

ALAN PHILLIPS -- MAAG PERIOD '63-'64', '66 – '67

Alan: My name is Allan Phillips, A-L-A-N, Phillips with two Ls. I live now in Frederick, Maryland. I was brought up in Vermont.

I served in Vietnam in '63 and then November '66 to November '67. In the first tour of '63, I was an adviser to Ranger Training Center for three months and then was an assistant battalion adviser to the 7th Battalion of the Vietnamese Airborne Brigade. In '66, '67. I was the commander of the 173rd Long Range Patrol outfit. For five months and the remainder of my tour, I was company commander of A Company, 4th battalion, 503rd Infantry, 173rd.

My dad was in [second wars 00:00:54], a Korea naval officer. We lived in Vermont. I was actually born in New York in '37 but we lived in Vermont from my earliest memories. Went to first grade there. Then, after the war, we moved around to different places with my father but generally, I grew up in Vermont. I went to first through the fifth grade there and then came back and went to high school there.

After graduating from high school in London where my dad was stationed at that time, I went from high school straight into West Point. I'd wanted to go to the Naval Academy and then West Point. I had both nominations. My dad, Korean naval officer, rather than NAPS, said the Army's a better deal. I ended up at West Point. I had an older brother who'd gone to West Point before me.

I was commissioned in the infantry and 1959. I was married. I went to Germany in an infantry battalion, and then about two years into that tour, the call came out to volunteers to go as adviser to the southeast Asia. This was Kennedy era [inaudible 00:02:20], so I volunteered for that.

Two of us in that battalion volunteered to go. We left Germany in September of '62. I went to training at Fort Bragg and language training at Monterey, and arrived in Vietnam in January of '63. It was hot. It was a small outfit then. [inaudible 00:02:49] several thousand advisers.

We arrived in class A uniform and were met on at the airport by a classmate, in fact. One of the first things I recall is driving from [Townsend 00:03:09] Airport to the processing center. There was French tricolor on a cemetery there, so there was still a lot of French influence in 63. We went to the in-process for a couple of days and then went off to about an area about 30 or 40 miles to the northwest to a Ranger training center.

That's largely correct. More important was to inculcate in them, to work with the people, to protect their hamlets. That was a time when we had the Strategic Hamlet approach. We'd arm a local militia in the hamlets to defend themselves and winning their hearts and minds. It was one of those. I bought into that and no question about that. Both the units I was involved with, the Ranger training center, these were Ranger battalions and the parachute battalions, we're really offensive. Find where they are and destroy them as opposed to the people building a strategic hamlets and training guards. There was a two-pronged approach to that. One was to protect the people and the other one was to eliminate the enemy, as far as domino theory.

Producer: [inaudible 00:04:52] the spirit, if there was one.

Alan: I was with elite units. The fighting spirit was good. The officers in the Parachute Brigade, a few of them had received their officer training and their commissions from [inaudible 00:05:11]. The battalions trace their lineage. One or two of the battalions trace their lineage to French colonial forces, veterans of [DMVM to 00:05:22]. I don't agree that the population illiterate. It's a pretty literate population. One of the problems was targeted assassination of school teachers by the Viet Cong. That's the strategic hamlets, we're trying to protect these people. It was cruel. Small unit patrolling and communications training, lot of small unit patrolling.

Producer: When you go out then, would you got out on missions with them in search and destroy?

Alan: We would go out on missions with them. There were training missions but there's plenty of enemy around, so you'd generally make some contact on these missions. They were local, at that time they were local Viet Cong. They were not the North Vietnamese army yet and they were dedicated. They wanted to takeover the country.

You're aware that when the partition of Vietnam came in 1954 and there was 300 days when people could move freely from north to south and the other way. I don't think anybody want the other way. You brought down from the North Vietnam. I would guess close to a million refugees who were Christian, intellectual, and [economist 00:06:59]. They're the people that were trying to survive in South Vietnam. That was the Viet Mihn organized by the North Vietnamese to try to consolidate the country.

That's interesting. We gave them, we furnished them with, generally, carbines, light weapon .30 caliber carbines. They were outgun by the AK47s of the Viet Minh. They had US artillery, US machine guns, and mortars. They had aircraft, prop-driven Skyraiders, things like that.

I don't think consciously we did. I think it was a decision to arm them with the M1 carbines and M2 carbines, that was a mistake because we thought that the M14, which was our standard weapon going in was too big. We may have had a lot of M1s kicking around. I don't know. The M16 or the AR15 was just coming into our inventory. The advisers carry the M16. We didn't give them to the Vietnamese.

I think in retrospect, [inaudible 00:08:29] recognize it as a mistake throughout the whole war not arming them with our frontline weapons. As far as the size, no, I don't think it was a conscious problem that [inaudible 00:08:44] got a problem that we [felt 00:08:44] we had to address. They carry big rucksacks. They carry a lot of stuff.

I don't think so. No, we weren't sure when it was going to end. I never imagined we would end up with half a million troops there in 3 years later. No. That was a bit of a surprise. There was a lot of talk in the units about something's going to happen. The airborne brigade had been responsible for a coup attempt earlier on, 2 years earlier. It didn't surprise me that something was going to happen.

Reading it much later, reading all the history on it, I'm not sure it was a smart thing to get the CIA and the Kennedy White House to engineer this thing or at least to let it happen, although they made it happen or let it happen is clear, one of the two. It happened. I don't know what would happen, how it would turn out if we had not supported the coup. It's one of those things with the [greyhound chest 00:10:19] chasing the bus. We got the same bloody thing going on in the Middle East. We topple the government [and said 00:10:26], my goodness, if we broken all to China.

Back to your question, the feeling, it was not a surprise. The senior officers and the units I was with would have been aware of it. We got the word about midnight when we were in Cu Chi which is a bit to the northwest. We marched all night into Cu Chi, commandeered a bunch of buses and trucks, and headed to the palace. That was all, it was planned. We headed straight for the palace and we were there for couple of days. The advisers disappeared. An adviser team and the battalion was generally one non-commissioned officer, one lieutenant or captain, and one captain or major. There's three of us and we had radios.

Producer: Small units, you're going out and [said 00:11:33] the field. You're trying to make contact with the VC to [parrot 00:11:36] them out?

Alan: Yeah.

Producer: Things start getting hot. You don't just stand there and watch these [urban 00:11:43], you pick up a gun and return fire yourself. Was that common?

Alan: No. Not in the unit that I was in. We carried weapon certainly. These battalions had been fighting and fighting. They say somebody's [outfits in trees 00:11:58] still lineage to, they were French colonial forces. What we could bring to them was logistics support, air support, and intelligence. We had an intelligence processing capability and this was done at a much higher level in Saigon. That was the value. As far as training them to shoot, training them to patrol, they were well beyond the need for that. They were good soldiers.

Producer: What were you ... keep out and find of those [at DC 00:12:37] and then bring that info back?

Alan: Let me go back. The first part of my tour was at the Ranger Training Center and yes, we were teaching them what a patrol should consist of, how it should be organized, and what typical missions. In the majority of my tour with the Vietnamese airborne brigade, they knew their job. We were there for two reasons. I think, frankly, we were there to get experience on guerrilla warfare ourselves and we were there to provide them strategic communications, air support, and that's about it. We did send a number of advisers over to Malaya at that time, to do the Malayan jungle school. Today, they had defeated the insurgency there. We were trying to learn how to cope with this enemy.

Producer: Because this was new kind of worker before.

Alan: We were in Korean war, World War II gear, and we've been trained how to fight the Soviets in Central Europe and we have been warned that we're not going to get involved in that land war in Asia.

Producer: Did you find that some of equipment? What were some examples?

Alan: Leather boots don't last long in the jungle. The weapons that can shoot accurately at 500 meters is not much good in the jungle, and infantry gear, rucksacks. We had come up with rucksacks and rations. It think the whole gamut was we had to learn. There's no secret. We always prepare to fight the last war.

It was that better suited but the ammunition is heavier and the weapons are a little heavier than the M16 or the AR15. The M14, we should never have brought that over there, 7.62 caliber. That was a NATO weapon, NATO standard. That was to fight the Soviets. We realized that. I remember that we were given the option to carry the M3 grease gun, which is a .45-caliber, that heavy as can be. We didn't want to carry that but short range it can spray out a lot of lead. That didn't take on.

It was clear, the question, the AK47, it's a simple weapon that doesn't break down. I guess the only drawback is it's heavy. In '63, the marines had H-34s. I

don't remember any army units with the choppers there. The marines had H-34s and we use them up in the north for medical evacuation from time to time but the Huey, the age of the Huey was just dawning at that point. It didn't come in real force until '65 when we brought US units, army units in.

Producer: Now, [you're 00:16:19] primarily [work 00:16:19] ...

Alan: The CIDG. Yeah, we did because when the Vietnamese Airborne Battalion, we fought in all four core areas, when we go into to an area because there was an intelligence [development 00:16:36], a buildup. We would always coordinate with the local village chief and the CIDG would be the one, [we'd be 00:16:46] responsive to the needs of the village chief, so we'd always check them for intelligence.

That would be done Vietnamese to Vietnamese level. The advisers, for example, we went to play coup the central highlands. I would go to the senior adviser of that area, senior American [and see 00:17:08] we're here. Yeah, we know you're here and this is our mission. We would coordinate to make sure that everybody knew what was going on.

They're dedicated. I'm not sure about all the troops, whether they had a draft, [inaudible 00:17:28] the conscription army. Just like our own special troops, you might get drafted but you volunteer to be in a lead unit and you meet the standards and you're accepted. There was no defeatism that I could sense in '63 on the part of the Vietnamese parachute officers. They ended up running the country.

Producer: Now that you were there and you were training these troops, did you have any memorable encounters with the enemy that still stick out in your mind?

Alan: No. We made contact but none I particularly remember [inaudible 00:18:22] the leaves start dropping down and you know that if you stand up you might get hit but nothing that I carry away with me.

Producer: The VC learned their technique of booby traps that they [crosstalk 00:18:38] perfected?

Alan: Yeah. They had used it, perfected early on. These are left over from, I would guess, by the Japanese. We carry our own food. I'm not sure exactly what the point is but we were resupplied frequently by parachute. Live chickens, live ducks, rice, fruits, [some in 00:19:10] vegetables. I'm talking now about 1963 We parceled out and they would cook in two or three-man groups and prepare their own meals.

The difference was in the load is we wore steel helmets and the enemy didn't. We were a long way from home many times and they were living in that area. The logistical pay off for them was shorter but we were pretty self-sufficient.

Producer: Wait. You were still eating World War II K-Rations?

Alan: We were eating pretty much the Vietnamese rations. The World War II rations had gone but the C-Rations were in. They were cumbersome. We generally eat the C-Rations, the Vietnamese rations. It was new form of freeze-dried, lightweight [alert 00:20:22] rations, which were indigenous. They had fishes and things like that.

You'd jump ahead to '66, '67. '63, no.

Producer: [crosstalk 00:20:31] Something like that.

Alan: There was no track wheels. Maybe there were some but they haven't put a [parade but 00:20:39] there were some armored units and we only know what we saw. We're all victims where we were, where we were when, but there were some armored units with, I think, was M113 track vehicles, personnel carriers.

They were good in some parts of the country we ended up generally going to parts of the country where they [are no good 00:21:11] it all, no trails.

I don't know but that's certainly. The casualties go back to the late 50s. We had people there early on. In '62, '63, the first significant number of people that went in was [as the results 00:21:50] of the Kennedy campaign. We had sent a lot of them. [Lieutenants in there 00:21:50], I was a lieutenant, and captains. Yes, they were casualties.

Producer: I think I heard the number ones that early, that sound right?

Alan: Order magnitude probably, yeah. I would guess 1 or 2,000 we [they 00:22:05] came in. I would say 5000 by the end of the year maybe 6,000. Of course, the ironic thing was president [then 00:22:17] was, he was assassinated I think in the 1st of November. Then three weeks later, when the radio operator came to me and said, in Vietnamese, he said, "Kennedy has been shot."

We were out in the woods. He got shot. That didn't equate to being killed. Then about half an hour later, he said that [he's 00:22:41] died. We didn't know what impact that was going to have on the war.

Producer: That first year ...

Alan: Professionally, it was very rewarding for me. I got a lot of satisfaction out of the job we did. We met a lot of good people. Got to know, developed a kind of loyalty to the Vietnamese people and the nation. As far as the strategic picture of the world, it wasn't in focus. There I did a job, got satisfaction what the job I did and just wished them Godspeed and [inaudible 00:23:37] not knowing that I'd be going back but if I did, it's fine.

Producer: You come back to the States.

Alan: [It's cool 00:23:47]. [Took this 00:23:49] captain's course. The people in the captain's course [inaudible 00:23:47] who had been to Vietnam were probably 15%. We were a separate group. The people who were going to go to Vietnam were the rest of them. It was good.

Producer: What kind of wisdom did you impart to all these young guys [who's 00:24:18] 85%. I'm sure they were very curious.

Alan: Yeah.

Producer: [What 00:24:23] did you do? How did you [behave 00:24:23]?

Alan: Because our whole focus was fighting 60 Soviet divisions in these plains of Central Europe. In the Infantry School, the words of wisdom were equipment. We need to equip ourselves to fight a war in the jungle, like clothing as I've mentioned, weapons, and small unit tactics, and the importance of nation building, working with people and language training, cultural training.

Unfortunately, I think we went too fast. We didn't have time to do all that stuff but we, at least, wanted equip units to fight. Remember that this time, we were sending advisers in for one year. Compare that to World War II, where we had sent divisions in for the duration. You're going to be there till it's over. We didn't have a war. The last war we had was World War II.

Producer: Were you relieved to get out of there?

Alan: Pleased to get home to my family, yeah. Relieved? No.

Producer: When you find that you're going back for a second tour, what was your reaction about that?

Alan: Good. I had orders to go to Korea on a short tour. I said I would prefer not to go to Korea. I prefer to go to where the action is. I got my orders changed to go to Vietnam and I knew what unit I wanted to go to. I ended up there.

Producer: By the way, that first story there ...

Alan: No US artillery. As I recall, one piece of information, every battery commander in the Vietnamese artillery had been trained at Fort Sill and they were using US weapons, US artillery pieces. It was good.

Producer: By the way, were you seeing any [crosstalk 00:26:53] point?

Alan: No. It was there but I just didn't see any. We were light infantry in general, in off roads and we were in all the places. We did spend time securing rubber plantations [inaudible 00:27:11] was there. This is in the third quarter.

Producer: Three quarters outside of Saigon?

Alan: Yeah.

Producer: In the north? [crosstalk 00:27:23]

Alan: Yeah, and to the coast, to Vung Tau.

Producer: By the way, Cu Chi is famous for ...

Alan: The tunnel.

Producer: The incredible tunnel [inaudible 00:27:31]. Were they using it [inaudible 00:27:32]?

Alan: We were aware that they're using tunnels. I don't think we were aware that Cu Chi was a big center of it but we knew [about the 00:27:43] tunnels. The French should figure that out. We read a lot of the French accounts. There was a huge mountain there in Cu Chi. [Back then 00:27:58] black virgin mountain which is a strategic communications outfit. It's also a cultural symbol for the Vietnamese.

Producer: Speaking of French ...

Alan: Yeah, there's some [inaudible 00:28:14] there but we figured that French, all they want to do is reestablish their colonial empire and we wanted to make a democratic society out of the free will. Looking back, we probably had a chance to work more closely with Ho Chi Minh. He had made overtures at the end of the war. We figured the French. We were not going to let the French back in after reestablish the colonial empire. That was a really vital decision.

Producer: [crosstalk 00:28:54] what you saw?

Alan: Went to a base camp, you had a lot of people doing a lot of things. Again, it was in a unit, it was all volunteer units. The tempo was feverish. We were doing a lot of things, doing a lot of patrolling. The 173rd was the first army unit to arrive in Vietnam.

By the time I arrived there, most of those people had rotated on out. What I saw was a huge logistics buildup. Ammunition, fuel, there were no shortages. A lot of helicopters. Our whole method of mobility was dependent on the helicopter, which was good. We had a lot of forward-thinking generals and colonels from 11th Air Assault Division became the first [cav 00:30:02] that was [test beta 00:30:03] Fort Benning when we were there earlier.

The conduct of war had changed. It was not attack on a wider front. We were up to strengths and we were well-trained. We had good non-commissioned officers, good soldiers. That is the key point. I think at you look at the direction of the war, of our participation in that war, we want to do it on [on the chief 00:30:44]. The administration, Kennedy, and that's a big question. If Kennedy had not been assassinated, what would have happened? You can go forever and that one.

We decimated everybody. All of the units in Europe, we just hollowed them out. We didn't do much in a way of guard or reserve, if anything. We had draft and it was doomed to failure because the nation didn't mobilize. Back to your question, no, [the airborne 00:31:27] had changed their character. They didn't suddenly get worse. I think I would not have wanted to have been in charge of the Vietnamese military and try to figure out what we were going to do or how we were going to do it, if we don't think we were very consistent. We were going to win the war technologically, no matter war. We're going to win it in intelligence and we [have 00:31:56] mobility. It must have been confusing for them.

Producer: Especially with the superpower coming in and with all these [well 00:32:08] and with all these incredible [crosstalk 00:32:13]

Alan: Yeah. We were democracy and we had to wage a war on that our population would support. There's no question the population support in World War II and pretty much in the Korean war because it was a kind of a continuation but [then 00:32:38] Vietnam came along, wait a minute. What are we doing?

Producer: Did you ever get a sense that we were in the middle of this?

Alan: No, I didn't. I've been back there. It's my conviction that Vietnam was a better country. They're much better off for our having been there, even if we don't think so or even if we regret having been there. If we had not gone there, I don't know where Vietnam would fit in. It's an economic power now. It's second world's largest exporter of rice. I don't know whether it would be like [back

quarter 00:33:23] like Laos or Cambodia had been out [going 00:33:26] there or whether it would have survived, it would have thrived anyways. The feeling I got is, I have is that we did well.

Producer: And you would find these rules of engagements.

Alan: As a small unit commander, no. That was way above my level of consciousness. No, we didn't. Those kinds of constraints would have been filtered out elsewhere.

Producer: Where were you in the second tour?

Alan: I was in 173rd Airborne Brigade and we were the national reserve, [that's kind of 00:34:07] similar in role to the first two. We were all over the country. I was long range patrol leader and the company commander and then, for a short time, on the brigade staff operations.

Producer: This time [now 00:34:22] you're actually out there doing the fighting and [urban 00:34:26] assistance.

Alan: No, we were autonomous. No. We would coordinate with them but we were in the Delta and in the Highlands.

Producer: As you look back on this ...

Alan: I have a feel about it. Once I got commissioned, I never doubted that I would serve in the infantry. That's where I wanted to be, leading troops. I feel that I rode to the sound of the guns. I feel satisfied. I feel at ease with myself on the contribution I have made. We all make mistakes, which we could do things over from time to time. I'm proud of the people that I served with and I would do it again. I have no second thoughts about I made mistake, I should have done that, shouldn't have done that. No, I'm quite ...

Producer: It must have been tough watching that embassy [inaudible 00:35:49] people out of there and those boats going up [to the 00:35:51] carriers and those [inaudible 00:35:53] were being pushed in the back.

Alan: Yeah, I feel sorry for the thousands and thousands of Vietnamese who we've been in and the good Vietnamese officers that we served with ending up either dead or in reeducation camps for years. Many of them have made successful lives that they could get out, made successful lives here, Canada, France. I'm proud of them. I'm in communication with some of them. Could I describe what? I'm sorry.

Male: [inaudible 00:36:31] patrolling those long range [inaudible 00:36:32] missions?

Alan: Yeah, that was interesting. We operated in five or six-man teams, which would be helicopter, Huey [slick load 00:36:42] and sergeant, staff sergeant, team leaders, they'd go out for three days to five days. We were the brigade long range patrol. We'd go out 20 kilometers, 30 kilometers. Our mission was to do surveillance of trails. Occasionally, you'd be asked to try to capture a prisoner intelligence. They were not combat patrols. We didn't go near try to shoot things up. It was intelligence. It lasted three or four days I'd say, sometimes longer, sometimes shorter, and sometimes out of range of artillery so you're on your own.

Generally you would be infiltrated in by helicopters at last night light, go to ground, and in the morning go, to your objective area and do what you had to do. It was reconnaissance and intelligence gathering, and so you'd report back on how much traffic was on a trail. You lie low. Occasionally, you'd get discovered or you'd get compromised and we'd always have helicopters on standby to go pluck you out. We also did bomb damage assessment when B-52 strike would come in. We would go back, go in there immediately after the B-52s had left and see what damage had been done or hadn't been done.

It's a lot of wreckage. There's a lot of tangled trees and a lot of big holes. [Did wipes out 00:38:37] your grid square, one grid square by about 3, 1 kilometer by 3 kilometer is gone. Those things were amazing. They come in from Guam and blow it up. The effectiveness of it? It must have been tremendously detrimental to morale. Now, I don't know, [have 00:39:06] it on a strategic level what it did but we could certainly tell that they've been there. Then I had a lot of territory to them. The cost? I don't know.

Male: The other thing you've mentioned was that you've been in contact?

Alan: We're the ones having contact with. Yeah but they got horror stories of their comrades who never made it out. I believe that all of the officers of Vietnamese parachute division [attempt 00:39:37] [inaudible 00:39:38]. They were carted off and put into re-education camps. I suppose some of them summarily executed but there is an active group of the all boys association from the Vietnamese Parachute Division. They're settled in East Coast and West Coast and a number of them are around Washington DC.

I didn't know it at the time but they could come down pretty quickly. Now, I don't think we used the B-52s on the Ho Chi Minh trail often that much because you're getting right over around international border when they're coming down. I think the B-52s, the Arc Lights were more in the Delta and some portions of the Highlands. I'm not an expert on that. I just know what I saw.

On the Ho Chi Minh trail we put a lot of sensors [inaudible 00:40:40] back to McNamara's high tech war. We put a lot of acoustic sensors, seismic sensors, infrared sensors. We could pick up movement on that. As the company commander at the time, I didn't know where the intelligence was coming from but I realized now that when we were sent to a hilltop or set of coordinates to check things out, the intelligence probably came from sensors on the trails. Was I surprised how resilient? Yeah.

Producer: I guess I'm still astounded that this happened.

Alan: It's happening today. I mean, look at what's going on in the Middle East. We are a power and we are fighting a bunch of people who don't respect our power. They should recognize that we can beat them.

Producer: Would you suggest that there's a lesson to be learned that hasn't been learned yet?

Alan: I'm not sure it hasn't been learned but we're learning a bit. Sometimes it's a hard process to learn. I would hate to be given a mission [of 00:41:57] defeating [them 00:41:57]. I don't want to but we should be thinking about it. We are thinking about it. We got smart people

Producer: There are no [inaudible 00:42:06]. Thank you for [inaudible 00:42:08]

Alan: [It was 00:42:08] my honor really.

Producer: Thank you. Great. That's a good job.

Alan: Thank you.