

Vietnam (1965-1967)

by Jim Meenan

Jim Meenan is a former USOM (USAID)/Vietnam Senior Local Currency Officer. Now retired, he is a member of the AFSA PAC Advisory Board.

I was only a couple of years out of college when I accepted a USAID offer to join a Special Training Program for Vietnam. The 10 month program included a three-month inspection/review of the USAID program to Liberia. The full program was cut short when the American embassy in Saigon was attacked by exploding a vehicle next to the building. Instead, the Vietnam Area Studies Program was provided to augment my training and provide a great introduction to what would lie ahead by bringing together experienced Vietnam field staff with the new recruits.

One war vet proved most helpful with understanding the true meaning of “self-help” efforts. Lt. Col. John Paul Vann, who had served with the Army in Vietnam, “rewrote the book” on counterinsurgency initiatives, much to the chagrin of his former military bosses, and provided unique insights on how real progress could be attained under difficult conditions. Vann died with USAID in Vietnam, but his insights have good application, even today.

Necessities found me in uncharted waters when I was assigned as the first American to manage all of USAID’s local currency in the country, in excess of \$1 billion. Without a good national banking system to call on, USAID established cashiers throughout the country to pay contractors and related local operating costs. I soon learned that the Ministry of Finance was not very supportive of Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky when it threw up a number of roadblocks to USAID’s efforts.

When the local currency (Piaster) was devalued, the agreement threw into limbo the extensive generations of local currency from the Public Law 480, Food for Peace Program, which in part helped fund the Vietnam Army (ARVN) through regular transfers to the U.S. Army (MACV). While we understood a corrective exchange of diplomatic notes to fix the problem had taken place, the U.S. embassy could not locate them. Accordingly, the Ministry of Finance blocked access to the local currency, and the USAID funds got comingled with their own import funds.

With the outstanding effort of my chief local accountant (a former North Vietnam national), we were able to gain access to the Foreign Ministry files and retrieve the corrective communications covering future food deliveries. However, the Finance Ministry continued to block the comingled funds until we impressed upon them that MACV, and in turn the ARVN forces, would be advised that the Ministry was the cause for their delayed payments. The issues were then quickly resolved.

