but the paperwork! First of all they had to go in, and the energy of these people [Pauses] I mean, at very first they had to build a file. Once they'd built that file, and they had to do some screening to decide which ones they would— they wouldn't just submit everybody to INS inspectors. But on the other hand, they didn't want to play God. If a guy had a fair chance, then they put him before the INS. And then the INS had to see them, and they would approve or not approve. But once that happened, they had to—there weren't any NGO resettlement people out there. And so we had to have them send all this stuff in to Washington. And in those days, most of the refugee NGOs had their headquarters in New York. Some of them still do—most of them at that time. Except, I think the Catholics were still down here [Washington, DC]. So we had to take—we rented a first floor—a big office building on Connecticut Avenue somewhere, and all the resettlement agencies sent their people down and so we had this flood of paper coming in. No real system set up. So Hank was in charge of that, and he could somehow get everybody there and working with him. And they went on 24 hour operation to get that stuff done, and they got it done, but it was <u>really</u> a mare's nest. And as a result of that, we got 11,000 people in, but in addition, the memory of that experience played a real part in the development of the program as it went forward later on. Now when we took on that 11,000, all of us sort of thought, 'Oh, that's about it. There'll be some people coming out that'll show up, and we do need a few numbers, and we need some kind of a possibility. So in those days they had something they called seventh preference, which was really a refugee preference, and there were some numbers available, and it was mainly for the Russians of central Europe. A European program. But we managed to get a little slice of that. I think it was something like 5-, 6-, maybe 700 numbers a year, just to sort of cover the odd one that comes out. And that didn't take any special activity, but then, as we got into '77, I guess, the numbers began to climb. And we could see that we were in for a longer-term deal. So we—

[Someone comes to the door. Interviewer pauses recorder.]

(49:55) So then, as we began to sort of wrestle with the idea of more people coming out, we began to develop a little more orderly procedure, and then we basically, maybe late '70s—'77, maybe [Pauses] In Europe, the program had been operated through a whole string of NGOs that were there helping refugees in Europe and mostly US NGOs, but they were over there in Europe helping people, and also taking part in the migration process. And we were subsidizing them, and it was fairly expensive. We didn't have that out of Southeast Asia; there wasn't anything like that, and to create it would take time, and it just didn't look like that would work very well. So instead, we developed a…

(51:36) Is this the Joint Voluntary Agency?

…a situation where one agency would be chosen to be the operating entity for all of the agencies back in New York, so that all of these files—they would hire staff, they would provide the senior person out there, and then—not the Ref Cord [Refugee Coordinator]—not the State Department officer, but the senior person to manage this part of the operation. So they would hire the people or send the people out or whatever. And they would do the interviews and the camp work and so on and so on. And the little more formalized relationships with how they could interact with ICEM

and how they would—the extent to which they could have any contact with INS officers, how that would happen, and so on. So we had kind of just—it was just sort of beginning that when the numbers became sufficiently great that we had to go back in there for more numbers. And I can't remember anymore now exactly what month we did that. I think it was August '77. And I can't remember for sure. I think there was 24,000—half land and half boat people.

(53:58) So how does that work exactly? Who do you go to and how do you get authorized to—

Well, we had—of course, we had to sell it in the building, to begin with, and then we had to go back to Congress again—both committees. But the tough committee was—I think even then, Senator Kennedy had the migration subcommittee. But to get through the House was what was hard. And again, by this time Phil Habib—when he testified the first time he was assistant secretary for Asia. And this time he'd moved up to being the undersecretary for political affairs. So he went and testified again. He said this time, [Chuckling] 'I'm not going to tell you this is the last time I'm coming up.' And he gave it a strong pitch, and they accepted it and grumbled and so on, but they did accept it. But I can really see that we were coming pretty close to the end of what the building could do for us. I mean, as long as Habib was there, I know he'd try to do everything he could, but had just gotten very difficult. And you could see that it was—that now there as something new happening—that it was these people coming out like this, and that just wasn't going to go away. So one of the—'Chavchavaj' who was a refugee program officer, a civil service position on the refugee office.

(56:37) And what was the name again? I'm sorry, I think I missed—

'Chavchavaj'—I'm not sure how you spell it

'Chav-chavage' I'll see what I can find. [Both laugh] [Chavchavadze?]

C-H-A-V…

And then maybe 'Savage' but pronounced 'Sa-VAJH.'

C-H- something. I don't know. But she was a very politically-oriented type, and one day she said to me, 'You know, Shep, you just aren't going to be able to do this unless you get some help outside this building.' And I said, 'How am I going to do that? I don't'— And so she didn't have any suggestions, but it was just that thought stuck in my head. And so we'd become fairly close to [Pauses to remember name] Now I'm in trouble. I'll just have to skip—be more vague about it, but we had to get our partners in the resettlement side of things who had a lot more contact with the world out there than we did as bureaucrats. And so Leo Cherne and the International Refugee [Rescue?] Committee—there you are. He was the chairman.

Leo Cherne.

Leo Cherne. [Spells the last name. Mrs. Lowman brings in some tea.] We had asked them to provide us with the first director of the office in Bangkok of this new…

(59:51) So in other words, International Rescue Committee became the primary agency in Thailand.

That's right. And remained—kept that through the whole—right through, the whole time that I was around.

So this would have been late '77 or early '78?

I think '77. But anyway, Leo had made a trip, or had planned a trip to Africa to look at the situation in some of the front-line states around Zimbabwe. And I had made a trip like that myself during a period when we didn't think there was going to be all that much work to do with Vietnamese, so I got to pick up on some of these other things. And so he wanted a briefing and so I gave him a

briefing, and he went off and did his trip, he came back to New York and I said, 'I wonder if he would be willing to try to help out and so I called him and I said, 'I would like to come up and see you,' and he said, 'Fine,' so I did. I began to describe the situation that was developing, and indicating that we were going to have—if we didn't get more resources, we were not going to be able to handle what I saw coming. And as I hand him all this, Leo asked, 'Well, why are you telling me this?' And I said, 'Well, I don't really know. I just am frustrated and worried and thought you might have some thoughts.' And he said, 'Well, yes, I do.' And he said, 'In the past, IRC has set out a so-called Citizen's Commission to look at situations and make recommendations. And let me think a little bit and maybe talk with some people a little bit and see whether something like that might make sense.' Wonderful. Well, it did. He put it together, and it included—I can't remember their names anymore, but—Ronald Reagan's (***) director of the Securities and Exchange Commission to a black gay labor leader. That's a pretty good span—and everything in between: a well-known Jewish rabbi, a well-known Catholic priest, and so on. Eight or ten people. They paid their own way. IRC provided Bob DeVecchi, who later became the executive director for the IRC. He was deputy, I think, at that time. But he went out as a staffer and became the first joint voluntary agency director.

(1:04:22) If you don't mind, I've used these terms and I just want to make sure that I use them properly and that I understand this organization. So 'Joint Voluntary Agency' is something that you created so that in each country there would be a primary NGO or non-profit or something that would be primarily responsible for heading up the resettlement effort. Is that a fair explanation of—

Not quite.

OK. Well, this is exactly why I asked. [Laughs]

Because what you just described is what the Ref Cord, which is a US government position—Refugee Coordinator. That's what Lionel was. He as responsible for all refugee activity, including that, and he directed the work of any of the NGOs that had that contract for Thailand. And then others would be other places. But what they were responsible for was that piece of activity that involved liaison with the UN and the Thai authority in the camps, the screening of the population as it came into the camps, the development of—especially of case files where they think there is a possibility that they might be able—they probably did everybody, but especially those that seemed to have a chance of getting taken—and then arranging for in-country transportation, getting them to the INS for interviews, all that kind of thing. So up to that point, up to the point of INS approval, and then they deliver them to IOM [ICEM].

(1:06:54) So in a way you could almost call it 'pre-resettlement'—refugee services more.

Yeah, that's right. It <u>was</u> pre-resettlement, and it was <u>after</u> they were approved by INS that the job shifts over to ICEM.

OK.

But that's not quite right, either. That misses an important part of their function, a <u>very</u> important part of their function, and one of the reasons they were created, actually. 'Cause all <u>that</u> I'm telling you about is what they did <u>before</u> these Peace Corps volunteers did for Lionel. They—and State Department these days would tell you that's not [Pauses] We don't like that so much. But when I was running it, they had a second job of keeping their fellow agencies here informed, and informed of simple, very direct things like Nguyen Van Nguyen is being held up because of a health problem to more sensitive subjects such as we think INS is being too tough on this category of person. But it was their privilege to have opinions and to keep their people back in Washington abreast. And that was part of what kept them always as a strong supporter of the program, because they understood

what was going on out there. So—this big piece of paper I was talking about, getting those people out of that place in '76, that was their problem. We dealt in several cases, and certainly in Bangkok, Malaysia, Singapore—at least those three and maybe some other places. We built a whole separate communication system and file room and everything. Otherwise it would have completely overwhelmed the commo guys in the embassy, the volume of it, so we just built our own. Of course, it was under the control of the ambassador, but for that purpose. And they would send—when INS approved somebody, they would send that fact and something about the family and so on to New York, not to us. We didn't want to hear about it. Send it to New York. And there was this—and this group all came together in a roof organization. I can't remember the name of it. Boy, I sat in their conference room often enough. (***) But anyway, there we funded the communications for them.

…They're in New York. And it later was sucked into the current—well, I take that back to… Anyway, their organization had been part of a big roof organization of almost all of the international agencies working overseas, NGOs, and they had some differences of opinions and didn't think they were getting any kind of specialized—it was kind of pushing into their area. So they created their own organization. They then came back into what is now downtown known as [Pauses, can't think of name.] Well, see now, that's awful. It once again became everybody. And then they had the same kind of problems again. So about three or four years ago, maybe longer than that now, five or six, they pulled out and created Refugee Council USA, and that's what they are now. But anyway, that organization, at the time I'm speaking of now, was in New York and we built them a very first-class commo operation, so all of this stuff would flow into there, they'd have a meeting and auction off [Chuckles]—you know, they'd take it case-by-case. It was really funny. They moved so quickly it really was like an auction in a way, 'cause everybody was so quick and fast and different and, 'Well here's a family of six, they're this and that, and one person has an illness' and whatever. And then, 'I think we—maybe we can fit over there' and they'd divide up the cases. Then once—then they would have to go down to their networks and say, 'OK, we have to resettle 3,000 people for this region working for one of those agencies.' And once you had the name and address, then this organization we're talking about would say, 'OK, this person's approved by INS. Here's the family, ICEM, you take them.' And they would take them to see if they were medically OK to go, and make arrangements, travel arrangements, so on and so on, and take them off, get them to their new family or their new whatever—family, or if it wasn't—in some cases it wasn't a family; in many cases, actually, it would be just the local agency, the local office says, 'OK, we can take two, three more cases.' So we sent them to the local office. The local office would either pump them right into a family they had waiting, or maybe had to put them in temporary housing for a little while. But they would do that. And that was—without that we never could have done 14,000 in a month from 10 or 12 camps all scattered around Southeast Asia.

(1:15:53) Again, just my ignorance showing, but say, in the case of Thailand, where IRC is in charge—are they working with the other organizations in Thailand to help divvy up those responsibilities? Are they the ones that make those decisions, in consultation with the other organizations?

Which decisions?

About who gets what caseloads.

No, no, that was made in New York.

OK.

That was made in New York.

So what would the relation—

We gave the authority to the NGOs once we had an INS-approved case. They'd tell us where they wanted them sent. We didn't have to get into it. We monitored what they were doing.

But you got to bypass a lot of the mess that you didn't really need to concern yourselves with on a weekly basis.

That's right. Yeah. So, to go back for a minute, Leo Cherne took his troops out there and they had this long—they were gone for a couple of weeks, I think, ten days to two weeks. And these were all very senior people that were doing this. They got back, and they went and they testified before the House Sub-committee, and just **pow**—just very, very strong testimony by very senior people, and it was just a big change.

That was the help outside the building you were looking for.

That was the help outside the building—and it stayed; it stayed for years. Because yeah, OK, 'Mr. Cherne, you're right. We'll increase it a little bit.' But every time that we were—every time we'd move a little bit, then we'd have a bigger problem. So I had to—I was probably on the phone with Leo, I'd say at least two or three times a month, for years, because he could be—he was a great lobbyist, but he had to know where the action was. 'What is your problem?' So I told him what our problem was. Many of the other agencies also began to be very active and down here, going through the halls of Congress, lobbying for their own people, and so on. But Leo started it. And that's—by the time we got into late '78 and early '79, the numbers were beginning to get really scary. And we knew a lot of people were drowning, the boats were being pushed back off, first by the Thai, and then we managed to get them slowed down at least, and then the Malaysians started doing it. I was in Indonesia, in fairly early '79, and all of a sudden I'm getting reports—the embassy didn't really have a clue—but from others about the numbers of people that were coming in to Indonesia, and—I can't remember the name of the island. They were coming—there's a group of islands about 300 miles east of Singapore. But they were coming in—and floods of them coming in, because both Thailand and Malaysia were shut down. And there was something like—well, I can't remember now, but big numbers, 30-, 40,000 people showing up in just a very short period of time, and obviously, what was happening was that the whole flow was continuing and now it was shifting to Indonesia. And if the Indonesians started pushing them off, that would really be tough, because then the Philippines and Australia would be the next ones, and that's so far that we'd lose a lot of people, and the boats were all worn out by the time you got to Indonesia, anyway. So as soon as we heard that, we shifted the real focus of our activities to Indonesia. And you can talk to a guy named—where is your—oh, you're in Minnesota. You don't get out to California all that much. Jim Schill was an officer working in Bangkok. Lionel and one of his senior guys, and I took him and sent him down to Singapore, down to deal with the Indonesian problem, and he concluded, I think rightly, that we should be based in Singapore. But with elements of our (***) out on these islands, it ended up he got one of these big oil rig platforms, not drilling platforms, but a residential platform of an oil company, and we rented it from them and ran his operation off of them over the Anambas islands. And then it doesn't sound like much, in some respects but you have to be a bureaucrat to understand what a remarkable job it was. But he was able to find office space, recruit office people, recruit a large crew, set up procedures, start this paperwork flowing—it took some time for it to flow there and back and forth again—and got some INS people out there, one thing or another. He was moving 3,000 people a month within about four or five months after he got down there, which is amazing, just 'cause each one of these is so hard to move. But this—and then finally we got enough money, we got Jimmy Carter riled up enough about the whole situation, we had an international conference about this in July of '79. And our authorization up to that point had been 7,000, and they had been bumping up all that they would allow, but at that point it was still 7,000 a month. And at this conference we committed to moving 14,000 a month, and we did that for about the next two years, year and a half—closer to two years. So that's sort of a rough history of how the

thing—and then after that we had lots of other things we did. We set up training—largest ESL and cultural briefing programs ever in the—gave these people about four or five months to learn something about the US, a little rudimentary English, and then so on. We had one of them in Bangkok, one of them down in Indonesia, and just south of Subic Bay.

(1:27:04) So these would have been sort of processing centers?
They were processing centers, but they…
But they included orientations and—
They were not processing in the sense that we talked about before, because they'd already been processed and approved, approved for resettlement in the United States. I think probably even—I can't swear about this part, but I think probably it even had their family spotted. Maybe not, because it could be a four or five month [orientation]. Maybe that was done later. But all of the processing up to that—and this was specifically for training—we set it up in 1980, there was beginning to be a sense that we were dumping people in so fast that some of the social welfare agencies and others were beginning to complain a little bit that nobody speaks any English and so on—one thing or another. And so we thought, 'OK, we'd better do something about that,' so this was our answer, and it worked fairly well.

(1:28:34) Is this something that ICEM would have administered for you?
No. I think that was just done by contract with one of the various agencies that specialized in that sort of thing. And under the overall aegis of the local embassy and the refugee coordinator. But I don't think ICEM—ICEM would have picked people up from there and sent them—and maybe involved in—I'm not sure how the sponsorship was handled for them. I want to say it was done before they left. And it was easy in Bangkok, because the Center was about a two-hour drive from Bangkok. But more of a problem there. They probably—I'm just guessing now, I can't remember exactly, but it was—I would guess that we must have done it through the Joint Volag program, where there were elements like that in all of the places where they had the training centers. Yeah, that must be it. So when they began to get near the end of their course, then they began to think about the other end. Now how did all of this tie in with the Hmong? One of the things that we tried to do with most of our programs was to try to resettle people as widely as possible, and not have them concentrate in one area, which if you took that kind of a flow and concentrated it all in one area, it would create problems, as it is in Minnesota now. And we knew there would be secondary migration, but at least we wanted them to start out with them being not scattered so that—you know, three in this village and—but so with some reasonable amount of them. And to do that, there had to be enough people there to form a kind of a magnet, so that you had to—which would happen anyway, if you said, 'Don't deliberately put them together.' So that this area has pulled in—I don't know how many they've pulled in now, but probably 50-, 60,000 at one point, and a lot more now. Oklahoma City has a pretty good chunk. New York has got a pretty good chunk, but not big compared with a lot of other groups in New York. Houston got a pretty good-sized chunk, and then California's got the lion's share. The Hmong were kind of special in my eyes, at least. I'm trying to think if we really had—I guess… [Pauses] You know, Paul I'm not sure how deliberate it was, but I know that the Hmong themselves—I guess we still tried to resettle them without <u>too</u> much concentration, but at least in my mind, it wasn't <u>as</u> important, partly because it was a somewhat smaller number, partly because you could guess that at least some of the Hmong might need community more than—they <u>all</u> of them needed it to some degree, but it might be more important to the resettlement adjustment of the Hmong. So I think we were less kind of aggressive about that. And then add to that the Hmong themselves, who are very active in communicating to their fellow Hmong where they were and the social security benefits are pretty good here, and

training is available here, and maybe not there, which caused a little more—caused quite a lot of secondary migration. I know that Mr. [David] Obey was a great supporter of the program for a long time, but I'm not so sure he is anymore.

[Interviewer takes a moment or two to remember who David Obey, Congressman from Wisconsin is]

(1:35:52) He's a little more—I think he's probably getting a certain amount of static from some of his constituents.

(1:36:03) Well, I know there's a big—this isn't so much dealing with resettlement, but of course some of the Hmong who are still in Thailand in places like Huai Nam Khao, it was just announced in the *Bangkok Post,* I think two days ago, that Thailand and Laos have agreed that their Ministries of Defense will take over this refugee resettlement issue.

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I saw that.

So that's burning up the phone lines to our elected officials in Washington these days, I think.

Well, the Thai have, when you consider how many refugees have gone through there, I know that right after I retired from State and at the end of '87, the very end, the first of '88, that we began to get stories that the Thai were pushing boats off, and this thing went on and on and on until finally it was over. But it never—it was not a program that died willingly, [Chuckles] so you had people pushing out—but anyway, the Thai were pushing boats off, and the reason was that the flow had increased, because people were being paid off in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Thailand—very organized. So the flow had increased, and the US, among others was not being very good about picking up the additional amounts, and the populations in the camps were growing. All of a sudden they started ramming boats. And so we went, three of us—let's see, Al Santoli, who's a writer, and one other fellow that I can't recall his name. We went out there to see what was going on, and people were saying, 'Don't worry about it, don't worry about it.' And the Thai, of course, were saying, 'We're not doing anything.' And we got a—went down the track, then, in the gulf there, and got a little boat and went out, and began to find people whose boats had been rammed, and they were stranded on these little islands with no water and no food. And we went back to Bangkok and went into the see the Foreign Ministry, the guy in charge of that, and he said, 'Well, Mr. Lowman, you've been misinformed.' And I said, 'I'm really sorry, Mr. Minister, but you've been misinformed, because here are the pictures we took up in where we were at there.' Well, of course he was embarrassed and said, 'Well, we'll have to look into this,' and they did. But it was that kind of thing that—you know, until they all went home, there were those that wanted them to go sooner and others who said, 'No, it's not time yet.' And the Hmong always had that going on. The Thai were much more receptive to the Hmong than they were any other of the refugees there. I mean, after all, they were kind of cousins to their folks up there in the mountains, anyway, but at the same time, they felt very strongly that they weren't going to just let their doors and let anybody in in Laos that wants to come over come over. So they would do those things every once in a while.

(1:40:50) I think, too, it got complicated as a significant portion of the Hmong community decided they wanted to stay in case they had a chance to go back.

Well, that's right. . . [B]ut those were not major problems during the period that I was involved, '81. And after I retired I went to work for refugee agencies, the NGOs, as an advocacy person. I spent time with Refugees International and in fact, I was their second president, and then [my wife] opened up a restaurant [Both laugh] and I got out of the business for a while, and then Lionel came

in as president. But then I worked for the Catholics and so on, until 2003 I remained active in this area, and Lionel and I worked very closely together in many ways—very, very closely on a whole host of things, not just Southeast Asia, but especially Southeast Asia. And that's when we were saying it's not right to give them only a choice of going to the United States or being forced to go home. And for a long time, that was acceptable, but increasingly the Thai keep pushing to—say, 'If they want to resettle in the United States that's fine, but otherwise we want to send them home. They're not refugees, anyway. They don't qualify.' Well, you can have that argument, but…

(1:43:21) Yeah, I was actually <u>in</u> Huai Nam Khao last November and talked with the colonel who runs the place. And you get the impression when you're just talking to him that he's a reasonably decent guy doing a very difficult job, and just trying to do the best he can to treat these people humanely. But then you see how he treats the people in the camp, and you realize that he really just wants them to go away. And even the rules posted at the camp all make it very clear that basically, 'We are the law, we will tell you what to do, and your options are basically to go home. That's it. We don't want you here, we don't want you going on to a third country. You're all supposed to go home.' So it's a very dicey situation there, I think.

Yeah, that's strong, yeah. So they don't even want third country resettlement.

No, it says right on the sign, 'No'—I think what they're probably trying to do is to discourage further sneaking into the camp.

Mm-hmm.

And I'm sure they—I'm sure it's true, at least to some degree, that there are human traffickers who are encouraging people to come to Thailand because they believe that they can then get them on to the United States or—

Yeah.

Australia or somewhere.

[Mr. Lowman excuses himself for a moment. Recorder is paused.]

(1:44:56) But I know I haven't given you very much Hmong-specific stuff—

Oh no, that's quite all right.

But I just—it wasn't really a—once you got past the first little bit—in the beginning the Thai were very rough on some of the Hmong and ran 'em back across the border there. And there was always the threat of that, I guess, and there were some—it sort of would depend who was in charge of the border at the time, that kind of thing. But in those days, if they'd been prepared to go to the US, we were probably prepared to take 'em—most of 'em. And the Thai would have permitted it. But what really was the problem that came was that so many of them really didn't want to leave. And that—from our perspective, that would be bad for them, to force them to leave, come to the United States, and bad for us. We really don't want people that you have to handcuff! So we always had to try to do something about that, and one of the things we tried to do was to make sure that—we wanted to do as much as we could to help the people in the camps, but we also wanted to make sure that they didn't get so much help that they were better off than the local Thai. So we had programs to assist the villages—the Thai villages nearby, that kind of thing.

(1:47:12) I've heard his name, and of course we mentioned him briefly as well, but I don't know—you said Albert Corcos was a seasoned veteran. What had he been doing up to the time that you recruited him to be part of this effort.

Well, he was a long-time employee, senior employee of ICEM in other situations, but he was new to this problem.

So this was a long-term interest of his, and he certainly had the expertise that you needed to—

I pulled him out of retirement the last time when I was—that was '82 to '86. I was down in Honduras, and we had lots of camps., Salvadoran camps on the border, and they were a mess. I had to get Albert in to help me out with that.

So he would have been in his 70s then, I suppose.

Yeah. Yeah.

(1:48:18) If I wanted to contact somebody to find out where the State Department records are involving resettlement of people from Thai refugee camps, where would I go?

I'd go to the refugee bureau.

The State Department Refugee Bureau.

Uh-huh. What do they call it now? They call it [Pauses] I can't recall what they call it now. They changed its name. They changed its name for cosmetic purposes. Something like Migration and Refugees.

Well, I'll see if I can find it.

Population, maybe.

OK. I'll see what I can find out. Well, I know I've taken a lot of your time already, and I sure do appreciate you taking time out for me. This has been very helpful.

[The two exchange a few words of thanks, encouragement, and farewell, recorder is turned off, interview is over.]