The Five O'Clock Follies
by Bill Lenderking

Bill Lenderking served in the CORDS program in Pleiku, South Vietnam from January 1968 (just before the Tet Offensive) until October, and the following year in Saigon with Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, until the end of 1969. The following is an excerpt from a longer interview with the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training conducted in March 2007 detailing some of Lenderking's experiences.

http://adst.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Lenderking-William.toc_.pdf

Q: What were some of your impressions about the foreign press corps in Vietnam?

One thing that is legendary, even to this day, is the daily press briefings that were held at JUSPAO, the Joint U.S. Public Affairs Office, which USIS operated with the military. And those came to be known as the "five o'clock follies." At any given time there were 400-500 foreign correspondents there in-country, and some of the really top names in journalism were there at one time or another as foreign correspondents. So it was a big deal, and this was how the world was seeing the war, through what these guys wrote.

One experience I had in Pleiku: we were informed that a Viet Cong company had surrendered, and this was a big coup for us because the Chieu Hoi (amnesty program) was not really successful. Some people came in but they were low level people and they were just tired of the war and we very rarely got anyone of any consequence. For this reason, the surrender of a large number of the enemy was a big deal.

But I was a personal witness to all this, and my colleagues who went out to check and see who those folks really were saw right away they were just bedraggled Montagnard villagers forced out of their homes and just trying to survive. They'd been uprooted from their village by the war and had been wandering about for some time without much water or food, and maybe a couple of them had old rusty guns or something. They weren't Viet Cong, they weren't combatants—they were just part of the war's huge flotsam, but somehow someone thought it would be helpful to call them Viet Cong and report they had come in and laid down their arms.

So after hearing from my colleagues in Pleiku what this incident was about, that very day I went to Saigon on other business, and at the end of the day I went to the five o'clock follies. And guess what they are talking about? The big news of the day, announced to a briefing room full of war correspondents, was this: a company or a platoon of 55 hard-core Viet Cong have come over to our side. I took this in from the back of the room, and I said to myself, this is just total bullshit. And this is what happens: an incident of some kind occurs, and immediately it is passed up the line, getting more distorted at each link in the chain.

Now, obviously, I wasn't going to say anything there, but I went afterwards and told the briefers, "You know, I'm from Pleiku and my colleagues saw these people you're calling defectors, and what was said just now was total nonsense." Well, they didn't want to hear that. I was pouring

water on their story. They didn't want to hear me out and put out a correction; they wanted me to go away and not come back. I could give you many such examples...

I remember a cocktail party conversation, not really a cocktail party but there were always parties going on in Saigon, some reception or other, and I was talking to a guy from USAID, a senior guy in Saigon. I told him who I was and we were just talking, and I said it doesn't matter whose side you're on or whether you think this war is justified or not; from my perspective, we are losing and we're not going to win it. The war is unwinnable and we're doing all kinds of things wrong. And he got red in the face and said if you feel that way you're disloyal. You should go home; you shouldn't be here. And I said, "I didn't ask to come here but I'm doing my best and all the guys who are here are doing their best but this is what the situation is. And we're out there where we can see what's really happening..."

When you came into Saigon there would always be guys from the provinces in there; they're coming in to get some money or coming in to push a project or something like that, so I talked to many of them and found I wasn't alone in the way I felt. Almost all of us in the countryside felt that way. Guys in other parts of the country had stories very similar to the ones I've mentioned, and they had the same sense of disillusion: we were doing badly, we weren't winning and our side was not capable of winning the war. So I felt okay, it's not just me, it's not just because I am disgruntled; I'm seeing the same things these other guys are seeing. So I think that was a good chance to learn that we were not crazy or disloyal, but we were dismayed, and a lot of guys had really good projects going but they had this sense that our side was not capable.

My Vietnamese was getting better and better because I was using it all the time, and I would talk to students on the street corners in Saigon, or something like that, and they were just like guys who hang out on street corners anywhere. They were chasing women and looking after themselves, and I said to one of these groups one day, "Why don't you join the army and fight for your country?" They were university students, and they said, "No, we are not soldiers, we are intellectuals; we are students."

So I paraphrased Lyndon Johnson's well-worn argument, "Do you think it's okay for Americans to be here and fighting this war, when Vietnamese students hang out on street corners, drink coffee, and chase women?" "Oh yes," they replied, totally without guile. "You should fight, it's perfectly all right for you, but it's not for us and you go out there and win it and we'll stay here." That little vignette always stayed with me. As privileged kids in a class-ridden hierarchical society, what they were advocating was perfectly reasonable. They weren't soldiers, they were young intellectuals. It helps to explain why our side could never win... But the trouble was, our hopes to help build a democracy in this infertile soil were unrealistic. There were political parties and some good people in some of them, but they faced overwhelming odds and, of course, they ended up being overrun.

Here's another little vignette regarding reporting on Vietnam: I had a good friend who went through Vietnamese language training with me, and who was a State Department guy assigned to the political section. One day we exchanged notes, and he said he agreed with the criticisms of the reporting and acknowledged the process of distortion and how the message got altered along the line to Washington, because of the pressure to produce good news. He said the best reporting

on Vietnam, for all their faults, came from the press, and there were good people and bad people, but press reporting was the most reliable. And the second was the CIA. And the third, I guess, were the provincial reporting units; the fourth was the reporting from the embassy; and dead last were the voluminous and so-called objective reports from CORDS and the countryside. He told me supervisors would alter reports reporting officers had written to reflect good news, which was not borne out by the facts on the ground.

Q: How were relations between what you were doing [in Pleiku] and the headquarters of the Fourth Division? Was this not the ivy (IV) division, the famous fighting Fourth?

Yes. They occupied a huge base about 10 miles outside Pleiku town, the provincial capital of the province. I went out there a couple of times to remonstrate with anyone who would listen to me, and basically I just did not count enough. I mean, I never got in to see General Peers (MG Ray Peers, the commanding general of the Fourth Division); but there were a couple of guys, say, lieutenant colonels, majors, I could talk to and their attitude was that an army division is a massive thing and we have a war to fight and we're not going to worry about the people who get in the way. And that was very unfortunate because some of that has happened in Iraq, too.

They did have a war to fight, and they were doing things like using Agent Orange and they were trying the best they could to not contaminate places. The planes were only supposed to fly when the conditions, like wind direction, were a certain way, and there were other rules as well; but in a war zone you fly those planes when you have them, you know. Put your finger in the air and take off. One time, I had an argument with an Army captain. He said his troops had to destroy what were called "monkey bridges," makeshift bridges made of a narrow plank or two that the people used during the day to cross streams to get to their crops, or whatever. And then at night the military would come and chop them down because the Viet Cong were using that bridge too.

And the captain said, "Look, I am here to protect my men and I'm not going to allow that bridge to be used by the Viet Cong to attack my troops." Of course I could understand his viewpoint; I would have felt the same way in his position. But here was a tiny but fundamental conflict, right at the grassroots, that went to the heart of some of the problems of trying to defeat what was already more than an insurgency. It was an attempt by the North Vietnamese to repel what they regarded as an invasion and occupation by a foreign power, and that's what it was. From our viewpoint, we were trying to help a weak and corrupt non-communist regime survive so that communism would not take over another country. If we had understood better that the forces of nationalism and xenophobia were stronger than any pro-communist sentiments, perhaps we wouldn't have made so many mistakes. In any case, we feared that Vietnam would become a satellite of Communist China, but that was never really a possibility. Later, the Vietnamese flared up at the Chinese over a border incident, and the Vietnamese really bloodied some Chinese noses and gave a very good account of themselves before the Chinese numerical superiority dictated an end to hostilities...