

Interview Questionnaire – Charles Nguyen Tan Cuong 07/2012

Policing in Vietnam and Collaboration with US Advisors

A. Background

1. Tell me about yourself, how you grew up? Your family and community?

My name is Charles Nguyen Tan Cuong. I was born on November 2, 1925 in Saigon, Vietnam to Joachim Nguyen Tan Cuong and Marie Lacouture, my mother, both French citizens and Roman Catholics. I grew up in the southern central highland city of Da Lat, where our extended family made a comfortable living in government, railroad administration, horse breeding, agriculture and commerce. I was educated within the French Catholic Lasalle Taberd* school system in which curriculum emphasized philosophy, history, theology, natural sciences and mathematics.

Our family has a rich history of civil service. My Vietnamese (paternal) grandfather was Governor of Cho Lon, the largest province in Vietnam with a predominant Chinese community. My French (maternal) grandfather was the Chief Prosecutor (Procureur Generale) and later, Chief Judge of Indochina which was comprised of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia under French rule. My father was appointed Minister of Security for 7 consecutive administrations. He also held the dual post of Minister of Youth and Sports.

2. What was the police role in your early life?

When I was 20 years old, I attended a French college preparing to study law and become a judge as my family had hoped but World War II (WWII) changed my plans. When the Japanese Army invaded Indochina during WWII, I was mobilized within the French Army and later captured as a prisoner of war. After the Japanese were defeated and WWII ended, I worked as Security Inspector for the Surete Federale Francaise, the equivalent of the FBI, which controlled intelligence and criminal investigation across Indochina. When the French left Vietnam, the Vietnamese government requested my transfer to the Vietnamese Police.

Successively, I became Police Chief of provinces, including Commander of the Police Special Branch in Region 3, controlling 12 provinces and Vung Tau City. Later as Chief of Special Operations Service, I was also nominated as General Secretary of the combined anti-terrorism center at Saigon comprised of US, Korean and Australian military forces (date).

3. Why did you become a police officer?

I felt it was my duty to continue our family tradition of civil service. Again, I had set my sights on a career in law but circumstances of WWII led me to law enforcement.

B. Questions related to Pre- Deployment

1. What was your impression of Americans before working with an advisor?

Before working with Americans directly, I did not have a strong opinion. However, I admired the strength and success of the US during WWII and looked forward to having a strong ally.

2. Did you want an advisor? Why/why not?

Yes, I wanted advisors because they would bring new methods and techniques, different from the French ways we were used to. *** At the time Frank Clark and I worked together, I was provided 3 advisors: Frank was my logistics advisor providing transport, equipment and weapons. I recall a Mr. Frenick, my CIA advisor providing intelligence and funding for all operations targeting communist activities. Also, a US Special Forces Captain was assigned to train my Police Field Force.

3. What prior police training did you have? Related to advising or receiving advice?

My Police training consisted of: (date)

- Inspector Formation Course, Surete Federale Francaise, Saigon, Vietnam
- Police Academy, National Police Headquarters, Saigon, Vietnam
- Special Branch Senior Course on Counter-Insurgency (COIN), British Commonwealth Police, Singapore
- Special Branch Senior Course on COIN, US Police, Saigon, Vietnam
- Police Pedagogic Techniques, USAID Public Safety, Saigon, Vietnam

Specifically related to advising, I completed a 3 month CIA course in clandestine operations, counter-espionage and infiltration, CIA HQ, Saigon, Vietnam, (prerequisite was to pass a lie detector, for commissioned officers (officier superior) major and above)

4. Describe policing in Vietnam/U.S.? (at that time)

Policing in Vietnam was focused on prevention and interdiction* (footnote French word) through 3 main areas of monitoring and counter-activities: internal security to counter anti-government and anti-establishment movements, criminal investigation to counter criminal activities, and intelligence gathering specifically to target communists.

Policing following the French Police model, exploited information to gain advantage through the element of surprise. The CIA model was more methodical and based on surveillance. In the long run and in both war and peace time, this method returned the best results.(elaborate)

5. What did you do?

When Frank and I worked together, I commanded Khanh Hoa Province and Nha Trang City which included 6 districts each with 12-30 villages, several US and Vietnamese military bases, the Vietnamese Ranger School, as well as airports and sea terminals* (footnote: an important military logistics port have name?). I was responsible for the security and protection of the civilian population, US and Vietnamese Special Forces, US Navy, Vietnamese Air Force and Korean Forces. My command area stretched across a 90 mile radius(or diameter) at its widest.

6. How large was your agency? How was it structured? What Knowledge Skills and Abilities (KSA) were required?

The Vietnam National Police was approximately 130,000 strong and considered a paramilitary service. The Police were not elected but organized to support the elected administration. In Khanh Hoa Province, I commanded a force of approximately 5000 Police Officers including the Police Field Force per Province that focused on special operations. Under my command, there were 3 Adjutants/Deputies specializing in criminal investigation, intelligence, and logistics. Major of Police Field Force. I appointed a Chief of Police for each district and established a Police post in every village with 6-12 Officers.

Police Officers were required to have a high school degree, Police Academy training, 3-month law course, and focused studies in counter-manifestation, trafficking, or counter-terrorism. Patrol Officers typically had a military background since they were recruited from the Ranger School for all of the national police. Police Chiefs were required to have in-depth knowledge of civil and administration. Service Chiefs and Adjutants/Deputies further focused on criminal investigation, intelligence and operations planning. To me, important character traits were honesty; loyalty to order, structure and Chief; devotion to country; and a passion for Police work.

7. What kind of role did the police play in society at that time? Were they respected?

The Police had a crucial role during a time of political instability. We were responsible for securing and protecting citizens against crime and violence. Approximately 90% of civilian administration was performed by the Police including citizen identification, licensing, exit-entry passports and economic security (related to ensuring business diversification and eliminating illegal currency trading and black markets) to public safety. People generally trusted and respected the Police because we were involved in many areas affecting their daily lives and businesses. They sought the protection and advice of the Police. Again, policing is about prevention/interdiction so I tried to cultivate relationships and friendships by showing sincerity and a willingness to serve. In return, I received precious information from many reliable informants.

8. Why did you decide to become an advisor?

Not applicable.

C. Questions Related to Engagement

1. What was your first impression of your advisor/advisee?

Early on, I observed that Frank was sincere, energetic and dynamic. He was eager to work and make a difference.

2. How did you meet?

When I met Frank, I was based in Nha Trang, as Police Commander of Khanh Hoa Province and Nha Trang City. I believe we were introduced by Frank's chief/supervisor who was advising the larger Region 2 or by his predecessor during the transition of support.

3. How did you work/engage?

As the security of US and Vietnamese Forces depended on the security of the province, I was able to request and receive a significant supply of equipment and training. With all advisors, I employed open communication about the conditions, issues and imperatives of the command and provided full access to information and intelligence. Frank worked with my Adjutants/Deputies to plan logistics and deployments. With Frank especially, I was friendly because I sensed he valued and needed a close working relationship to be effective.

4. What was the mix between theory/training and application-based On the Job Training (OJT)?

Because our resources were stretched, there was very little time for classroom and theory-based training therefore we depended much more on the observation and guidance of the advisors on-the-job. Some examples of training are special intelligence and even firefighting. In addition, I was assigned a US Special Forces Captain to train our Police Field Force for special operations.

5. What was the role of interpreters?

Interpreters worked for the advisors.

6. Within your Area of Responsibility (AOR or command), what was the crime/security situation like?

Under my 3 years of command, I had complete control within the province although terrorist insurgencies and incidents occurred on the outskirts of my province.

7. What was daily life like during that time?

Aside from the political instability, it was a peaceful time, there was order within the province. There were no major incidents or unrest among citizens or military.

8. What actors/threats/dangers were operating within your AOR/command during the deployment?

There was communist infiltration. We did not know who they were until they rose up. Most of our time was spent on clandestine activities to identify, track, investigate and prevent the communist surges. We often had to find a balance between making immediate arrests as elements were exposed and being patient with surveillance to achieve the long term goal of eliminating their presence.

9. What activities were they engaged in?

The communists were engaged in occupation, terrorism and manifestation (get better term). Their aim was to kill as many people as possible in many scattered areas to create fear and chaos while avoiding capture.

10. What were the impressions of the military versus civilian advisors?

The roles of my military and civilian advisors were distinct. Frank was responsible for logistics and weapons. Mr. Frenick was responsible for clandestine operations. Both required a long term understanding of our needs through regular engagement and coordination across many organizations as it was much more dynamic work. The US Special Forces Captain was focused on training which did not involve a lot of change.

11. Give 3 up, 3 down of experience?

I give my civilian advisors 3 up, and military advisor 2 up.

12. What "use of force" rules were being used?

The US had no authority to use force with the Vietnamese civilians and therefore, my advisors had no such authority. Depending on the nature of incidents and operations, we would discuss and coordinate the level of support required of the US to ensure collaboration occurred under the Vietnamese Police authority and within each of our areas of responsibility.

For example, there was an uprising that involved drunken conduct by a group of black US servicemen in Nha Trang. The Commander of the US Forces requested my help to quell the rebellion and arrest the individuals. My assertion was that US military command was primarily responsible for the servicemen until Vietnamese

citizens were involved or impacted. However, I assisted by deploying a Police contingent to form a perimeter and contain the group until the US Military Police regained control.

13. What was the relationship between policing and internal security?

Again, the Police played a crucial role in securing and protecting citizens against crime, violence, and manifestation, and performing 90% of civilian administration including identification, licensing, exit/entry control, economic security, and public safety.

14. What was the relationship between policing and pacification?

Policing and pacification had to coexist. During unrest, the Police role is to secure and stabilize. We always aimed to maintain a Police presence to avoid a lapse in security. For long term stability, we developed a local Police force staffed by local people so they have a stake in their own security.

15. What did you talk about?

We talked about security issues within the provinces and the politics and lack of resources that stood in the way of achieving security. Frank was always very eager to understand our day-to-day work and challenges. And although I tried not to involve him in dangerous operations, he would accompany us to show support and solidarity whether or not his direct support was needed.

16. Did you discuss your family? Personal issues? Did you cultivate a friendship?

Yes, we discussed our families. After a few months, I considered Frank a friend. As he was far from home, I would often invite Frank on hunting trips and family outings. I had the pleasure of meeting his wife Marilyn during her visit to Vietnam.

D. Questions Related to Post Engagement

1. How did the experience end?

Our careers took us in different directions. I was promoted to Police Commander and moved my family to Saigon, 1st Precinct. Frank's last image of us in Vietnam was my family waving goodbye to him from the back ramp of a US cargo plane as we left en route to Saigon. Later, Frank requested to be transferred back to the US and subsequently resigned from government service.

2. Do you think the advising experience made a difference? Yes/No, in what way?

Yes, my US advisors provided perspectives that helped us prepare more proactively and strategically in managing security risks. Often that involved patience and long term thinking. But also, my advisors provided equipment and training that improved our day-to-day service to the civilian population. An example is Frank's provision of fire trucks and firefighting expertise to my force.

3. If you could change anything, what would it be?

From my perspective, there needs to be more commonality and coordination of support between the US military and civilian advisors. I often felt the need to bring the advisors together myself to synchronize and learn from each other.

Also, support should suit the conditions and issues of the local environment. For example, with the growth of the civilian population and foreign military presence in Nha Trang, my goal was to increase Police presence with wider and more detailed patrols. At the time, we had 2-3 men teams patrolling in US supplied Jeeps as well as Officers on motorbikes. While Jeeps were useful, teams had difficulty pursuing suspects through narrow streets and alleys. Often, Officers must disembark and pursue on foot. Suspects had the speed advantage by navigating on scooters. I wanted to put more Officers on motorbikes, and reduce the fleet of Jeeps which were costly to maintain. Therefore, I requested motorbikes, some with side cars for 2-men teams where appropriate. Frank was very responsive and resourceful, so not long after, he delivered a fleet of 1000cc Harley Davidsons. Although they were state-of-the-art, the motorcycles were too bulky and wide for my Officers to pursue suspects on more nimble 100cc scooters. I never received sidecars and to this day, Frank still finds that request humorous.

A related problem was with over-supply that created storage space and cost issues whereas I wanted the force to operate in a very lean and streamlined manner. I learned from my US advisors that returning equipment and supply was not a viable option. Therefore, I was forced to manage the appearance of impropriety by finding ways to creatively dispense of surplus which distracted from my command mission. As an example, I dispensed our vast over-supply of fuel to local fueling stations within our provinces. In exchange for surplus fuel and a security presence, my Officers had use of fueling stations as shift break and transition areas, and to refuel their vehicles.

4. Did you keep in touch? Why/why not?

We lost touch after I left Nha Trang for Saigon and Frank went home to the US. When Saigon fell 5 years later, we escaped from Vietnam in a military raft down the Saigon River. As all US flag ships were ordered to rescue refugees, we were picked up by a Miller beer ship and transported to the Philippines. Although we had not stayed in touch, when Frank learned of Saigon's fall, he enlisted the help of his Congressman to search for our family. They eventually found us through the Red Cross in the Philippines.

When I called Frank from the Philippines, he offered to help our family relocate to California. Eventually, we decided to settle in the Washington DC area in order to be closer to family members that were already established in the US through their service in the Diplomatic Corps. However, I will always be grateful to Frank for extending his help during a time of great turmoil for our country and family.

5. What did you learn that has stayed with you?

In terms of policing, set an example of honesty and integrity. Do not parade Police authority for your own glory or benefit. Instead, be composed and unassuming but also observant and vigilant. When you have people with high potential and strong character, trust and empowerment up and down the command structure yields a stronger, more unified force. Whether assessing performance or reprimanding conduct, be respectful and fair, and take every opportunity to impart wisdom and develop your people.

The same is true in dealing with civilians, build trusted relationships so they seek your help and advice in lieu of acting in ways that may not be law abiding. When enforcing the law, be practical and judicious, and seek to change the behavior.

Finally, relationships built on trust and respect, working side-by-side under the stress created by political instability and war time, can last a lifetime. That is certainly true of my friendship with Frank.

6. What advice would you give to those who are now doing what you did? Or recently returned?

In terms of working with US advisors, make a conscious decision to leverage your advisors. From that point on, make a concerted effort to be open, accessible and inclusive. Gather different perspectives and learn new methods. Reach a mutual understanding on Police authority and the advisors' role. Communicate the conditions, issues and imperatives of the command. Only in those ways, can you build trust and have productive working relationships.

7. In what ways did this experience impact your view of the United States? Of Americans? Of Vietnamese?

I view the Vietnamese as a resilient people who are attempting to rebuild a homeland and unite a culture that were tragically caught between ideologies. During the war, we were forced to choose, and right or wrong, our actions had to support the choices we made. But now, the people of the US and Vietnam share a common hope for freedom, peace and prosperity.

Moreover, I view the US as a moral nation willing to make great sacrifices to uphold high moral values. Having benefited from those sacrifices, and as Vietnamese

Americans, my family and I believe in the goodwill of the US and protection of the laws, rights and benefits of all people. Today, I am proud that my children and their children are responsible US citizens who serve their communities and especially my youngest son Chuck, an Army Ranger physician who has made service in the US military a part of his legacy.

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