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Interview with John Dickson

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C: ...Dickson?

D: That's right.

C: Mr. Dickson, my name is Cecil Currey, and I am a friend of General Lansdale...

D: Oh, yes, right.

C: ...and I guess I am more than a friend--I am going to become his biographer here in a while.

D: Who, Lansdale?

C: Yes.

D: Oh, really?

C: Yes.

D: That's great.

C: I have been working on researching his life for about two years now...

D: Oh, he is a wonderful guy.

C: Yeah, he's ok, isn't he? (laughter)

D: He is something like that, what, Lawrence of Arabia--he is the closest thing we have, right?

C: He did pretty well at that. Lawrence just did it once, but Lansdale did it in two different countries.

D: That's right. Once in the Philippines and once in Vietnam. And you know, if we hadn't goofed up out there, it would have worked out a lot better.

C: Well, that's the kind of thing I was hoping you could tell me about. Would it be ok if I talked to you on the phone for awhile and record it?

D: Sure, ok, I don't care. Just one second please--let me --may I get your name again?

C: (you introduce yourself again)

D: Ok, let's go ahead. You know I wasn't in Vietnam myself so I can't be of any use to you over there.

C: Yeah, he tells me you were in the Philippines with him.

D: Yeah, I was in the Philippines with him, right, exactly.

C: Well, what I would like to know: how you met him, in what way you worked with him, or knew of him in your work if you didn't work with him. You know, whether you were a member of the company as he was, various kinds of things like that.

D: Right. Definitely I was a member of the company. Ok? And I was very active on the Chinese side, Chinese affairs...

C: In the Philippines?

D: ...in the Philippines. You see there was a big overseas Chinese community there.

D:

C: That's right. /It used to be, when I was there, about 400,000-- God knows what it is now.

C: Well, Mr. Dickson, not only that, but you look at any given Filipino and you see traces of Chinese.

D: No question about that, including the great Marcos, right?

C: That's correct.

D: Look, very oriental features...

C: So to say that they have an active Chinese population is one way of putting it. (laughter)

D: Exactly. And also you know too, the Chinese, when I was there, they were the most powerful economic group in the Philippines by far. So naturally, money talks wherever it is, and it talked there, I think, too.

But anyway, I suppose---I tried to keep Ed apprised of activities

D: in the community.

C: Now, when did you go there, Mr. Dickson?

D: Oh, I arrived in December of '51 and I was there until June or July of '54, I can't remember which.

C: Ok, and what was your capacity there?

D: I was Assistant Attache in the Embassy.

C: Right. CIA often does that with their people, right?

D: Yeah, that's right, exactly.

C: Ok. And how did you meet Lansdale?

D: Well, you know, being in the same business, we--I mean, I was just introduced to him. Or I just met him in the office.

C: Had you been briefed before you went out there that he was there and this is what he was doing and...

D: No, I hadn't because I wasn't actually involved in what he was doing directly.

C: So you worked with the overseas Chinese population there in the Philippines, kind of, I suppose keeping aware of them.

D: Yes, keeping touch to see if there were any subversive movements there and so forth, and if there were, how it would affect them, how it would affect their attitude toward the government, how it would affect their attitude toward us, you know, matters of this nature which were, you know, of some consequence then, because the people there had associations in Hong Kong and Indonesia and throughout Southeast Asia. It was a very potent force, I would say by and large, and they had a lot of unbelievably talented people among those in the Chinese community there in the Philippines. Really a well motivated group of people. It was great working with them.

C: How old were you when you arrived?

D: I was quite young. I was around 27 or 28 I guess.

C: I have a son that age (conversation omitted)

I certainly have learned a bit about CIA since I have been working on this book...

D: I am delighted you are doing this because Ed is a phenomenal guy and I tell you the thing that impressed me the most, Ed had a way of empathizing with the people where ever he was. I mean the Filipinos liked him, in my opinion, and admired him and respected him, and he knew how to be one of them, while at the same time maintaining his status as an American. And it is something I have seen all too rarely, throughout my career, someone who could acclimate himself to a situation and make the people know that he was as interested in them as he was in himself. I felt Ed had that capability, which I thought was extremely rare.

C: What I find amazing about it is that he does that without speaking their language.

D: Oh, I know. Well, actually, of course, Tagalog is the official language of the Philippines, but basically though, I knew an awful lot of Filipinos and I don't remember anyone who didn't speak pretty good English.

C: That's true, but he goes to Vietnam and does the same thing there.

D: He doesn't speak French, and he doesn't speak Spanish, does he?

C: No, he doesn't. And of course he doesn't speak Vietnamese.

D: I don't see how Ed managed that well there. Maybe the Nhu brothers, I imagine their English, their education was probably pretty good, and perhaps those surrounding them were pretty good. But, although I wasn't there, I am sure that Ed managed to get out and once again establish contacts with the people on all levels. Or if he didn't I am sure that those who

D: worked for him managed to do that.

C: Tell me something about the ways in which you did come in contact with him in the Philippines.

D: Frankly it has been so many years ago, it is almost---30 years ago.

C: Over 30 years.

D: And I just don't even remember who introduced me to him. But I remember I was impressed. The thing that impressed me, I guess, was also say we would have a big Embassy function and all of the diplomats in Manila would arrive, and Ed would come in and it would be as though the show had stopped, you know. I'm not kidding you. Because he was a very dashing looking guy then, and there was a certain aura about him that I don't think was duplicated by anyone in our whole periphery of contacts there. And there is something startling about Ed, I guess his reputation sort of snow-balled as people got to know that here is somebody who has a unique mission maybe and who has a unique way of carrying it out. And also the guy looks like something out of the movies, you know; he did then. And we have got a President that is out of the movies, and people respected that sort of thing.

C: That's a good point.

How frequently did you come in contact with him when you were there?

D: I don't know exactly how frequently. Probably not much more than every couple of weeks, because I wasn't working directly on what he was working on. My own thing was pretty separate and apart. It had kind of a collateral aspect to it, but by and large probably not more than once every couple of weeks at the most.

C: How long did you work for the company?

D: Oh, you mean out there? Oh about 23 years.

C: 23 years. I would like to ask you another kind of question that

C: would help clarify something for me, maybe. Some people that I know worked for CIA, I KNOW IT, will look at me with this straight face and say, "Oh, I didn't work for CIA!"

D: Never understood it myself.

C: And others, you know, like you, say "Yes, I worked for them".

D: I think it is a known fact anyway, we served so many places -- I -- many of my friends are like that: they sit in the band box and think no one knows. To me, if there is some reason for it, good; if it is not, it's an absurdity.

C: Well, do you know what it means to speak in Jesuitical (?) terms?

D: I know it very well indeed; that is right.

C: Well, Ed Lansdale, when I first started interviewing him, would say with this utter deadpan, "I was never a member of CIA", and come to find out after I got hold of some official records, he wasn't.

D: I think precisely that he was an Air Force officer.

C: That's right, he was an Air Force officer on duty with the CIA.

D: That's right. In Ed's case, he was telling you the absolute truth.

C: Well, yes, but I was asking him kind of things like, "Did you work for the CIA?" and he responds, "I was never a member of CIA." You see, he is shading it.

D: But I think some of these things are pretty well documented, aren't they?

C: Oh, yes, and any more when he and I talk, why he is open about these things.

D: Well, how did Ed feel about your doing a biography on him?

C: Mr. Dickson, I think he is very pleased with the idea. This will be my tenth book so I have a kind of a reputation behind me, and he is at

C: an age in his life where I think maybe he would like a little justification for some of the things he tried to do that got washed down the drain occasionally.

D: Frankly, I think things like this, in my opinion, it would help the Agency rather than hurt it. He was so remarkable.

C: Well, Bill Colby has been very cooperative with me. I interviewed him.

D: Was Bill in Vietnam with...

C: Yes, he was.

D: (static on phone line)

C: He was there when Lansdale went back under Ambassador Porter in '66, '67 and '68.

D: He was out there in the beginning. Who was the Ambassador when Ed first arrived. Do you remember?

C: Well, I would have to look at my chart...

D: It is not important. I remember a General Collins was there at the time...do you remember?

C: Yes, he was.

D: And there was a considerable dispute between the two of them. I think General Collins later left and Ed stayed.

C: That's right and at one point Collins having meeting, says he is going to represent the military, and somebody else will represent the State Department and Lansdale stands up and says, "Well, I hereby appoint myself representative of the American people, and I don't like what is happening in this meeting, and I am walking out."

D: You know, he is capable of doing that. I don't have any documentary, but Ed is the type of guy who would do that. He has a touch of the dramatic

D: about him. You know, maybe that is what attracted the attention of the top level in our own country who wanted to see things move, and they found a guy like Ed who had the guts not to be a bureaucrat, and that you appreciate. I mean it is not always that good, but often it is.

C: Well, let me ask you another question. Do you know the man who works now for National Geographic and who is a novelist--his name is Charles McCary (sp?)?

D: No, not at all.

C: Ok. Well, he used to be CIA.

D: Oh, I have never even heard the name.

C: The reason I mentioned him was when he was going through training to become an agent for CIA, he said that very often the instructors would talk about this episode or that episode and put it in hypothetical terms, but later on McCary said that what he found out those episodes were based on were the exploits of Lansdale.

D: I'll be darned.

C: What I was leading up to: did you ever do any instructing for CIA?

D: No, not at all.

C: You never worked with new agents?

D: No--you worked--I mean I never worked as an instructor.

C: That's what I meant.

D: No, never. That is probably why I didn't know him. I never worked, thank God I was never in that category. I would have had no interest in it.

C: Well, I always like to get at least two people to agree on a statement before I consider it worthwhile including in my book. And I wanted, and still

C: want, to get somebody else who was with the company to say, oh, yeah, when I was training, etc. etc.

D: But actually I never was. In this same context, do you have Ed's book...

C: Oh, yes, "In the Midst of Wars"

D: Yeah, that's right. Do you find that helpful?

C: Well, yes, except he wrote that and you would never get from reading that any indication that he ever knew who the CIA was. He never mentions it.

D: Never mentions it in there, hunh?

C: Not one word.

D: I'll be darned.

C: Just kind of baking a loaf of bread without using yeast.

D: Well, how is he going to feel now if you bring in the CIA?

C: Well, I think he will feel all right about it now. You see, since Bill Colby talked to me, Lansdale feels that any need for utter kind of secrecy over issues 40 years in the past, that it is ok now.

D: Ok. I haven't looked at "In the Midst of Wars" in years, but I had thought that there were references in there...

C: Well, there may be references to somebody else...he may actually mention CIA, but never any indication that he was a part of it, or worked with it, or knew what they were doing, or anything. It is a very interesting book in that respect.

D: Funny how your memory shifts around on these things.

C: Well, let me ask you one more thing. And talk as long as you want to on this. Do you have any favorite Lansdale stories that kind of tickle you when you recall them?

D: No, I don't because I, my association was/such that would have
not

D: provided something like that. You will probably have to find some of these guys who were more intimately associated with him and what he was doing. I wish I did; I would like to help you, because I think anecdotes like that are very useful and helpful, but I don't...

(Interruption on line--another voice)

D: But anyway anything you want to say about Ed and what he tried to do, I would strongly endorse it. I think we need more people like that, particularly more people who have compassion for those who need compassion, which is about two-thirds of the world anyway.

C: That's right. And he does, he really does.

D: How does he look now; I haven't seen him, we have been up there the past 6 or 7 years.

C: (conversation omitted--kidney removed)

D: Still have his mustache?

C: Oh, yes.

D: At this age, still got the dashing figure?

C: I think so for a 76 or 77 year old man, yeah.

D: That is unbelievable. 76 is right. God, it is incredible, all these years have passed, it is terrifying.

Well, anyway I wish you all the luck on your book.

My work was such that I just don't have that type of---I knew him more personally than I did on the work side.

C: If in the next few days you think of something...(you give him telephone number)

END OF INTERVIEW