

**J.B. Drachnik, Oral History Interview – 7/27/1970**  
Administrative Information

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**Biographical Note**

Drachnik, chief of the naval section of the Military Assistance Advisory Group in Vietnam from 1961 to 1964, discusses his work as a military advisor, the Vietnamese navy, and the Vietnamese military coup of November 1963, among other issues.

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J.B. Drachnik

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Oral History Interview

with

J. B. Drachnik

July 27, 1970  
Norfolk, Virginia

By William W. Moss

For the John F. Kennedy Library

- MOSS: Captain Drachnik, let me ask you when you arrived in Saigon and what your position was there, as a starter, just to identify you and where you were.
- DRACHNIK: I arrived in Saigon in response to orders from the Navy Department to the post of chief of the navy section, Military Assistance Advisory Group, in Vietnam on 4 December, 1961.
- MOSS: And what were your responsibilities in that position?
- DRACHNIK: As chief of the navy section I reported to the chief of the military assistance group, who at that time was Lieutenant General Lionel McGarr [Lionel C. McGarr]. You know, of course, there were three service representatives in the military assistance group: a chief of the army section, a chief of the air force section and a chief of the navy section. As chief of the navy section I was the senior U.S. Navy representative in Vietnam and the senior adviser to the Vietnamese navy and marine corps.
- MOSS: All right, now what sort of things were you doing in respect to giving advice to the South Vietnamese navy and marine corps? What things were

you concentrating on?

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DRACHNIK: In a nutshell, the job was simply to provide all of the expertise, advice, and assistance possible to help the Vietnamese navy and marine corps do their assigned jobs effectively. This ran the entire gamut of navy and marine corps activity. For example, the--I'm a little bit at a loss because I don't know where to start.

MOSS: Start anywhere, and we'll go from there.

DRACHNIK: They had some twenty-one ships in December of 1961--that is, seagoing vessels, in their navy--along with a couple of hundred assault craft in the rivers and waterways of the delta. Our activities were to provide them with training assistance, with management assistance to improve their management of, for example, their shipyard--which was a large and capable one--one with a great deal of potential. Its capability at that time was rather limited because of poor management procedures, lack of experienced people. Our job essentially was to provide the expertise as best we could to fill in gaps in the management. It was a very young navy. It was eight years old, as I recall, when we arrived on the scene, as an independent nation's navy, and operated about as you would expect an eight-year-old navy to operate.

Other things that we did besides providing management in the shipyard were we looked into their naval academy, which had potential and from whence came all of their naval officers. We found their naval academy taught by French methods, which were by lectures and rote memory. Over a period of some six or eight months we completely reorganized the instruction at the naval academy, completely rewrote their syllabus and all of their lesson plans, obtained new textual material and training aids to suit, of course, the U.S. equipment and the U.S. ships that they had. For that we had a crew of about nine or ten people who were specialists in the field, and they modified the naval academy to the kind of a system that we would use.

The numbers of ships that they had were increased. The first thing that we had to do was develop in the Vietnamese navy a sense of going to sea and a feeling of competence. They were rather looked down upon and downtrodden, and the perennial remark that I kept hearing as I was on my way out there and for the first several months after I got there was to the effect that, "The Vietnamese navy you'll always find anchored in the Saigon River." And it was true that when I arrived,

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coming in by jet, we overflowed the Saigon River and there were the Vietnamese navy tied up at anchor while Secretary McNamara [Robert S. McNamara] and the U.S. government in general were voicing extreme concern about possible infiltration of Viet Cong materials and personnel by sea. So the initial major task that I was given was to do something to insure that sea infiltration did not occur. And the first thing to do to accomplish that was to get the

Vietnamese navy on the step, get their ships in such condition that they could operate for extended periods of time, convince the sailors that they could go to sea for more than three days without everybody getting seasick or running out of water or food, and developing incentives and showing them procedures whereby they could do this. Some of this sounds awfully elementary, but that's exactly the way it was.

MOSS: All right, did you have any local political opposition to what you were doing among the senior military of the Vietnamese navy or politicians or anything of this sort?

DRACHNIK: Now before I answer that I should express a little more firmly some other basic principles of this job that I had. I did not run the Vietnamese navy per se. However, in effect, that's about what happened. What I'm trying to say is, I had no command authority. I had no authority to tell anybody to do anything. It was entirely an advisory function; however, the CNO, the Chief of Naval Operations of the Vietnamese navy [Ho Tan Quyen], who in my mind is one of the finest men I've ever met, was a most cooperative individual, a very intelligent individual. His goal and mine were identical. His goal was to improve his navy, and my goal, my function, was to help him improve his navy. As a result then, he was very amenable to my advice and assistance, and we became a two-man team running the navy.

Now he had numerous problems on his side politically--perhaps not so much politically as his problem in obtaining a fair share of the resources to apply to the navy when the rank structure in Vietnam was so unbalanced. When I arrived in Saigon the chief of the Vietnamese navy had the rank of commander. There was a four-star army general who was commander of their so-called Joint General Staff, and there were several three-star generals and many two-star generals and brigadier generals in their army. The commander of the air force was a lieutenant colonel; the commander of the marines was a lieutenant colonel or perhaps a major. The commander of the navy was only

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a commander. You can see that the navy and air force were very low on the totem pole, and they were referred to within the Vietnamese military as the navy division. The army at that time had something like nine divisions--I think nine is correct, perhaps seven--seven or nine. And the size of the navy, manpowerwise, was about the equivalent of one division. Therefore it got about as much attention at court.

I had been in Saigon for a little over a week when I undertook to call on the Vietnamese Secretary of Defense as I was told I should, and was warmly received by him and told I'd receive every cooperation. And while I was calling on him, who should walk into the office but President Diem [Ngo Dinh Diem] himself. Before they rather quickly ushered me out of the office, President Diem at least indicated to me that he was very happy to have me and that he wanted to see his navy improve. So I would be inclined to say that we got very good cooperation, with the only problem being that the rank structure within the country was such that it was far unbalanced in favor of the army. On the other hand, the army left the navy entirely alone because navy things are inclined to be boring to the army.

And so this unbalance did not have too great an effect except with respect to some of the things that the country had to fund or provide--like technical manpower for the shipyard ran into competition with technical requirements for the army, and we had a hard time trying to get people with even basic technical training for the shipyard. Of course, you know, it's not a technically oriented country, and therefore there were not many of these people in the first place. We had a hard time getting them because of the larger demands of the other services.

MOSS:           What problems did you have on the American side?

DRACHNIK:      I really had none. What I have just recounted with respect to the Vietnamese army and navy also applied to the American army and navy, and I was given a quite free hand. I think that I had to prove myself first, and things were moving so fast that it didn't take very long to get the opportunities to do that. General McGarr seemed to have been favorably inclined towards me from the very beginning and I had a free hand in my own bailiwick. I got very fine support from the American side as well as from the Vietnamese side.

MOSS:           All right. Now how did things change over the course of the time that you were there? What were some of the significant developments as you saw them?

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DRACHNIK:      Overall the most significant one, I suppose, was the increase in size of the U.S. contingent out there. Equally, the steadily increasing interest by the United States government in Vietnam, which of course was just a follow-on to the decisions that the President [John F. Kennedy] had made as the effort gained momentum. As to the organization in country, the major significant one, of course, was the establishment of the Military Assistance Command, MACV, in February of 1962. If you recall, I said I arrived out there in December of '61, and that gave us most of December, January; and in early February this new organization--in fact I think the ninth of February--was formally established and General Harkins [Paul D. Harkins] was sent out to command it. What this amounted to, though, was a change in name only for a starter, because of course there were many things going on. The work was still done by the same group, the advisors. They didn't send out any new navy man, so I still had the same job. I essentially had one more layer between me and the higher levels that I had to go through. I still worked with the chief of the military assistance group, but he now reported to COMUSMACV [Commander, U.S., Military Assistance Command, Vietnam] instead of direct to CINCPAC [Commander-in-Chief, Pacific Forces]. Again, the buildup there was on the army side. The general was an army general, and again I was left alone to handle my problems in my own way, which was pleasing to me and apparently satisfied them as well. Although COMUSMACV was officially established in February of '62, it seemed to me that no effect of MACV was felt until the following year, actually I would say about the latter part of 1962. Whenever a new organization is established in that manner there are so many details, so many things involved,



that it takes quite a long time for a larger command to enter into these, to take them unto themselves. This was certainly true out there.

There was one other change that happened a little later--I think it happened in May or June. When I first arrived on the scene all of the support in Vietnam was also my responsibility--the dispensary that catered to all of the Americans in Saigon, the dental clinic, the military construction personnel. The navy had the support requirement out there, and they all reported to the senior navy man in the country, who happened to be the chief of the navy section, which happened to be me. About mid-year of 1962 there was established a separate support command to take that load off of the chief of the navy section so that he could devote his time entirely to the advisory business and also because this support function started blossoming out into quite a mammoth affair. So they established a second U.S. Navy command called Headquarters Support Activity, which then took away all of the

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administrative and logistic matters from the chief of the navy section.

MOSS:           MACV's a sort of curious breed of cat, isn't it? You've got a four-star rank running the show, and yet he's subordinate to CINCPAC, and yet he really has his line going all the way back to Washington. How difficult was this command relationship?

DRACHNIK:      It did not cause any difficulty as far as I was concerned. If there were any difficulty I would say it transpired because with a senior commander on scene, related especially to one service, it made it a little stickier to get my problems heard at the highest level. As to the idea that you bring up, I think that in my mind it amounted to something like this: CINCPAC was back in Honolulu. He had many other responsibilities around the Pacific area, and so in essence--in my mind anyway--it was something like that part of the CINCPAC organization that was focusing entirely on Vietnam had moved out to Saigon, and that was sort of the way I rationalized MACV. There's no question it was a one-over-one command situation, which always seems to be a peculiarity.

Most of the problems that I had--most of the things for which I needed assistance or support from higher authority--were of a nature that I could go directly to my service. My guidelines for what I was to do as far as CINCPAC and MACV were concerned were pretty straightforward: the navy and marine corps of Vietnam should be brought up to make whatever contribution they could, and the maximum contribution they could, towards the effort of sweeping out the VC [Viet Cong]. The resources to do that had to come through the service chain, and I had direct liaison with service bureaus, navy bureaus, for that function. For example, I could program ships into the country. They had to be approved by COMUSMACV and CINCPAC, but the approval or disapproval by those agencies was principally pointed towards, "There's only so much money available. Should it be put into this LST [Landing Ship, Tank] that the navy chief says is needed for the navy, or should it be used to build a division headquarters that the army chief says must be done for the army?"--more a matter of refereeing than it was one of direct involvement.

MOSS: What did you see as the South Vietnamese navy's task and the general naval task in Vietnam at the time, and how did this change over time?

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DRACHNIK: Generally it was just what I have expressed, to make whatever contribution they could to assist in the effort. There were two functions that were quite obvious: one, to establish patrols or to do what was necessary to prevent infiltration by sea; and the second, to provide support for the Vietnamese army forces in the delta. The interesting thing was that there were--and I don't think I can remember the figures now--it seems to me it was something like forty-six hundred miles of waterways in the delta and only twenty-four hundred miles of roads, and the roads are many times impassable because of monsoon rains and so forth. In other words, the means of transportation in the delta was by waterway, and the only boats were operated by the Vietnamese navy, and therefore it was our function to provide this transportation for the Vietnamese army, to move them around, to make assaults and attacks. The problem on the coastal areas, of which they had some twelve hundred miles of sea coast, was to provide a means to determine whether there were attempts made by Viet Cong to infiltrate by sea, and in any event set up such a procedure that it would make it impossible for them to do so, to stop the capability if the Viet Cong chose to use it.

MOSS: How do you tell the gun-runner from a fisherman'?

DRACHNIK: The same way then that we do now: you go along side, board the craft, look at their identification papers, and search the craft to determine whether or not it has any contraband. There's no way in the world you can tell whether the fellow is a Communist agent. If he does not have any contraband he may be an agent, or he may be a fellow going in there to fight on the side of the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese. We had very extensive procedures set up for identification of the friendly fishermen. However, the fallacy was that the fishermen did not like to take their ID cards to sea with them because they might get wet or get lost, and then they'd be in real trouble. So they'd leave them home, so they never had them. When the patrols caught those people they then hauled them in, sent them through interrogation centers until finally they were screened as friendly or enemy, and hopefully that had the effect of encouraging them to carry their ID cards in the future.

The stories that were told of ways in which things could be infiltrated were quite amazing--including the building on, outside the hull under the keel, of boxes in which weapons could be waterproofed and then stuck in these boxes, and how would you ever tell they were there by searching the junk at sea? Having heard stories of the deviousness of the Oriental, we were inclined to be very thorough in our searches.

MOSS: Did you actually run around the hull and send divers down?

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DRACHNIK: We did. We did not do this in every search, but if there were suspicion you would put a line around from one side to the other and run it down the keel. There were other stories that if attempts were being made to infiltrate contraband, the Viet Cong knowing full well they'd have their heads taken off along the way if they were caught with it, stories were told of their having it tied on lines, and when they were being searched they would put the line over the side with the bundle on the end. If the search got too close, they'd cut the line and nobody would ever know whether they had contraband or not. Of course they'd lose the load. So these were the kind of things we were looking for.

MOSS: What about the ship that would sit out--I hesitate to even call it a ship--sit off, oh, forty or fifty miles off shore and make a run in under cover of darkness and back out again?

DRACHNIK: We had no cases of ships, nor did we turn up any indication that any were used during the two years that I was there. I cannot say that this was foolproof, that I could prove that nothing came in. On the other hand, we had patrols consistently in so many parts of the coast, and in fact had it generally covered. It wasn't 100 percent of the time, 100 percent of the area, but we developed this junk fleet that sat out there at sea and investigated and checked and checked and checked. We had the Vietnamese ships patrol and patrol and patrol, and we had a barrier from the DMZ [Demilitarized Zone] all the way out to the Paracel Islands, and anybody who wanted to go out beyond that would have to have a pretty large craft.

We captured three or four small boatloads, agents and token amounts of equipment. I was convinced in my mind, and Mr. McNamara told me later when I was on his staff in the Pentagon that he too was convinced, that during those years there was no effective infiltration by sea. I believe that we had sufficient coverage--and we had it out far enough, and we had air patrols from time to time--that we would have known if there was a ship of that type that might be in that vicinity. There were none. We had more than a few cases of shadowing merchantmen that were going around Camau Point and on up to Bangkok or Sihanoukville, for example. Although we would get alarmed and we'd have a Vietnamese ship dog them, they went on by about their business. So I am quite sure that there was no significant infiltration in that period by sea. Another reason that contributes to this--when you study this kind of a thing and live with it, you begin to understand that in an area where the mud flats extend for fifteen miles off the coast, a story that there was a submarine a hundred yards out was bound to be a spurious story. And we had many things like that which we investigated.

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MOSS: You actually had reports of submarines?

DRACHNIK: We had a report which came to me from the intelligence section of COMUSMACV staff that one of his advisors in the delta had passed up

hard information which he collected from a peasant that a submarine had been sighted just off the western coast of the delta. And in that vicinity for a couple of hundred miles it's impossible for a ship with a draft of more than five feet to get within fifteen miles of the coast line. So, many of these scares that a person not at all familiar with the sea might have come up with could not have been valid.

MOSS: Let me turn to a slightly different subject for a moment or two, and that is the visiting firemen. You had quite a series of people coming out from Washington to Saigon to look things over. We've mentioned the Taylor-Rostow [Maxwell D. Taylor-Walt Whitman Rostow] thing in October of '61. You had Hilsman [Roger Hilsman] and Mendenhall [Joseph A. Mendenhall] go out.

DRACHNIK: In fact Mendenhall was the political advisor at the embassy. Well, I had a different attitude towards it than some people. I was lonely out there. I was

the only U.S. navy captain within a thousand miles, and I dearly wanted someone to come by and imply that I was lousing things up or that they sort of thought I might be doing it the way they'd like to have it done. I was well aware of the fact that COMUSMACV and CINCPAC had put very stringent rules on visitors to that place. As a result, the only people that came by were extremely high-powered individuals, and nobody in the guise of, let's say, merely a rear admiral or a navy captain could ever work his way out to the country. I was very disturbed about that. There were generals coming out, and members of the joint chiefs and others, but usually army or air force oriented, and I never saw anybody.

So I went so far as to write CINCPAC. My contact back there was, oh gee, a J-03 (chief of staff for military assistance matters), I know him so well--I can't think of his name though. And I complained that maybe they thought there were too many visitors out there, but here was one person who welcomed them, and I'd sure like to see some once in a while. The answer I got was, there were too many coming out and they were sorry there wouldn't be any coming by. So I wasn't bothered by them. There was one thing that the visiting did: it kept us on our toes. Whenever a highly placed visitor came through, everyone had to search his conscience and ask, "Am I doing everything that can be done? Am I handling this right?" Because you know when the GAO [General Accounting Office] is going to come by, you immediately start

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wondering about "Gee, is everything going right? What do I have to start doing right that I wasn't doing right before?" I think it was a very good thing for the effort, even though visitors are extra work. There's no question about that. But I claim it was not wasted effort. That's what kept everybody on their toes and made them run fast.

MOSS: Do you remember any particular incident in connection with any of these visits that might be sort of local color for somebody writing a story of these things?

DRACHNIK: Oh, I can probably think of several. Perhaps the one that comes to mind was that General Harkins was flying up to Nhatrang and he invited me to go along with him because the naval academy was up there. I had a base up there, and of course transportation was in short supply to get around the country. This happened to be a week after Curtis LeMay [Curtis Emerson LeMay] had been out. It was his turn as a member of the joint chiefs to come out. This was Easter Sunday, and we were at work and flying up there. And General Harkins was mad as heck. What he was mad about was that General LeMay had gone back to Washington and spread the word that we were running a nine-to-five routine with weekends off. Neither Harkins nor I had had a weekend off since we'd gotten there about six months before, and he was just hopping mad. I don't know where LeMay picked that up or why he spread it around, but it wasn't true.

We had the Secretary of Defense out there two or three times while I was there, and of course those were always very interesting times. If for no other reason, the Secretary of Defense is a very highly placed person and he lent some prestige and interest to the place. One was rather pleased to be associated with him when he came by.

MOSS: How did the people out there generally regard the way overall policy was coming from Washington? What was their view of the way things were being--the kinds of instructions that you were getting with respect to what needed to be done?

DRACHNIK: I would say that the people out there were dedicated, hard-working people.

In the first place, they were all picked. They wouldn't have been out there otherwise. Somebody had looked them over. The ambassador was picked to be there, the chief of AID [Agency for International Development] and the functionaries. They were all

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good men. Nobody would have been out there by his own choice for the hell of it because it was a discouraging environment. I was there under military orders--we're used to following orders. And we were loyal subordinates. One of the things that most impressed me the first time I met Secretary McNamara---it was at that first Secretary of Defense conference, at CINCPAC Headquarters--I can still remember him leaning back in his chair and saying, "The President has made the decision that we would help the Vietnamese." And his further comments were to the effect that, "Those are my marching orders, and we're going to do everything we can to win this affair." My impression was that Mr. McNamara was an outstandingly fine man, an excellent subordinate. Now whether his decisions and the way he implemented them were right, wrong or indifferent is entirely aside. But he certainly was dedicated and his attitude was not what he thought of the decision, rather to implement the decisions that were made.

In the military, of course, there is no questioning. The easiest way to get into difficulty is to imply that you're not with the decision that's been made. You are, of course,

expected to get your arguments in, if there are arguments, before the decision is made. For my own part I was in a most enjoyable position because I was the navy spokesman, and I was turned to for advice on navy things. Nobody told me what to do. They gave me tasks, like, "Protect this country from sea infiltration," which might have been well-nigh impossible, but they left it entirely to me to do it, and I received excellent support in order to do it. All I had to do was ask, justify what I wanted, and I got it. I wouldn't have expected it if I couldn't justify it or convince them of why I needed it.

Now if you're alluding to what I might call friction between one group and another out there, I think there was some of that. I think there was, in the very early part--and of course this is all hearsay, but that hearsay comes from pretty close association. I think that there was a difficult situation established in putting a four-star general on scene in what was--no matter how you look at it--a war, a war because people were being shot at and killed, and he was out there and charged with doing something to quell that, but at the same time having the ambassador on scene as the spokesman. It has always been my impression that you normally do not have the two. Either you have the ambassador and you handle things on a diplomatic plane through statesmanship, or everything goes to pot and you send for the military. And when the military comes in the ambassador and his group pack their bags and shove off and the military take over and you shoot up the enemy. And when the enemy's dead, then you turn it back over.

Well this, in my mind, was the first instance where such a

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situation arose, and the rules then were a little bit hard in getting straightened out as to who did what to whom. I have, from a reliable and highly placed source, the remark that at one of the early social functions the four-star general was seated higher than the ambassador, and this caused some sparks. Because I was a senior service representative, I was frequently called in--in fact always was--to the highest councils to provide navy expertise. I got to know General Paul Harkins and Ambassador Fritz Nolting [Frederick E. Nolting, Jr.] well. They came to our home for dinner, and their wives and my wife were close friends and have been since. So I heard a lot of things that went on, and I could observe some of them. On the other hand, Ambassador Nolting and General Harkins were both exceptionally fine men and exceptionally nice, gentlemanly people. But one gets one's professional nose out of joint in things like this. And I think that it took some time before this was smoothed out.

MOSS: Was it a question of getting used to new ground rules, or was there a real question of conflict of authority?

DRACHNIK: I don't think there was any question of conflict of authority, in the early part of it at least. I think there might have been some arguments at the very

highest level, say in 1963, but all I know about that is hearsay, and therefore it would not be appropriate for me to dwell on it. I know from remarks that were made that there was a feeling of that nature by some of the highly placed people out there.

This was of no concern to me or my immediate boss, the two-star general. I'm talking about the very highest policy level.

MOSS: Right. Now you said you were out there for two years. That would take you to December, '63.

DRACHNIK: In fact I left in early February, '64.

MOSS: But at any rate you were there during the Buddhist crisis during the summer of '63, and the coup against Diem and Nhu [Ngo Dinh Nhu]. How do you remember those situations?

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DRACHNIK: The Buddhist crisis, as something that was separate from the war, somewhat the same way that I look upon the current rash of activities on campuses, for example--kind of askance and, "Good grief, things are tough enough. Why do these local yokels have to pull things like that?" The Diem coup I look upon rather personally for this reason: this very fine naval officer and gentleman who I referred to as my counterpart, the chief of naval operations, was murdered before the coup started.

And I will reiterate that he was one of the finest Vietnamese, and I lost sympathy for the Vietnamese people when that happened. This, of course, is projecting one's personal feeling into a professional job, but the person who was next in line for the command was a very poor naval officer. I think that this became obvious later on. He was, however, a member of the coup group--which my counterpart, Captain Quyen, was not.

I was first apprised of this during the lunch hour. I got a telephone call from my deputy while I was home at lunch, on Saturday, that there was something funny going on. The army had moved into the naval headquarters. Our advisors down there were incarcerated and could not leave, and there was a rumor that the CNO was dead. Information on the coup was very closely held before it happened, and once it started it really happened. It is true that the CNO was murdered, and the circumstances of his murder were very unfortunate, and the fellow who murdered him thereafter was recognized as a hero. In other words, instead of being punished as a murderer should, he was promoted and a fair-haired boy.

There was no doubt in my mind that this was a very bad thing for the country. I said to myself when the coup occurred--and it became obvious there was a coup going on--that it would only be a little while before they learned that having knocked over one government they would have the same problems again. Things were not going to be rosy, as the people who were cheering in the streets seemed to think, but they were going to have the same problems again. I think that that has been true. It was only three months later when they had another coup.

I look upon it as a very sad period. I felt that all of the work I'd put in for most of two years out there was eroded because shortly after that the Vietnamese navy was again tied up in the river. The reason for that was twofold, the major one being that every commanding

officer of every ship and every staff officer in a key position was replaced by someone who was in favor of the coup. It happened that the coup group

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were southerners. Those who had been in power were northerners--by northern I mean from the northern part of South Vietnam. But the people in the Vietnamese navy in the key positions were the ones who had been on the receiving end of all this training and effort we'd been putting in. We had gotten a shipyard commander who had developed a great deal of know-how about management of a shipyard under the tutelage of my expert, who was assisting him. Well, it did no good to send him out to the delta--it did the shipyard no good--and to put in somebody who had no more ability than the fellow who had been there in the first place. And this happened throughout the navy. So it eroded the thing immediately, and much of what we had done was lost because there'd only been one team that had been trained over this eighteen-month period. Of course, some of the training did rub off on others. That's how I remember the coup.

MOSS: Just for the record, what were the names of the people involved—your counterpart who was murdered?

DRACHNIK: That was Captain Ho Tan Quyen.

MOSS: Could you spell that for the transcriber?

DRACHNIK: Q-U-Y-E-N.

MOSS: And the fellow who murdered him?

DRACHNIK: Luc, Lieutenant Luc, L-U-C [Thuong Ngoc Luc]. And one of the poignant things about this was that Lieutenant Luc was one of Captain Quyen's subordinates. He had command of a river group in the delta. He had, about a year before, come under suspicion for expropriating to his own use some government materials and funds, and it was Captain Quyen who went to bat for him and got him out of that.

The fellow who moved in as the chief of naval operations was a Commander Cang [Chung Tan Cang]. Commander Cang had been the commander of the river forces during the year and three-quarters before that, that I had been in Vietnam, and he had been most uncooperative. A very obvious example which turned me against him was that we had problems of personnel in the Vietnamese navy--shortages, limited numbers of trained personnel. Commander Cang was trying to get larger numbers of personnel for his river crews. They could have used them, there's no question. There were just so many people and they had to be parceled out. In order to do it he tied up his operating forces and told the army he could not support them, while at the same time he manned his bases at far above their allowances. Now this goes beyond the realm of the things that you ought to do



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if you're trying to make a case for more personnel. This eroded the war effort. It was traitorous in my opinion. I, of course, kept out of internal politics and discipline within the Vietnamese navy, but it made me feel that this person certainly was not the kind of person you would want for a senior job in the Vietnamese navy.

MOSS:               How did you deal with him afterwards?

DRACHNIK:       Well, fortunately my tour was short after that. I asked that I be relieved when he took over, but General Timmes [Charles J. Timmes] laughed at me and he said, "I'm sorry. I don't think we can do that. You go ahead and do your best and stay with it." I had talked with Captain Quyen from time to time about him, and about the condition of the river forces which was far below what it should have been--the standards that we thought they should maintain. The training was not good. Their ability to--their readiness was poor. This was my business, and I had discussed it with Captain Quyen often, and more than once I suggested to him that he might relieve him (Cdr. Cang). But Captain Quyen had no choice because this was the second senior officer in the Vietnamese navy, and he couldn't relieve him. So it was a very formal association with Captain Cang after he took over, and things were rather dormant for the period from then until I left. My association with him was, when I had to direct a communication to him, I would direct a functional professional communication to him and get that kind of an answer.

MOSS:               Do you have any hard knowledge of, or do you recall, any Saigon scuttlebutt of U.S. involvement in the coup? By involvement I would mean anything from passive tolerance of what was going on to active connivance.

DRACHNIK:       Well, yes indeed, I know of a great deal of scuttlebutt and I believe it could be true, that there was, perhaps the tactful thing to say is, a passive acceptance. You have to accept that we were out there and had worked extremely hard during the year and a half, the year and three-quarters before the coup. We knew what the problems were. We knew that there were errors. We knew that Diem was far from being the ideal ruler. But I defy you to look over the--what is it now--hundred and thirty or forty independent countries and pick me out three ideal rulers. It happens people who are the chiefs of state are not necessarily picked for their abilities. Diem had many shortcomings and weaknesses, but I think he had more strengths than he had

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weaknesses, and I still think he was the best ruler Vietnam had or has had since. There was one problem that was insoluble. I think that if his brother Nhu had dropped dead or gone on a foreign cruise that a good government would have developed. I do think that brother Nhu became such a man of power, and Diem would not sever relations with him, and he ran into an impasse. I believe that there was passive acceptance by the U.S. of that coup.

MOSS: You don't know of any communication between the coup leaders and U.S. forces, either civilian or military?

DRACHNIK: No. In fact I know of nothing of my own direct knowledge, but you asked about rumors. My firm conviction that rumors substantiate--to say it perhaps more correctly, there were a hell of a lot of rumors that implied there was passive acceptance by Americans before that. One of the reasons I say that was that shortly after Ambassador Nolting came back, he resigned. And then I found the reason for his resignation was that when he returned and expressed dissatisfaction with the policy the United States seemed to have adopted, he couldn't find anybody to listen to him. They shut him off in a corner--which implied to me that U.S. policy had changed and that anyone who still favored the old policy was passé and nothing could be done about it.

MOSS: Nolting himself told you this?

DRACHNIK: I can't say that, but he implied it. No, Nolting himself did not tell me this. It came from other friends of mine. I know the story to be true from other people, though, who did tell me, and from the actions that did occur.

MOSS: Who do you see as the people who changed the policy, and why?

DRACHNIK: I believe that the policy was changed probably for the reason that I expressed a few minutes ago. There was no way, there was apparently no way, that Diem could be separated from brother Nhu's influence, and I think it was apparent to all that brother Nhu's influence was a rather bad thing, perhaps not "bad" but not for the best results. And with that impasse, I guess the decision probably was made that if a change were to come about it probably would be to the good.

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MOSS: Okay. Do you have anything else you'd like to say at this point? I think that  
takes care of questions that I have:

DRACHNIK: No, I don't think so. My interest in it was because I probably never worked so hard in my life. I had just come from command of a destroyer where I had been in practice at working hard, and I was faced with such an awe-inspiring task out there, of running an entire navy--which was a prideful thing--and if I weren't inclined to work hard anyway I probably would have worked at that. It was a dangerous place. People were getting wounded and killed, and therefore there was a life-and-death aura to it, too. And whenever you're involved in that kind of an environment you're inclined to look back upon it with poignancy and to remember it quite well.

I've racked my brain as to what could have been done to change the course of events, what could have been done and what can be done today to wrap up that nasty mess out there

faster. I spent about eighteen hours a day every day I was there for two years thinking the same way, knowing full well I'd be a national hero if I came up with a solution. If I could have, I would have come up with a solution then. But there isn't any easy way of winning a war.

MOSS:           Okay, fine. Thank you very much indeed, Captain.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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J. B. Drachnik Oral History Transcript  
Name List

**C**

Chung Tan Cang, 14, 15

**H**

Harkins, Paul D., 5, 10, 12  
Hilsman, Roger  
Ho Tan Quyen, 3, 13, 14, 15

**K**

Kennedy, John F., 5, 10

**L**

LeMay, Curtis Emerson, 10

**M**

McGarr, Lionel C., 1, 4  
McNamara, Robert S., 3, 8, 11  
Mendenhall, Joseph A., 9

**N**

Ngo Dinh Diem, 4, 12, 13, 15, 16  
Ngo Dinh Nhu, 12, 16  
Nolting, Frederick E., Jr., 12, 16

**R**

Rostow, Walt Whitmas, 9

**T**

Taylor, Maxwell D., 9  
Thuong Ngoc Luc, 14  
Timmes, Charles J., 15

Addendum: Translation of article on Captain Quyen's death, from Vietnamese newspaper.

VN Newspaper Dong Nai 11-11-63

How did the Revolutionary Troops occupy the Naval Installations?

In what circumstances did Captain Quyen die? Captain Thuong Ngoc Luc, the naval hero, captured Naval Hqs and shops without firing a ball.

Cdr Luc and Lt Giang had reluctantly murdered Ho Tan Quyen because the latter used violence while Cdr Luc tried all means to convince him.

Capt Ho Tan Quyen was Ex-CNO, and was one of the most trusted men of Ngo Dinh Diem. He was made CNO after the coup on 11-11-1960.

On 11-1-1963, Lcdr Thuong Ngoc Luc received a secret order to capture and lock up Ho Tan Quyen because he was decidedly loyal to Ngo Dinh Diem. (Maj-Gen, Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee gave orders not to murder him, except in circumstances beyond control).

Consequently, on 11-1-63, Lcdr Luc invited Quyen to go to Thu Duc to celebrate his birthday. Lcdr Luc made arrangements for Qyuen to be in the same car as Lt Giang. On this car there was a big lemon which would be used to block up Quyen's mouth. Arriving at the Naval Hqs, Quyen decidedly invited Lcdr Luc and Lt Giang to be in his car, a Traction 15 of the Hqs, bearing the civilian tag number NBH 508. Lcdr Luc's driver drove his car behind.

When the car was on the highway and turned to Thu Duc, Lcdr Luc began to convince Quyen to join the Military Revolutionary Committee. But Quyen insulted him. Then, Lcdr Luc used his knife and, from behind, Lt Giang used his colt to intimidate and capture Quyen. Unexpectedly, Quyen let go of the steering wheel and, by using judo, tried to take Lcdr Luc's knife. During the struggle, nobody drove the car, so, it got up to the road-side and got down into a puddle of water. In this dangerous situation, as Lcdr Luc's left hand was already wounded, he was compelled to give Lt Giang orders to shoot. The first two balls did not go off. Only 4 minutes later, did Ho Tan Quyen lay down unconsciously in his puddle of blood and died. Passengers stopped and inquired, and when military policemen came and investigated, Lcdr Luc presented his senior officer's ID card. Lcdr Luc brought Quyen's corpse into the other car which had just come up; this car carried the corpse to Phu Tho rubber-plantation and left it there. As it was time for the Military Revolutionary Committee to take action, Lcdr Luc and Lt Giang had to return to Naval Hqs.

At 1:30 PM, the Revolutionary Troops began to shoot and attack. On behalf of the Captian CNO, who had already died, Lcdr Luc gave orders to the Naval Officers, and the armories were at once taken. Then, Lcdr Luc immediately went to the Navyyard, and deceived the commanding officers there, so that the armored troops which were surrounding

outside, might get in and capture the Navyyard at once. And the Military Revolutionary Committee had the Navy itslhad from that very minute.

In the morning of Nov 2, the Presidency Guard Brigade surrendered before the valiant and strong appearance of the Revolutionary Troops. Lcdr Luc was gloriously promoted Cdr, and Quyen's corpse was carried to Cong Hoa Military Hospital. Thanks to Cdr Luc, the Capital population was kept from the destruction of the Navy under the command of Ho Tan Quyen.

(Photo caption)

The sedan Vauxvall, Tag No. NBU 169, painted yellow, carried Captain Ho Tan Quyen's corpse and left it at Pho Tho rubber plantation, at noon Noc 1. The next morning, Lcdr Luc came up and carried Mr. Quyen's corpse to Cong Hoa Hospital.

ABOVE PHOTO: The car was brought to the gas-station, in the corner of Phan Dinh Phung St. and Le Van Duyet St., to be washed.