 Transcript of

Virgil Kovalenkol

Interview

Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Give us your full name.

Virgil Kovalenkol

My name is Virgil Nicholas Kovalenko. I was reared in Phoenix, Arizona. K-o-v-a-l-e-n-k-o. Good Ukrainian name.

Interviewer

Give me a brief synopsis of how you got to Vietnam?

Virgil Kovalenkol

I started my military career in the Navy as an enlisted photojournalists and then transitioned later into commissioning program in the Air Force, 1962. And in 1971, by that time we were stationed at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. And for a variety of reasons I wound up answering the call for volunteers to go to Vietnam. So I was assigned as an Air Force advisor to the Vietnamese logistics command in the Vietnamese Air Force. And I was stationed at Bien Hoa Air Base northeast of Saigon from May of '71 to the beginning of March of '72. I was curtailed by three months of my normal rotation date because of then what was known as the Nixon Doctrine or the Vietnamization program. We called it the "3-B" program. That's not readily known is what 3-B means. But we advisors were suddenly notified–all of us throughout the country–were notified to turn over all of our projects and get out of Vietnam as fast as we could. But don't give the Vietnamese allies any materials, equipment, supplies, nothing. Just get out. And that's what 3-B came into being known as when we said well what do we all with all this stuff? And they said, okay, 3-B's: burn it, blow it up, or bury it. But don't give it to the Vietnamese. Those were our orders and so we did and we left. The advisors.

Interviewer

What year?

Virgil Kovalenkol

That was '72.

Interviewer

What month was that?

Virgil Kovalenkol

I left at midnight on February 28th of '72. And so between January 1st and the beginning of '73 is when that program was in dramatic effect. And that came directly out of the Kissinger talks in the Paris Peace Accords where we cut off our–

Interviewer

February in '72 to --?

Virgil Kovalenkol

To March of '73.

Interviewer

So you were there during the Easter Offensive?

Virgil Kovalenkol

No. I was out of there by then. I was here at the University of Utah.

Interviewer

How do you feel when you hear helicopter blades today?

Virgil Kovalenkol

The first sounds I heard, my first night in Vietnam: helicopters. And the second sound I heard was the explosion of grenades being thrown at the hotel where I was in the middle of the night. So when I hear helicopters, there's déjà vu, there's flashbacks. But I've learned to control that, having flown on helicopters now. Not just the war thing, but subsequently. My wife said she always wanted to take a helicopter ride. Her first helicopter ride was being extracted off a beach in Panama with a broken ankle. And she said that's not how I wanted to ride in a helicopter. Helicopters bring back many, many memories. I watch them and when I see the military helicopters, salute smartly.

Interviewer

Agent Orange. You said you suffer from it. Tell us about that.

Virgil Kovalenkol

Agent Orange, as you probably know, was sprayed all over South Vietnam, all the way up to the demarcation zone, the DMZ. And deforestation and we thought–or the people who put that thing into motion thought if we kill all of the jungle, we'll flush 'em out. We'll flush out the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese. Yeah, well what they did was poison the vegetation and the earth. And what we didn't realize–and I didn't know for a number of years until I went back to Vietnam–was the effect on the human flesh. The neurological disease that I have now is called Myasthenia Gravis and part of it is due to Agent Orange. The diabetes that I suffer is because of Agent Orange. And the VA has finally acknowledged that all of us who served in Vietnam, just the fact that we were boots on the ground in Vietnam for any period of time, we were exposed in one form or another. When I went back there in '87, '88, and '89, I went right into the areas where it was heavily sprayed with that stuff. And I had the unfortunate experience of going into the war crimes museum in Saigon where they have, in great big jars, horrible examples of what happened to human fetuses of people who were sprayed with that stuff. And they have a tremendous propaganda problem for all tourists, even now, who go on cruises and say, "Oh, let's go and Vietnam." They take them into those war crime museums in Ha Noi and in Saigon. "See what you Americans did to our country? Evil Americans." And so the propaganda continues.

Interviewer

Talking about war crimes and things like that.

Virgil Kovalenkol

At every point in history where there has been any kind of an armed conflict between or among nations, there are what is known as war crimes. There are crimes against humanity. There are crimes against human decency. Good grief, look at the stuff that's going on in the Middle East. I was there in '79 when Khomeini came out of exile and started this Islamic routine. Were there war crimes then? You bet. Are they going on now? You bet. On both sides? Yup. But I don't want to divulge into a political diatribe because I have some very harsh feelings about such things and I've been instructed by my wife to keep my mouth shut.

Interviewer

What was your role as advisor?

Virgil Kovalenkol

The advisor program started under JFK and it actually began under Eisenhower. But when JFK came in, that's

when advisors were sent in by boatloads. My assignment was originally to be what was known as the public information advisor. But quickly, after I arrived, I was assigned by my Vietnamese counterpart who was a young Major, younger than I. I was a Captain at the time. He asked me to wear three hats: public information to train his people on how to do news releases and reporting; and then also he wanted me to be the political warfare advisor and the psychological warfare advisor which caught me completely by surprise. Somehow or another he found out what some of my previous assignments in the Air Force had been, so he said, "Captain–" you know, he called me "Di Wee"–he said, "You can handle this." So I had three hats that I was wearing at the time. My responsibility was working directly for the Vietnamese Air Force logistics command in his specific shop training his airmen on these three different types of jobs. And I enjoyed the heck out of it, it was just a lot of fun. And I was treated very well by the Vietnamese and respected. I became close to a number of Vietnamese families who were living on base. And that was my after-hours activity. Because at the same time I was called by LDS Church authorities to preside over the LDS servicemen who were stationed at the Bien Hoa complex. The Bien Hoa complex was a huge military base split in half by the runway. On the one half, on the north half was the Air Force side. On the south half was the Army complex with all the different Army units, Rangers, and so forth. And Special Forces, we had the Green Berets compound on our side, on the Air Force side in a little barbed wire enclosure where the green beanie guys were locked up each night. But on our side of the base, we had the only LDS chapel ever built in Vietnam. That's where we worshiped and that's a story in and of itself, but it was a lot of fun.

Virgil Kovalenkol

The thing in Ha Noi, the war crimes museum up there, they have built in the lake where John McCain was shot down, they have built a monument right at the shoreline of that thing. And out in the lake, right where his plane landed and where they fished him out, that you have a monument. And in Vietnamese it says this is where John McCain, an American pilot, yadda, yadda, Navy pilot. And in the museum in Ha Noi they have the wreckage of a B-52 that was shot down over Ha Noi in the Hai Phong Bay. And they have all the propaganda about the evil Americans and what they did and the bombs and so forth. Keep in mind what I told you, that Le Duc Tho said, "Why did you stop the bombing? If you had continued, we would've capitulated." So who's giving the propaganda? Did we do terrible things? Oh, heck yes. That's the nature of war. Colin Powell said the nature of war is you go out to break things and kill people. That's war. Is there a humane way to wage war? No, there is not. Do terrible things happen in war? Yes, they do. Does that mean we all have to be lousy, terrible, horrible criminal elements? No. Is there humanity during war? Yes. Can there be love of your enemies as Christ taught? Yes. Can you try to help? Yes. Did we try to help? Yes. Were we successful? Hmm… in some ways, yes.

Interviewer

You watched the news, you must know what you're heading into. You know that things are bleak in the future. Tell

us about that.

Virgil Kovalenkol

When I received my orders to go to Vietnam, nobody told me anything. I was only told, "You're going to be an advisor assigned to what was known as AFAT-6, Air Force Advisory Team 6." And I said, "What does that mean?" "Well, that means that your headquarters will be at MACV headquarters in Saigon and from there it will be in Thailand and from there it will be in Hawaii. Don't worry about it. You'll find out when you arrive." When I arrived, I was introduced to a couple of other captains who were just finishing their tours as advisors and I said, "What does this mean to be an advisor?" "You'll find out."

"Okay, good."

Then I was taken over to meet this young major, this Vietnamese major. And he interviewed me to see if he would accept me to be his advisor. And he asked me several questions. He said, "Di Wee, you come Vietnam to smoke?"

"No."

"You drink?"

"No."

"You come Vietnam chase our women?"

"No."

"You married?"

"Yes."

"You don't smoke, you don't drink, you don't chase women, you Mormon?" "Yes."

"Okay, I accept."

That's how I became his advisor. And that was the interview and I still didn't know what my duties were. My first day going to his office, he gave me a desk, had my typewriter, introduced me to his young airmen staff and said, "Okay, teach them. I want them to know how to do this and this and this and this." I said, "Okay." That's how I became an advisor.

Interviewer

World communism gets laughed at. Tell us about the world as it was back then.

Virgil Kovalenkol

Vietnam was necessary for us. That's a harsh thing for me to say. The reality of Vietnam for me was were we supposed to be there? Yes. Should we have been there? Yes. Did we go in under proper auspicious? No. Lyndon Johnson was a liar. I know this personally because I was on a protection detail and I was as close to him as I am to you, even closer. I have no respect for Lyndon Johnson. He manipulated things. But anyway, we wound up going

there all right. We started going there as advisors under Eisenhower and then John Kennedy did some really stupid things and caused the overthrow of the Diem regime. But we went in. Okay, we were committed, we went in, we did a job that we were told by our Congress and by our government this is what we need to do. We went and tried to do that in the military. We did the best we could, we thought. Could we have done more? Heck, yes. We were betrayed so we wound up leaving there. We sent in C-141s from Philippines in March of 1973 to retrieve our POWs out of Ha Noi. Did we bring them all out? We did not. There were quite a few who were left behind and who were shipped off to the Soviet Union. When I went back to Vietnam, one of the things that was very interesting to me, very disgusting to me–when we left there was this huge vacuum. The military was pulled out of there in 1973, the Americans. So when the propaganda and the apologists in this country started whining and complaining that we lost the war. And it's taught in the history department up here in the Universe of Utah that Vietnam is the only war that America ever lost. They're lying. We did not lose that war, we were pulled out, we were told to get out. We didn't lose, the military didn't lose, the politicians lost it because they had no guts. We were pulled out in 1973. The war ended in 1975. We weren't there. But, when I went back there, sitting in the front end of that Xich Lo, children would come running up alongside and they would be laughing in derision and pointing at me and they would say, "Lyn So! Lyn So!" And I learned to say back, "(in Vietnamese 18:20)" And they would shut up and they would say, "My?" So they would come up and run and hit me in the back and they would say, "Lyn So!" That means "Russian! Russian!" Because I was a lot bigger than I am now. And I said back to them in Vietnamese, "I'm not a Russian, I'm an American." And that would shut them up and they'd say, "American? Okay, you come back. You come back." Because by then, after we left, within a matter of two weeks after we were out of there, the Russians came in force. The Soviet Air Force took over all of our air bases. I was at Da Nang and Bien Hoa and I saw the MiGs flying in and out of where our Marines and our Air Force and Army flew. I saw them. I was there. But the Soviets came in in bulk. They took over Cam Ranh Bay, this beautiful deep sea port that the Navy built, the Seabees built. They took over everything that we left behind. But the Vietnamese learned very quickly you cannot trust the Soviets. They're worse Communists than the Vietnamese Communists. You can't trust 'em because they came in and raped the country and that was their term to me when I would ask them about, well, you know, you welcomed the Russians in. I had the opportunity, in 1989 of talking to two of those secret police that followed me everywhere. I talked to a young lieutenant who'd been trained in the Soviet Union, spoke fluent Russian. I didn't know that until I made the mistake of saying, " (in Russian 20:11)." And his eyes went wide open and he said, "Kovalenko." He recognized me as Ukrainian-American. My dad fought in the Revolution of 1917 in his country. And so we talked about things like that and I asked him, "You've been trained by the Soviets, you speak Russian fluently. What's your opinion?" And he looked around to make sure that his colonel wasn't listening and he said in Arabic, "(In Arabic – mishnamam (ph) 20:48)." Which means in Vietnamese would be "xau," it means terrible, bad. Didn't have any respect for the Russians, for the Soviets. So war time, dichotomy. Good, evil. Positive, negative. Always in conflict.

Virgil Kovalenkol

Frequently I would go down to Saigon and attend what were then the daily news briefings for all of the out of country news hounds who were coming in to Vietnam to file their stories. "Stars and Stripes" and all of the newspapers from everywhere. And so I attended those briefings and was astounded in hearing what was said in the briefings and seeing all of the charts that were put up and the headcounts–that's what Westmoreland wanted was head counts–and seeing all of that. By then Westmoreland was gone but his policy still existed. And then when my family would send me news clippings from what was printed in the States, there was no semblance of what they had been told; they made up their stories.

Interviewer

Tell me more about this.

Virgil Kovalenkol

What was reported to them and shown to them as what had happened. For instance, a particular operation, I can't remember all the names–but a particular operation where our forces had gone in, for instance, in the Iron Triangle and I have experience of having flown three combat missions in a gunship in the front seat of a snake in the Iron Triangle so I know what happened where we inserted some guys to go after the bad guys. That story was published in the United States in the media here as being a complete and utter disaster for the Americans. No semblance of truth. And it really soured me on the American media because most of those clowns–and I'm being very frank with you–most of those characters who came over there came over for the booze and the highlife, and the nightlife of Saigon which was a wide open wild town in those days. And many of them–not all of them–but many of them would come to these briefings hung-over. They didn't care what information was being given them. By both of the Americans and the Vietnamese, people who were giving the briefings. They didn't care.

Interviewer

Did you have conversations with any of those news people?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Very infrequently. When I became aware of all of that I was very dissatisfied because here I was trying to teach these Vietnamese how to report honestly, accurately and being fair to their people and to what they were trying to do to maintain freedom in their country, in the Republic of Vietnam. And then to have all of this lousy example being given by Americans–and not just Americans, but there were Brits and Australians and other countries available there. But I didn't find the other foreign countries as egregious in the way that they skewed their stories. So I became very much disillusioned in having anything to do with the American media, so I tried not to.

Interviewer

You said you went out on some combat missions. You're a PIO, public information officer. You also are teaching psychological operations to discourage the enemy. Why were you put into the front seat of a gunship?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Do you remember the old movie, "What Did You Do in the War, Daddy?" Well, I had a family of five young children at home. My eldest at the time was 11 years old. I knew the day would come when they would ask, "What did you do in the war, Daddy?" I wanted to be able to say, "Well, I saw a little bit of it." So I commandeered my way in a request of hey, can I go off on a mission somehow? And so the Army guys at the helicopter base on the Army side said, "Yeah, sure, we'll put you in the snake," in the cobra gunship. And so I flew with a young chief warrant officer, or Warrant Officer 3 and we went out to the Iron Triangle.

Interviewer

Tell people what the Iron Triangle is.

Virgil Kovalenkol

That was an area that was probably at the time I was there, it was probably the hottest portion of the southern part of the Ho Chi Minh Trail just coming into the triple canopy jungle area of Xuan Loc just beyond Bien Hoa. We had several fire bases out there supporting the insertion of our search and destroy teams. And so our assignment on these three missions that I went on, we were to orbit at high altitude and watch for smoke to be popped by the team that was going in to a particular area. If they popped their smoke grenades, we were to dive down in there and fire our rockets and Gatling gun and so forth and as the saying was, "Hose 'em down." Interesting experience because three times–and I've never heard of this happening ever before and the guys that I've talked to who flew helicopters have never heard of it before. But each time that we'd go down and headed down in, the pilot was sitting behind me and I was in the front seat with the Gatling gun and he would say, "Okay, Di Wee, hose 'em down."

And I'd pull the trigger and the only thing I heard was "click, click, click." And he said,

"Fire!" And I said,

"I'm trying!" "Click, click, click."

"Take your hands off the gun."

I put my hands up like that. He tried firing from his seat. "Click, click, click." We had to break off. We fired all our rockets and by that time we were practically in the trees. Fired off the rockets, pulled off, and flew over to a fire base. Jumped out of the ship and the armorer came out and pulled up the cowling. The lead shell in the trace of the belt, the lead shell had come out and gone cross-wise and blocked the breach. So the shells couldn't fire, couldn't go forward. And oh, my goodness. I had been in the Navy and I thought I heard profanity, but those guys had words

I had never heard before. They said, "This can't happen. This is impossible." Anyway, they fixed it, test-fired it, off we flew for our next mission. Same thing, "Click, click, click." That happened three times. Third time, as we were diving down and firing the rockets, this young fellow behind me was just livid and I said, whatever his name was, "Mr. So-and-so, I think you'd better take me back to base. Somebody's trying to give me a message I don't belong in this seat." Flew me back to Bien Hoa, kicked me out of the plane, off he went to war, guns fired marvelously.

Interviewer

Tell me about the morale of the men and what you're thinking about our military at that time.

Virgil Kovalenkol

You have to understand, Jeff, that I did not work with the Americans other than on Sunday when we met together for worship services. And during those times we didn't talk much about what was going on although we did have those conversations. So I was aware of a lot of discomfort and disillusionment, and there was a lot of that. We were not pleased with the direction that the military was going. There had been so many lies told and perpetrated on the American public. We, who were in the business of trying to write the stories as they happened, didn't know whether or not our stories would ever be told accurately, as we wrote them, as eyewitnesses of what we saw, experienced, did. So the feelings we had included what's the use? Do the best you can with our allies. Try to pump them up and help them strengthen themselves so they can carry the ball themselves which is what I tried to do. When I was told to go to the airport to Bien Hoa Air Base or the departure lounge for my freedom flight home. It was midnight and one of the LDS Vietnamese families that I was very close to, brought the whole family, nine children to the flight line, seven children at the time. And they were all in tears. I was in tears. Our plane was fueling up and the engines were running and we were waiting for two busloads of Army troops to come from Long Binh from the transition outbound. They were held up because of a firefight on the highway. And as you probably have heard or know, when the sun went down in Vietnam, the highways belonged to Charlie, to the Viet Cong. And whoa be unto any advisor to anybody else who was out on that highway, especially an American. So these guys were on these buses and they were caught in the firefight and by the time they made the through, burning tires and all kinds of stuff, their buses came screaming up to where the plane was waiting for them. And I was watching, I was the senior officer aboard. I was watching out of my window, of how those Army doggies were treated. They were taken off, lined up in file, with all of their gear right by their feet and then told to strip. And the Army brought in the drug-sniffing dogs and sniffed every one of those troops and their gear and once the dog cleared 'em, they put their clothes back on, told to get on board the airplane. They finally loaded and by this time the crew of the aircraft, they were just beside themselves because we were way behind our departure. Take off. The plane was at about an altitude of maybe, I don't know, about 1,500 feet or so. And we were climbing hard. And one of the stewardess came back to tell me we're taking fire. And the pilot reported to me later, that as we took off, five Americans in a watchtower on the Army

side thought it was pretty funny. They were whacked out of their minds on drugs. They thought it was pretty funny to try to shoot us down. So they were shooting at us. That's how I left Vietnam was under American fire. So what was my attitude? Well, disappointment in many ways. But I have to say also that for the majority of my time there, I was very satisfied with most of what we were trying to accomplish.

Interviewer

So many vets felt betrayed and are angry or suffering from PTSD. Do you have a message to them?

Virgil Kovalenkol

My message to my brothers who came home, welcome home, brothers. Put it behind you if you can. There are guys and girls, men and women, doctors, clergymen, family, who want to put their hand out and help you. You did your job. You weren't respected at the time. You weren't welcomed home as they are now. So what. Get on with life. It exists. You did your job. Stand tall. Be proud. Salute the flag because it is the ensign of freedom to the world. Whether the world likes it or not, that's tough. We are Americans. We did our job. We don't have to hang our heads even though I can't keep my head up. Welcome home, brothers.

Virgil Kovalenkol

For the most part my time in Vietnam I appreciated what the Americans were trying to do. I did not appreciate some of the American officers who came over there–I can think of three colonels–who came over there at the end of one month, the last day of one month and stayed overnight for the first day of the next month so they could go home and brag at their officers that they spent two months under combat conditions in Vietnam so they could collect their combat pay and have their ribbons. They did nothing. I was assigned as one of their escort officers so we had to take 'em to Vong Tao for R&R on the beach. I had to take 'em to see a fire base and to do this and that. Just kind of a show and tell, dog and pony show. They accomplished absolutely nothing. But they went home and told their war stories.

Interviewer

And they got two months' pay.

Virgil Kovalenkol

They did. They got the combat pay and didn't have to do a darn thing.

Interviewer

You're a patriotic American and you're trying to do a mission here. We want to tell about it all. What are some of the

lies you've encountering that have been told for so long that you witnessed?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Probably the most egregious one that I can think of is Henry Kissinger. If anybody was a traitor to this country and our allies, was Henry Kissinger. I had experience with that man in Vietnam as well as in Panama later.

Interviewer

Tell us about Vietnam.

Virgil Kovalenkol

The so-called Peace Accord Talks in Paris where he met with Le Duc Tho. They were supposed to be secret talks; the press didn't know anything about it. They knew they were happening but they didn't know what was going on. I went back to Vietnam in 1987 and on Vung Tau, my roommate and I went into an old building that used to be a café. Seated in that building, inside, in a half-circle, there was an old man. And in front of him were about five or six Vietnamese younger men listening to him. My roommate spoke Vietnamese so he stayed there. I couldn't stay because there was a lot of smoke and I'm allergic to tobacco. I couldn't stay in there and so I told him, "Bob, I can't breathe in here. Please tell me what's going on." So he stayed. When he came out his eyes were really wide and he said,

"Do you know who that guy was?" I said,

"No." He said,

"That was Le Duc Tho and he asked me,

'Why did you stop at the Easter Offensive in Hue?' He said, 'You had us on the ropes. We were within 30 minutes of surrendering unconditionally to you and you stopped. And you stopped the bombing of Ha Noi. Why?'" And Bob said,

"We were ordered to." He said,

"You had us. We were ready to stop. But when you stopped, that gave us heart."

And when I learned that in '87, it confirmed what I had come to know, but couldn't talk about in the '70s when I came home. When I came out of Vietnam and came to the University of Utah campus, the attitude on this campus was abysmal towards us who were still in the military. We were spat upon, we were called baby killers, we were maltreated, we were cursed.

Interviewer

Did this happen to you?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Oh, you bet. You bet. Right here in River City.

Interviewer

Tell me about one of those times.

Virgil Kovalenkol

Well, it was one of those classes that I had to take by a fairly well-known professor who I will not name. His attitude toward all things military was there's nothing good to say about the military and that it was a mistake to be in Vietnam, we shouldn't have been there in the first place. And I raised my hand and objected. Wrong thing to do for a doctoral student; you don't argue with the prof. And I tried to talk to him afterwards and he just flat would not listen to me. And there were a lot of students who swallowed that bilge.

Interviewer

Tell us about an insult.

Virgil Kovalenkol

Well this business of calling us baby kills who served in Vietnam, and especially those of us who, like I, who were advisors. I was asked,

"Why would you be an advisor to those gooks?" And I said,

"First of all, they're not gooks, they're human beings and they were our allies; we were sent there to train them."

"But they were immoral."

"How do you know? Did you work with them?"

"No."

"Were you there?" "No."

"Well then how do you know?"

"Well that's what I read in the papers."

When you hit that mindset, especially coming home from over there and everything is still fresh in your mind and the noise and the whop, whop, whop of the rotor blades that you hear all the time, all night long. And all that's still fresh to be told that you really wasted your time, that's not a fun thing to hear or experience. So my attitude was, okay, I'll just keep my mouth shut which is what my wife tried to train me and teach me to do anyways. She said, "Why are you so upset with all of these? Just shut up and don't say anything. Just do your classes, get through the program and have at it."

So I saluted smartly and said fine.

Interviewer

We hear this all the time that South Vietnam was corrupt. Can you put that in perspective?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Vietnam traditionally is in three parts. And if you're familiar with Louisa May Alcott's "Little Women" story, three sisters. The oldest is very staid, very proper, very prim. The middle sister wants to be a bit of a little bit looser but she tends toward the staid. The youngest sister, she's the party animal. Well that's the way Vietnam was. North Vietnam, Ha Noi and all that, very traditional, strict, and under the Communists, even more strict. The middle part, which is Da Nang and all that, that was the middle kind of thing. I learned later, after going back to Vietnam several times, that Da Nang had some fascinating histories and museums that go back 2,500 years in their history. But South Vietnam was wide open and the corruption was rampant all over the place and it was not helped by the free-thinking of what a lot of the Americans brought in. Not just the military, but the civilian contractors who came into Vietnam, there was widespread corruption and it was well-known across the board all avenues of the society. You can make millions in South Vietnam if that's what you want to do. Prostitution, drugs absolutely and jacking up prices for all kinds of material.

Interviewer

Black market?

Virgil Kovalenkol

And black marketeering was also very rampant. We had a doctor, an American doctor on our side of the base, on the American side of the base. When he went aboard his freedom flight to go home, the Air Force OSI, the Officer of Special Investigation agents came aboard and arrested him for black marketeering and they confiscated, out of his office, piles and piles and piles of everything you could think of: tobacco, I heard cigarettes, alcohol, refrigerators, all sorts of things. We didn't have computers in those days, these little handheld things. But cameras. Anything and everything you could think of, he had stacked in his office and he boxed them up to ship home. They waited until he was aboard the plane to make sure that they could make the charge stick against him that he was actually going to deal in black marketeering. And then they arrested him and when the plane landed in Oakland they confiscated all his gear and off he went to Leavenworth.

Interviewer

Was South Vietnam uniquely corrupt or was there a crucible going on because of the war?

Virgil Kovalenkol

I think it was more a crucible. That kind of corruption has existed since time immemorial during war time. During the Korean War, and I was involved in that when I was in the Navy, there was corruption all over the place, throughout the Navy in our ships and so forth. And among the military camps in Korea, they had the same kind of a problem. So it wasn't unique to Vietnam. Vietnam was more visible to the outside world because of this flood of media that poured in there to file a story and say, "Hey, I was in Vietnam and I did this and that and so forth and look what I wrote and see, I know what the truth is because I was there. I saw it with my eyes; I heard it with my ears, yadda, yadda." Yeah, lies, all lies.

Interviewer

Tell us about the church thing. We talked by a guy in Cedar City, there was a general conference in Saigon. This is amazing.

Virgil Kovalenkol

Oh, yeah. October of 1967, Gordon B. Hinckley and Marion D. Hanks came to Vietnam and held a district conference on the top of the Dak Lak Hotel; the 14th floor there, they had a big restaurant up there. And they cleared out that restaurant and that's where they held this district conference. And at that time, Gordon B. Hinckley was an assistant to the Twelve Apostles of the LDS Church and he said that he felt inspired to dedicate Vietnam for the teaching of the gospel, which is what they did during that conference. Many years later, as president of the church, in 1996, he went back to Vietnam and rededicated the country. And I am grateful that I had a part, a smart part in that activity. South Vietnam was divided into four military–but for the church's concern, we had three districts: North, Central, and South districts. Each district was presided over by a district presidency of a president and two counselors and a district counsel anywhere from five to seven or eight or nine men. We had the full range of church activities. In Saigon we had one Vietnamese branch of Vietnamese church members.

Between April 6th, 1973 and April 14th, 1975, 15 full-time LDS missionaries from the Hong Kong Mission were sent to Vietnam to do their missionary service. And among the various restrictions on them was they could not go door-to-door and knock on doors. They didn't have to. All they did was they had a map of the city and each pair would go out in a certain part of the city and they would just stand on a corner looking at a map, looking lost. And inevitably, Vietnamese would come up to them and say,

"Excuse me, may we be of help?"

"Yes, we're looking for such-and-such an address on such-and-such a–"

"Oh, yeah, you go down this street and you turn and you–"

and they were baptizing people like crazy. In those two years that the missionaries were there, they had a phenomenal success. It was a great experience for them. From our standpoint, when I was set apart as group leader at Bien Hoa, one of the first things I was told was

, "Now look. You have enlisted and you have officers. You cannot have fraternization. You cannot proselyte. As an officer, you cannot go to an enlisted man and say, 'Would you like to know more?'"
We didn't have to. Didn't have to. We just simply said when the guys would check into Bien Hoa they were given a map of the base and if they were LDS they had to fill out a little card, what is your religion of preference. And if they put down Mormon or LDS or something like that, they were immediately told there was an LDS chapel over there, across the runway or across the base. And that little chapel became our refuge. But we had our saying, when anybody new would come in, we didn't care what his rank was, we told him,
"You walk through the doors of this little chapel, you leave your rank outside. Inside, we're brothers in the priesthood."

Interviewer

You said "refuge."

Virgil Kovalenkol

I called that little chapel our refuge because that was home for us. That was a feeling, hey, we're home. This is LDS. We don't have to worry about this war thing and being a Green Beret or being an advisor or being a pilot or being whatever we were doing in the war. Yeah, we're wearing our uniform, but this is our home. Treat it as such. And so it was our refuge away from the clamor of what was going on around us.

Interviewer

Why would these people join the Mormon church of all things?

Virgil Kovalenkol

One of the things that I became aware of, and I can illustrate it by a personal story. When I arrived there, I had my own military driver's license and I was qualified to drive a big Bluebird bus, 42-passenger bus. And so every Sunday I would take that bus and go all the way around all the bases and pick up anybody who wanted to go to church. Back in those days we didn't have this three-hour block routine. We would morning, middle of the day, and evening services. So I would drive the bus around and pick up guys. And we'd pick up anybody who was walking. Quite a few of them would climb on the bus and say,
"Take me over to the airman's club, I want to go to breakfast." Okay, we'd drive them. If they were on the bus and they started to light up, the LDS guys would say, "Hey, you can't smoke on this bus." Or if they started to tell off-color stories– "You can't swear on this bus, you can't tell those kind of stories."
And so the word went around very quickly.
"Is this the God-squad bus?" And we said,

"Yes. You're welcome to go to church with us."

"Well, I don't think so, I'll pass on that." Most of 'em were hung over. So we'd drop them off and then we'd go to church. One we could was district conference in Saigon so I checked out the bus and we loaded up our guys and we drove from Bien Hoa down to Saigon. And as we pulled into the all-faith's chapel in Tan Son Nhut Air Base, I found a place to park the bus. And the guys aboard my bus, some of them were Rangers who had just come out of firefights and they had their weapons with them. And most of them were in their uniforms; I was in civilian clothes as I was driving. And as I opened the doors, there was a line of Vietnamese youth sitting on a curb across the street watching us. And as we started coming out of the bus, they stood up and started saying,

"Yankees go home! Yankees go home!"

These guys on the bus became really angry at that and they said,

"Brother Kovalenko, you go on into the chapel and we'll go over and clean their clocks, we'll take care of this. You don't worry about it, we'll take care of it." And I said,

"We didn't come here to clean blocks, brethren."

"That's okay, brother, you just go ahead."

So they started towards these youngsters and that's when they changed their chant with smiles and they said,

"Yankees go home but leave us the priesthood."

That's when we learned they were LDS converts of the Saigon branch. In answer to the question, how does a culture reared in Catholicism and Buddhism convert to Mormonism? That's an excellent question because they learned very quickly, as their families had association with American Mormons, there was something different about these guys. They didn't smoke, they didn't drink, they didn't come to chase women for the most part. They behaved themselves. They had a belief system, they loved their families. They wanted to know more. And so they would start asking questions. We couldn't proselyte, but that's when we could answer questions. We were told in our briefings as we came in, you cannot proselyte. But if somebody asks you a question about your religion, go ahead and answer.

Interviewer

In some ways Mormonism is uniquely North American. But for someone in Southeast Asia it is totally foreign to them. How do they grasp this?

Virgil Kovalenkol

You have to understand in how the Vietnamese reacted to Mormon teaching. They are a people who are steeped in history. They know their history. And so when they started hearing the stories about the Mormons being persecuted for their beliefs and that there's a young man who saw God and claimed he saw God and then began teaching doctrines that united families and explained who we are, where we came from, why we're on this earth, where are

we going if we behave ourselves and all that kind of thing, they reacted to those kind of messages. There was none of this business of, well, that's a North American religion. It was a world religion by the time that we were there and they reacted to that and the message was,

"Hey, if you believe this, we would like you to learn how to pray so you can learn for yourself."

"What do you mean, pray? I go to the pagoda."

"No, no, no. We'll teach you how to pray directly to your Father in Heaven." "You will? Will He answer?"

"Oh, yeah. All you have to do is believe."

"How do I do that?"

And so we would teach that.

Interviewer

Do you feel like some of these people joined the church because they thought it was a ticket to freedom to America?

Virgil Kovalenkol

There are probably some folks who felt that by joining the Mormon Church they would have some sort of an avenue to special treatment or freedom or so forth. That did exist but very infrequently. Most of them were very devout in their conversions. There are some who are now here through our work later on; I have personal experience with a number of those families.

Interviewer

You could see the whole thing coming down, the ending of the war. You knew this was going to be under Communist rule. Did you think how do we protect them once they're one of us?

Virgil Kovalenkol

That's an excellent question, Geoff, and the simple answer to that is yes. It was a deep concern. A very deep concern. And in '75, by that time I was in Panama. When Saigon fell on 30th of April, 1975, a week later there was an immediate message that came out from the Defense Department asking for anybody who had served as an advisor at any level, in any service, please volunteer and come back and help with the evacuation that was going on so heavily then. I tried to volunteer. But my second level supervisor in Panama was an alcoholic jackass and he refused to send my volunteer statement forward which was illegal for him, it was a violation of rules and regulations. But he wouldn't let me go and he wouldn't explain. He said simply that no, I couldn't go. But I had personal experiences during the middle of a couple of nights where some of those very dear Vietnamese friends pleaded, "Please, Di Wee, come and save us. Save our families."

For the next 20-some-odd years, I've dedicated my life to trying to do that. They wouldn't let me do it in '75. And it took seven years, until 1982, before I could find that one family that I had been so close to in Bien Hoa. In a way, they actually found me. A letter came from Vietnam, wound up in the translation department of the Church headquarters. And through a series of events, one of the secretaries happened to look in the phonebook. She was told throw the letter away or put it in the unknown box. But she looked in the Salt Lake directory and saw my name. My name happened to be on the envelope and so she called my home and my wife answered. The secretary asked her,

"Did your husband serve in Vietnam?"

"Yes."

"There's a letter here that seems to be addressed to him."

"She said what's the return address?"

The lady read it off to her and she said,

"Oh, he knows that family. He was their home teacher."

Well by then I was working up at Hill Air Force Base as executive officer for the 6545th Test Group. And my wife called up there and she said, "You'll never believe this."

So she told me about this letter and this situation. And when she told me who the letter was from, I screamed. My secretaries came running down the hall to find out if I'd been shot. And that's how all this business started of contacting fellows who had been stationed there with me in that LDS group saying the family is alive, what do we do about it?

Interviewer

What did you do about it?

Virgil Kovalenkol

We decided we were going to organize an LDS Veterans Association, which we did. And we existed for the following 18 years with the main proviso of going back to Vietnam and trying to find the LDS families who had been left behind and cut off and abandoned of the Saigon branch. And were we successful? Yes, in part. We went back there and we made contact with 23 of those families. And of those 23 we were able to bring out 16 or parts of 16 families and relocate them.

Interviewer

The family that wrote you the letter, what were their names?

Virgil Kovalenkol

The father's name was (Du Win Lok Tok? 01:04:24). His wife's name was Tran Thi Son.

Interviewer

Were you successful in getting them out?

Virgil Kovalenkol

It took us 14 years. They were our very first family and it took us 14 years of going through the stupidity of the U.S. State Department and the Ha Noi refugee release department. He had been arrested three times and put back in jail. I went there in '87, '88, and '89 and met with him. Well anyway, long stories. But it took us 14 years of going through all the bureaucracy and we finally brought them out. May 8th, 1996, they arrived in Salt Lake City. Not all of them, just the ones who were eligible.

Interviewer

When was the first time you got face-to-face with them in country?

Virgil Kovalenkol

In April of 1987.

Interviewer

What did you say to him?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Very emotional. I was being watched by the secret police everywhere I went because they had my dossier, they knew who I was. They knew my previous assignments in the Air Force. They knew that before being an advisor, they knew that I had been a counter intelligent agent for the Air Force. So I was being watched everywhere I went. So I couldn't touch him.

Interviewer

What did you say?

Virgil Kovalenkol

The first thing was, "Hello, Brother Kovalenko. Nice to see you." And by then he was driving, as you may know, a Xich Lo, a rickshaw kind of thing. It was a bicycle seat and a front seat. So for four and a half hours, in that visit, I sat in the front seat of that Xich Lo with him, this little Vietnamese man, perched on that bicycle seat pedaling me all

around Saigon and we were talking all the time. We stopped for rest, we stopped and sat on a bench. I couldn't touch him, but we sat next to each other and we were talking quietly. But the police agents, security agents were at every corner, they had their recording devices and they were trying to record what we were saying. They couldn't pick us up, but anyway. That was a joyous experience to see him again, to ask him about the family. At that time, anybody of the South Vietnamese government/military, if they had been sent to reeducation camps–which we had been, he'd been arrested three times–anybody who went all of those things, once they were released back into society, they were known as "dust people" because they were lower than the dust. They were not allowed to hold jobs, they were not allowed to send their children to public schools, they were not allowed to do anything. They just didn't exist. They were literally non-people to the Communists. Some of them were sent out into the boondocks into swamp areas to live. I went out to one of those areas and those former prisoners and their families had cleared all that out and made themselves a little community. It was a tremendous experience. But, the reaction of seeing him was so dramatic. Did I see any of the other LDS families? Oh, you bet. There were a couple of them who were standing on the street corner or leaning on a building as I passed by and two of the men said, "Hello, Brother Kovalenko. Nice to see you." Because by then, since 1982, to that time, to '87, there had been a lot of letters exchanged back and forth. So they knew who I was, they knew who our organization was or what we were and what we were trying to do to help them. And they had been helped by our organization. We'd been sending care packages, we'd been sending religious materials dare I say clandestine? No, it wasn't clandestine. We sent them a few pages at a time in each letter. We learned, sadly, to our chagrin, that the care packages, when they would arrive, they would have to declare them at the customs shed at the airport or the post office which would be opened then by the officials and everything examined and then they would be taxed heavily on everything we had in those packages. So very gently, Brother (Thot? 01:09:15) said, and one of the others, Brother (Lom?), said, "Brother Kovalenko, please don't send us these boxes anymore because we can't afford to pay the tax on it." And that's the first time we knew that they had to pay these heavy excise taxes; 30 percent on everything that was in there. And we had sent them soap and shampoo and paper and pencils and so forth, just to help them.

Interviewer

So here you are working with these people while you are also an advisor.

Virgil Kovalenkol

You know, one of the things that became very interesting in my assignments of these three hats that told you I had to wear, as part of my psychological warfare and political warfare assignments, I was also a civic affairs officer which meant that I went out into the villages to help build schools and clinics. We couldn't build hospitals because we didn't have the equipment. But we would build little medical clinics. There was a village just outside of the Bien Hoa complex, it was known as Buu Long. And so my counterpart, the guy I worked for, took me out there to

introduce me to the village chief and the village council, I guess you could call it. So they threw this big banquet for me to introduce me as the new advisor, yadda, yadda, yadda. Big long table and they brought out food, I mean every kind of Vietnamese food. Delicious. It was my introduction to the Vietnamese culture and cuisine and so forth. And as an honor to me they brought out this humongous fish. I'm not very much of a fish eater kind of guy. Carp, I think it was. But the way they prepared it, I took one bite of that and my head almost exploded. They had such heavy spices in that thing, it just burned my mouth. And the village chief was sitting right across from me and he saw my distress because my face broke out in sweat and he asked in Vietnamese, he asked my counterpart,
"Is he ill?" And my counterpart looked at me and he said in English,
"Di Wee, what's the matter?" And I said,
"I can't eat this, it's too hot."
And oh, that was my first major faux pas in Vietnam as an advisor. I embarrassed the heck out of that whole council. And within a matter of about 15 seconds the village chief yelled at a couple of the girls who were serving us and they came and took that whole platter of fish off. And so for the next 15 minutes we sat and we talked and we talked and they waited until my face wasn't flushed. And they kept bringing me bottles and bottles of orange drink, orange soda pop to calm down the fire that was going on. And within 15 minutes they brought out another fish, but it didn't have the heavy spices and so I could eat that. That was my introduction to Vietnam culture and how gracious they were. My preconceived notions, when I went to Vietnam were completely wide open. Based on what I had been reading and my previous experience as a counterintelligence agent, I had access to all sorts of secret and top-secret reports. So I had some preconceived notions about what was going on over there. But not having any personal experience, this was my first. And I had to lay aside all of that preconceived trash that I'd carried with me because these were gentle people. These were respectful people. These were people who trusted. And then it was very easy for me to reflect on that first interview.
"You smoke?"
"No."
"You drink?" "No."
"You chase our women?"
"No."
"You married?"
"Yes."
"You Mormon?"
"Yes."
"Okay, I accept you."
And I figured if he's going to ask me those kind of questions and say then he accepts me because I'm Mormon, I'll accept him and I'll accept the people that he represents. That's when I learned to have a deep affection for them.

This business of being a civic affairs officer and going out and building these clinics and schools and trying to help the villages with their teachers, to learn how to organize their classes in functional realities instead of just the traditional–there's nothing wrong with their old traditions–but with the new things that were going on in education at that time, we tried to introduce those to them and they appreciated it. The sad part about it was–and the reality of the war was–during the day, we could go out and do all of these things in the villages. When nighttime came, Charlie came in and went to the villages and said don't believe those Americans, they're lying to you. If you believe them, we will burn down this village. We will kill all your chiefs and your husbands."

Interviewer

Did they ever do that?

Virgil Kovalenkol

They did. Very frequently. That was a brutal, brutal time. That happened more toward the Central and North. It did happen in the South quite frequently in the outlying villages. When Westmoreland was there as the commander–forgive me, but that man was an idiot. He made a lot of mistakes. For instance, just one big mistake was he touted when he came back to the United States, to Congress and everybody else with great big charts about how his guys discovered the tunnels that were known as the Tunnels of Cu Chi; that the Viet Cong had this big labyrinth of tunnels and that they flooded them and they did all this and the Navy booted them out. I went into those tunnels later in '87. That man was an idiot. He didn't realize that those tunnels were in three layers. He only saw the first layer. But there was a secondary and a tertiary level of those tunnels and in those tertiary levels, way down there, the Viet Cong had constructed hospitals–not clinics–hospitals, field hospitals. And those tunnels ran for miles and miles and miles, spread out all over the place. But the thing that was so ridiculous about it–and this didn't happen just in the Tunnels of Cu Chi, but also at Marble Mountain outside of Da Nang at China Beach. Underneath the American headquarters, under Westmoreland's headquarters, where they had the operation shacks for the helicopters where they launched all the airstrikes and so on and so forth. The Viet Cong had their communications equipment right directly under them with their antennas and all they did is just raise the antenna and they intersected and interdicted every transmission that we had. And so all of the frag orders that Lyndon Johnson tried to manipulate and run the war from the White House basement, everything that Lyndon Johnson said over there, as far as a frag order, "This is what you're gonna do, and you're gonna go over here and you're gonna do this and you're gonna do this air strike over here and yadda, yadda, yadda," the Vietnamese Communists knew that before we did, before our air strikes did.

Interviewer

You had a love of these people and you knew they had to survive with torn dual loyalties, even LDS members.

Virgil Kovalenkol

Well that's true. The LDS, I'll have to say from my own personal view of them, 98 percent of the LDS Vietnamese converts became absolutely dedicated and converted to what they had been taught. There were a few who maintained a foot in each camp for survival. It didn't serve them very well. I can think of one who never joined the church but he and his wife became very adept at manipulating their economic position with the Communists, and they still do.

Interviewer

How did they feel about the civilian deaths that were happening?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Well, going back to what I said about attending those public briefings in Saigon, there were, during those years, tremendous numbers of images and pictures that were broadcast and sent back. And the attitude of the editors then, as now: What will sell newspapers? What will sell magazines? Give them gore. Give them blood. Give them guts. Oh, look at this picture, Pulitzer Prize girl burned my napalm. Horrible Americans. Look what they're doing to the villagers. Yeah, right. Sad and terrible and horrible. But realities of war. When you consider World War II, the bombing of Dresden, how many were killed? The bombing of Hiroshima, of Nagasaki, how many were killed? Exigencies of war. Do I therefore discount or excuse? Under no circumstance. As far as the LDS were concerned, as far as our presence in Vietnam, we did not have branches or groups of LDS converts in the outlying villages. We had one branch in Saigon at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. That was the only Vietnamese branch. All Vietnamese who were baptized throughout South Vietnam belonged to that branch. That meant that we had an isolated member who was baptized up in Da Nang, she belonged to that Saigon branch although she never could attend. We had a couple who were baptized in Cam Ronh Bay. They could never attend unless they went with the Americans to district conference, they couldn't attend. But that doesn't discount what happened to a lot of these outlying villages. As I mentioned, during the day, we would go out and build these clinics and schools and we would teach self-sufficiency and we would try to help them become as capable as they could be, based on what we were bringing to them, what we thought was a good way of life. And they accepted. And then at night the Viet Cong would come in and say they're all lying to you and we're going to kill you if you believe 'em. Okay, so that puts them in a dichotomy. What do we do? By day we're friends. By night? And on every military base we had Vietnamese employees; the grunts called them mama-sans. These were women who would wash our clothes and shine our shoes and clean our rooms and all that kind of thing. And there was supposed to be a vetting process of interviewing and making sure that they were loyal, trustworthy, and all that kind of stuff. But there was the feeling that quite a few of them were double agents, and quite a few of them were. How did we deal with that? Well, we just simply put up with it. Could we identify them? Many times, yeah, you bet. I mentioned that in our air base we had a little enclosure of

Special Forces, the Green Beret guys and they very good in ferreting out who these double agents were. Sadly, they had some corrupt sergeants among them who were more interested in the flesh pots and the black marketeering than they were in serving the cause of freedom. How do I feel about it? I'm disgusted with it. Could I have done anything at the time? I tried. But remember the military structure, I was a captain, I was a Di Wee–which means "captain" in Vietnamese. I was in a middle of the food chain and some of the people who were above me in the food chain didn't want to hear my complaints. So I had to learn to avoid being too direct for fear of putting my dear friends in horrible harm's way. I think one of the best honors that came to me was when I was ready to leave Vietnam in '72. For those of us of our team who were leaving, the Vietnamese commander, colonel, held a pass in review in our honor. And he had us standing at attention in the hot, miserable, humid sun of Vietnam. And he pinned some Vietnamese medals on our shirts and on mine. And he personally thanked me. And I thought, "Colonel, how do you even know who I am?" Well, evidently my counterpart had made some favorable comments that I wasn't exactly the worst advisor that he'd ever had. Did I ever see that counterpart again? Oh, yes. He was one of them who came to me in my dreams in '75. He said, "Please, save my family."

Interviewer

So on April 30th, you're watching TV. Tell us about what you thought?

Virgil Kovalenkol

That was probably one of the hardest things I ever did, was seeing that massive pile of people rush to the American embassy. Trying to climb up to the rooftop to go on the aircraft and the helicopters. And later learning how many were left behind and right down at the fence line were five or six or seven of those LDS families. They didn't make it. The last plane out of there, out at Tan Son Nhut, left on the 21st of April. Last American aircraft. The last helicopter, Marine helicopter, left on the 30th off the rooftop. But the last commercial air flight was on the 21st of April. We had a few LDS there who were aboard, including an American civilian, Mel Madsen, who was one of the complete unsung heroes. He did everything he could to get as many of the Saigon branch on aircraft and get 'em out. He was successful in some parts. But that last aircraft literally, as they were pulling the door shut, they had people standing in the door kicking the Vietnamese away. "Get away, get away, get away." And by then the runway was being shelled on the outskirts of the city and so it was pockmarked. Dramatic.

Interviewer

So what did you think when you saw that on TV?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Well, my feeling was, "Oh, my poor friends. What can be done? What's going to happen?" And at that time, with the

total complete chaos, nobody knew. It wasn't until quite a bit later that I learned what actually happened. On May 1st, the next day, on every telephone pole around the city of Saigon, and all other cities throughout South Vietnam, all the major cities–on every post were bills pasted on there with instructions from the new regime. If you ever served in the military, if you ever served with Americans, if you ever were in the Republic of Vietnam or the previous regime in any capacity, you must appear and register for reeducation for maybe two days. And depending on your rank or where you were, where you served, anywhere from two days to a week. Right. You ever want to believe a Communist? Be my guest. But my friends, our dear comrades, were locked up in those reeducation camps, those prisons anywhere from two and a half to ten years.

Interviewer

What did they tell you went on in those camps?

Virgil Kovalenkol

I have pictures of 'em. They were put to hard labor. I don't know if you're old enough to remember the old CCC–Civilian Construction Corps–back in the World War II, but it was basically that. It was slave labor to build recreation centers, gardens, reconstruct villages. But it was all hard labor. Making little ones out of big ones, right? You know, that kind of thing. I have stories from those camps of Brother The who was the branch president of Saigon when it fell. And he was locked up for two and a half years and they had one chicken to serve 50 people–I think it was 50 people–in his group. One chicken every so often.

Interviewer

Did any people die of starvation?

Virgil Kovalenkol

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Many of them survived and were able to be released to go back to their families, but as I said, once they were released they were non-people, they were non-citizens. They didn't exist. They were lower than the dust. They were even lower than the Amerasians. And Amerasians didn't have any class at all.

Interviewer

Those were the children of the GIs and --?

Virgil Kovalenkol

And the Vietnamese.