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Interview with Peter Lansdale

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Tape 1 - Interview (telephone) with Peter Lansdale - 11 November 1985 - page 1

L: Hello.

C: Peter Lansdale?

L: Yeah.

C: This is Cecil Currey. Is this a better time to call?

L: It sure is. I appreciate it very much.

C: Oh, heavens, I appreciate being able to talk to you. ~~Let~~

L: Let me first give you Ted's address, or phone number rather.

Area 516 - 741-4447

C: Oh, he kept the same number then after he moved?

L: No, was that the same number you have?

C: Same number, yeah.

L: Yeah...no one answers at that number?

C: Well, I hadn't even tried to call it because your Dad had said that was his old number, and that he didn't know what the new number was.

L: Well, evidently he kept it then.

C: Ok. Now, I am going to record this if you don't mind.

L: Yeah, that's fine.

C: You are the younger son?

L: That's right.

C: When were you born?

L: November 7th of '41.

C: Well, you just had a birthday then.

L: Sure did.

C: Where were you born?

L: In San Francisco.

C: Your Dad, then, was by that time in advertising out there for Leon Livingston?

L: That's right.

C: What do you remember about your younger years, your early memories of your family?

L: Well, to be honest, I don't remember much in San Francisco. What I remember perhaps is more in the pictures that I see, I recall the pictures, I really remember living in a little town just north of San Francisco called Larkspur, just across from the Golden Gate Bridge. And I was at that time, I guess about 4 or 5 years old. My first recollections back in that era were back in the school, when I was in the first and second grade there.

C: I guess I didn't know your parents had moved to any place called Larkspur.

L: Yeah, they...I am not good at this; maybe my brother, who is two years older than I am, would remember more of this. We moved...that is a part of the history I don't recall. I know I was in the first and second grade in Larkspur. Now let me make sure that is right, because there was a time in there I was in the Philippines. My wife is sitting here--she keeps track of this better than I do. She is saying I was in the Philippines from the time I was 3 to 6, but that is not right--I wasn't there that long; it could have been 4 to 6. So I spent maybe a year in school in California.

C: And about 2 years in the Philippines?

L: Yeah, about 2 years.

C: Did you go to an Embassy School in the Philippines?

L: We went to what was called the American School, which I guess was under the Embassy or State Department perhaps. I know it was called American School and it was just for the dependents of Americans there.

C: Now you also lived in Washington, D.C. for awhile.

L: We moved here to Washington, I say here because I am just in the

L: suburbs now, when I was in the third grade, so I had to be 8. Let's see, I thought we moved here in '50--yeah, we moved here in '50 then.

C: If you were born in '41 that would make you 8 or 9.

L: Yeah. It was the early part of '50 then. I was 8. Yeah, third grade.

C: And have you pretty much lived in the Washington area since?

L: Yeah, pretty much since then. I was in the service for awhile, but I was stationed just by luck back at Ft. Myer (?), which is just right across from Washington. I am married and now I am here in Washington.

C: And your occupation?

L: I work for the phone company here; in fact, I work in Washington, D.C. and I run the business office that serves the Washington area.

C: Ok. When you were a little boy, how did it feel to you to have a father who was gone so much?

L: Well, I guess now looking back it is one thing...at the time it was almost the norm, you know, I didn't really think a lot about it at the time growing up. Looking back, of course, it looks, I guess it shapes the way you handle your family. From that experience you draw on things that you would like to see different with your family. At the time, I knew he was gone and we didn't talk a lot about it at home. I knew he would be home maybe once a year for a month or two; sometimes six months. We just kind of planned our life as I recall around those times when he would return.

C: Then you didn't feel like you were missing out on anything in particular?

L: Well, I don't ...to be honest, looking back, I don't know whether I was really aware of it at the time. Again, later on I realized that things could have been different, but to be very honest, no, at the time I really didn't. Especially when we lived in Washington, we were in an urban environment so I had a lot of friends then. And they were very close by, so they were a

L: resource I guess I drew on and didn't really have a real sense of void or loss or something.

C: Well, a little different question. How does it feel to be the son of a man who's, in his own way, extremely important and famous?

L: Well, that is tempered a little bit too by the atmosphere I guess I grew up in. All the nice answers, yeah, it feels great and I am very proud of him; that goes without saying. But I was raised in the section of Washington outside of Georgetown, and I went to school with the sons of congressmen and judges--you know, it was not a norm when I grew up but it wasn't unusual to have a famous father. So whereas I went to a public high school and my brother did too; we weren't in private schools that we would have that mixture, but we just happened to go to a school in the area that was the affluent area I guess of Washington.

C: One difference I can think of, Mr. Lansdale, is that the other kids, a son of a congressman, can say, my daddy serves in the House of Representatives. You could say, my daddy is famous, but I don't know why.

(laughter)

L: At a very early age, I recall he was home and we were driving, I think it was wintertime and we had some company, and I pointed out a building in Washington that that's where my Dad works. And my Dad was driving, or Mom in the car, they got very upset. I wasn't to point that out. I gather it was CIA now...I wasn't to point that out. You know, I felt kind of ill at ease with that.

C: When do you suppose you actually became aware that your father was doing sort of secret things?

L: I think that was it. (laughter) And I had to be 10 or 11, maybe 12, then. I actually was aware that there was some connection associated with him

L: I wasn't to mention.

C: Ok, going back a few years, what kind of memories do you have of the Philippines?

L: See I was there in '49--let me get my wife to concur with that? Was that right? Well, it was '49 or '50, so I was 7, 8, somewhere in there. What I recall mainly I think I recall from albums that I have seen, of some things I was involved with. I have impressions and they weren't real clear. The only impression I have that is really clear in my mind is the time I got in trouble, which is normal for a boy, I guess. I was playing where I shouldn't be and got into some things I shouldn't have and got caught. I recall that as an incident, and other than that...boy, you are going back 35 years. And I was a very young age and we were there for a year and a half. I recall living in a compound surrounded with an MP and there was barbed wire, and that was very different from my experience up to that time. Again, we were in a compound with all American families, other than we made some trips up to Bajio (sp?) and there were some other trips that were made, we were still pretty well protected, with Americans around us.

C: So I guess for you it wouldn't have been all that much different from living in Larkspur?

L: It wasn't really that different, correct, yeah.

C: Ok, what can you tell me about your mother?

L: Well, she put up with an awful lot raising two boys. We were I guess closer to her, as you would expect, than my father because she was the 85 per cent time parent. She was a little bit older than my Dad, 5 or 6 years, I am not real precise on the years, but she was a little bit older. And she was just real...I want to use the word strong, but she was real determined or had a very strong sense of how she wanted things to be in the absence of another parent.

L: I guess looking back, I am amazed that my brother and I turned out half way decent at all, in view of the fact that we had a father that was an image, you know. He was there sometime. And a mother that was, I found out later, she was 30 something when I was born--35 maybe, and she would play ball and catch and throw the baseball and football around (laughter)...I am 44 and I wouldn't want a small kid. So I think she was amazing to me, when I look back on it, she kind of dragged us around and made life as normal as she could for us, in view of the circumstances she was faced in. I don't think it was to her liking at all, the fact that Dad was gone so much.

C: Well, she would be an unusual wife, I guess, if she wanted her husband gone.

L: Yeah, I never felt that tug in front of us, but I am sure they had a lot of discussions in private, but that was never viewed in front of us. But we felt that that was the trauma that was always with Dad leaving in the family. very emotional and (She or we) would, of course, obviously/upset when he would go.

C: Was she a disciplinarian or a laidback, easy going type of mother?

L: I think in the middle. She was, had very old fashioned values, that children should be seen and not heard type, and that is the way I was raised, to be respectful and very polite, a gentleman. Those values I think were instilled in us. We recognized the fact that without a father around, there wasn't much she could do in terms of physical...to straighten us out. So we were more respectful of ...

(other voices on tape..phone goes dead)

L: I think we had a problem on the line there for a moment.

C: Now since you work for the telephone company, I want you to straighten it out.

(laughter)

C: It's gone now. It was some Oriental woman talking.

L: Somehow their line went dead and there was just cross talk on the line temporarily.

I don't know where we were.

C: You were talking about your mother and how she was kind of in the middle on discipline.

L: Yeah, I guess she really was. She couldn't really grab us and turn us over her knee very well at that age, 10 to 12. My brother and I had our normal, I guess, feuds or words with each other, but I don't think anything unusual that we did. You know, we were very much aware of the situation that she was there by herself trying to raise us, and I think we were smart enough to go along with that.

C: You felt a great deal of love and all that sort of thing?

L: Oh, gosh, yes. She was very strong. She came from a large family, and my Dad came from a large family. We had a guy across the street when we lived on McArthur Blvd. in Washington by the name of Woody who was; I don't want to use the term surrogate father--he was a butcher for Safeway, I think, and he would come in and do a lot of handiwork around the house fill in stuff with him. So I really can't say I missed it particularly growing up. I didn't have a father perhaps in the house, but I had all that associated with growing up. I can't say it was all bad.

C: Well, all of that kind of ended when your Dad came back from Vietnam in 1956, and he was assigned there in Washington.

L: Right.

C: So I guess from that point on, except for occasional trips, he was pretty much a father in the house?

L: Yeah. I was what, 14 then, and my brother was 16. I guess we were

L: in high school then. Yeah, I think he was very much in the house then ...he had a few minor trips but that was kind of it for him. Then the household routine got very normal.

C: Now how long did you live there on McArthur Blvd.? Had you grown up and gone away and they were still living there?

L: I was married, because I was married and had a daughter and we would go over and see them ...I was out of service then so I was living in Arlington at the time, so that was ten miles away was all. So we would see them on Garther (phonetic??). So I had to be 25 let's say when they moved, so that is back about 19 years ago.

C: Now that house burned down?

L: No.

C: That wasn't the house that burned?

L: No, that house is still there, it has been remodeled. Now they moved to an area down south of Washington on the Potomoc, near Mt. Vernon.

C: Which was the house that had the fire?

L: That house burned.

C: Oh.

L: Yeah, the one they moved to. They moved down into a house on the Potomoc. They moved into a condo for six months, pending the move, then they moved down there. Then there was a fire in the den. It was a beautiful house and was on about 6 different levels. And one level was a den/office that he had, lined with books, bookshelves all over. That caught on fire one day.

C: How did that happen? Electrical short?

L: Yeah, as I recall, it was. It was in the heating unit, baseboard heater. In fact if you see his books, you will still see the taping job he has had to do. A lot of books got burned; a lot he was able to save and just

L: put tape on the binding. It didn't do a lot of damage...well, it did but just to that one room, and burned the books and the bookshelves and furniture. There was a lot of smoke in the house. Then you had the smoke damage.

Then my Mom passed away after that I think about 6 months. Yeah, 6 months to a year after that she passed away.

C: Now, how did she die?

L: She had...I forget the medical term, but it was a lung disorder. I always suspected it was something to do with the smoke, because she was in the house at the time.

C: She didn't get out right away then?

L: No, she stayed in the house and called the fire department and tried to put the fire out, and was there at the time...called me, got me on the phone. I was living...

END OF TAPE 1

TAPE 2

C: Ok, she was in the house...

L: Yes, she was in the house at the time; called me in a real state of panic. The firemen had just arrived, and Dad was out doing something; he was not in the house. I don't know what he was doing. He was out for the afternoon or something. But she managed to get the fire under control. And I always suspected, and I am not real precise on this, on the date, but it was not that long after that that she passed away. So I always thought that was it. It took a lot out of her; being there and the trauma of putting out the fire and trying to save the books and doing it on her own; I just thought gosh, that is an awful lot to put up with. She thought at any moment the whole house is going to burn down.

C: Well, I have a final question. As you think back on your young days, when you were a child, are there any kind of standout occasions when maybe you and your Dad did something that was just lots of fun...

L: My brother and I will tell the same story (laughter)...how do I temper this...My Dad when he was home made every effort to be a father in every sense, the camping and that type of thing. Sometimes it was like, damn it, we are going to have fun if you like it or not (laughter). And my brother will probably tell a very like story I think, maybe we will get the details different. But we were in California on a camping trip, and my father (if you have gotten this from anyone else) when he cooks he will do it in excess. He will make chili but it will be there for two months. He won't do anything for just two people, it is always like trying to feed an Army. So anyway we were out on a camping trip; it was really a nice time, just the three of us. Mom stayed home. He made rice pudding, which my brother and I couldn't stand to start with (laughter). I think he made enough for the week. So we ended up we were eating rice pudding. So for years later everytime he would want to cook, we would say, anything but rice pudding. That is kind of a standard joke in the family about rice pudding (laughter). It was a nice bonding occasion, to get out and camp and that type of thing. That's on the light side, I guess, but it is something that always stuck in my mind. When he did come home he always had time for us to get out and do things.

C: Ok. Do you think of anything else you would like to tell me?

L: I can't think of anything really. I talked to Dad today, by the way. (omitted) I will be seeing him...he is fine...he is coming over for Thanksgiving.. through the operation his kidney problem)..he realizes how close he didn't make it,/and he is living more for today ~~agent~~ than I have seen him for the last 10 or 15 years. The fall of Vietnam was tough on him. He dwelled on that for years. He dwelled on Vietnam

L: for years after that. From that date on he was real different. He didn't live currently; he lived in the past. I can see a change in him. He has had heart problems, and that has really slowed up the way he has moved. At least it has got him into the current, into right now, and living for now, which I think is a real positive. And I think it was just absolutely the most traumatic thing he could have gone through, with the length of the operation and the other complications. And I can see a change. If we don't see him for two weeks, I can see a change. He gets stronger.

C: That is wonderful; not only is he a fine person, but I need him to read every word of this that I write. I don't want to write it after he is dead and gone.

L: No, he will be delighted. He just got back from the beach. To say how healthy he is, he has a place down at Kitty Hawk--it's a five hour drive-- and he will insist on doing it on a Friday night and coming back on a Sunday afternoon (conversation omitted: fights traffic both ways--passing everything in sight--laughter--so he is doing fine)

C: He told me a very funny story once. He was tailgating somebody in McLean when I was in the car with him (omitted: always more interested in who was following him than who was in front of him)

(omitted: you are going to Washington tomorrow. You give him your phone number so he can call if he thinks of anything else)

END OF INTERVIEW