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Interview with Nguyen Be

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**Interview with Nguyen Be
Washington, D.C.,**



C: How do we spell your name, Colonel?

B: B-E.

C: B-E. And the rest of your name?

B: N-G-U-Y-E-N.

C: Do you have any thoughts on what [Lieutenant] Colonel [Jean] Sauvageot was just saying?

B: Well, you see, as I told you that we can clear land but we can never hold it. I tell you one example. The first time I become military sector commander of Binh Dinh Province . One district chief came in and asked me, Oh, please send to me one company of RF, of Regional Force, to reinforce one little hamlet . One hamlet in Binh Dinh province, it meant we have almost 8 to 10 square miles so it was impossible militarily speaking, conventional military, one company cannot defend for 8 square miles.

C: That is a divisional sector.

B: Yes. Secondly, he said, well look, that village, that hamlet was individually protected by a 10-man self defense force and VC can attack it and take all weapons and kill all of them. Second time in we reinforce by one platoon of 30 men so still attacking by the Communists and take most of the weapons, kill only maybe half of the peasants. Now is the third time we reinforce one peoples self defense platoon with one regional force platoon. Is still attacking by VC and most of their weapons are captured by VC. And half of them was wounded and killed so now he asks to have the whole RF company to reinforce the little hamlet. I said, no, I can not give you one RF company for the hamlet. Secondly, how much is total population of Dinh Bihn Province. He says

is 900,000 in toto. I say how many young men can we recruit? He says that maybe out of 900,000, we can recruit around 1,000 young men if we ever want to.. 100,000 and how many hamlet do we have? He said that, well, we have around thousand hamlets. I said, well, ok. So each hamlet we can recruit for you hundred men. O.K., but as I told you, hundred men is not enough to defend for 7 to 8 square miles of area. Even if we are able to equip it and mobilize the whole population, one company, it is not possible to defend for... militarily defend in a conventional way. So I said, but I will come and see the population and see how we can solve the problem. So I came immediately, in the second day, in my second day of command in Binh Dinh sector come into that little hamlet, visit that village. Of course, I had one battalion to operate, to clear that area for me to be able to come in there safely with the district chief, my staff and everything. The population are still not cooperative with me in the village. Oh, o.k., I say, well, let me do it. So I called the battalion commanders and said, well, surround the village, take control of the pass. All the road coming into the hamlet nobody can get in, nobody can get out until the villagers decide to have their own government in the hamlet. So, well, I left. I just told them, some of the leaders, the elder people in the hamlet, well, look, you don't fight for me, you don't fight for the Americans, you don't fight for President Diem in Saigon. You are fighting for yourself. So you have to have your government because I don't want to give you a feeling that you are my subordinate, see? So people say, what can I do, I cannot appoint the hamlet chief. I say no, me either, I don't want to appoint your hamlet chief, but as long as you don't have your hamlet chief, your people are not authorized to get out, by me. Nobody gets out. So after one week, people start to starve without food, without

nothing, see. So people come and ask the battalion commander, well, now we want to have a government. Will the deputy province chief recognize our _____? They cabled to me and said, well, all right. I come second time after one week. Come in and say, well, ok, look, now you have to elect your five-member and the hamlet chief and your five member hamlet council, the hamlet committee, administrative committee. After one day the five people come in to show to me. I don't care if my secretary be in or not (?)_____. To those five people I said, it's ok, it's all right. Go back and bring your wife, your children, the whole family, your parents even, come in here each one of you. So I met the group. I said, well, ok now is nine o'clock at night, and I say, that, now well, these five people, your husband, your son, your father, your brother, now are working for the people in this hamlet, not for Americans, not for me, not for the province chief in Dinh Binh, working for you. So if something happen to them, well, the people, your neighbor, have to protect them; not me. I don't have the troops to come protect you. See? People say that, well, how we can protect them? I say, well, that easy. Very easy. Every children can watch out anyone who was strange, who was suspected, just alert them to get away. You save their life, that's all. You don't need a weapons to kill the other people. I don't want you to kill anybody, just to protect yourself. Well, I left. Of course, Communists come in and propogandize _____ that the people are working for them collecting taxes and... but I withdraw the battalion completely, left them to do what they want to do thus survive at least for two more weeks. After two weeks I coming back to visit and now this time I bring some toys for the children; some gift for the family. I come with the

protection and just to hear the people talking, stop at each family, talking a little bit. But at the meantime people say that, Now, we want to have a loans from a bank, bank loans for fertilizer, for the fish net and everything because the summer will very soon come in and we want to go to fish outside. We don't have money to buy. I say, why you not have? You cannot borrow back from the farm bank? They say, well, because we don't pay back last year. I said, now, anyone who want to have that loan, I guarantee that if you pay one piaster you can have a loan of two piasters. And anyone of you in here really owes some money from the bank and owes some taxes from the government, just follow me and bring your money and stay overnight with me in the district headquarters. I will tell to the district chief overnight, and tomorrow you will go back with double your money to have your fish net and everything. So they calling people up, is good they doing things for us. So they told the people, why don't you do it for us? So all of them just collect all the money and go in and pay tax, everything, so next day they come back with their money. But before they go back some of their wife and children come in and said to them, well, look, be careful because the VC last night come in to the hamlet and order that anyone who pays for the GVN one piaster has to pay for them 100 piasters. That is a vanity to be cooperative with the GVN. Well, those people are very afraid. All of them are head of household, but they had to go back to their village anyway because nothing helped them yet, you see. They have to be careful. They know who are pro-VC, who report to VC and everything else, they know. I don't know. Nobody know. They know, you see. So they coming back, they be very careful. Next day, of course, the VC come and start to find out who is paying tax for GVN. So, of course, nobody tell them that but they find out, well, come in to

this family asking the wife and the children, where your husband? And send many around to see the farmers, to find something, going to the district, going to the next village or something like that. So that very sad. First time, second time, third time, they start to be very, very angry with their wife and children. So after three more weeks I coming back to visit once more. This time some of the children come in and said to me, dear Major, I want to, from, I want to have some grenades. I know how to kill VC. I ask them, why you want to kill VC? They say that, well, because they do many wrong things to my mammy. Because my daddy is afraid of them and away when they come. They beat my mammy, they do something wrong for the children, and everything like that, so heck, I want to kill them but I have no weapon. If you can give me a hand grenade, I know how to kill them. I say, no. But I give them, you know, some firecrackers, the kind that drop in fire, crack and make noise and some sling shot, sling shot with rubber. Well, I left. So sometime VC come in, the children [scare them]with the firecrackers. The VC lie down on the ground, afraid that ARVN is coming or something like that. The children laugh, because they have no terror. They are brave, you see. So VC are very angry with them and beat them; take all of their toys and everything. So frequently every week I come to visit and every time I bring toys, something. I don't ask who are VC, who are not VC. This time many children are coming to insist to have hand grenade. I say, no, but maybe you can go to some next or nearest RF company. Maybe you can borrow from the soldiers hand grenade, something like that. And I don't want you to become homicide when you are teenagers, so I come back. One day I receive a cable from the district chief telling that, well, VC are coming into that village into booby traps. Two dead and three wounded, so they burned some of

the peoples house. I say that, well, move something with a roof in, move some stuff in to help the people rebuild that house and asking the neighboring hamlet people to come to help them to rebuild their house, but not to do anything, not asking who is doing that because everybody know the Communists, VC, are doing it. And I come asking that. So now this time in the village, you see, I start to organize their own system of law (?) with (?) booby traps. Anytime VC come in they can make some noise or something, shoot them or watching peoples house This time those five people come in and say that well, now we after two months now this is the time for us to be really committed ourselves for GVN because we know what the communists are. Before we have to work hard for you, hard for the other side. Now we are organized and the district chief, you see, say that, well, we spend nothing, even any weapon, you just supply them a little bit as their need, you see. So in the conventional warfare, search and destroy, clear and hold, all of those military operations are against our democratic ideology. Democracy, you have any democracy, because you clear it and make people hostile to you and appoint by someone and just know that this one is VC; this one is not VC. How you know it? It is very hard. Even myself, a Vietnamese, I don't think I know who are VC, who are not. Because ideology, Communist idealogy, you see, so most of the west at the time, because we are using most of our military weapons and war materials and fighting against a guerrilla who has only a small knife, or even a bamboo stick. So that like you are gambling with me and you are a millionaire and I have only a few quarter in my pocket. So you are wasting your money to play with me, you see. But _____ little by little, I can _____.

C: Colonel, you described a very good program. Why didn't it work?

B: You see, as I spoke to you, the good, the ruling class of people are

marginal. Even among themselves to be loyal to the western and to upraise the rural people. So you see the reaction was this: we spend thousand, thousand dollars on bombs, ammunition in the countryside. Nobody worry. If you come to Saigon, you see, people are very happy to see the airplane bombing in the rural area, but during the Tet offensive, we drop only two bombs in Cholon. Two bombs in Cholon because a lot of VC unit are moving to that part of the town. People are very worried but because it reach them, hurt them, see. So that a real class, we are fighting and helping only one class of people and what that class of people so called the _____. Well, they said that well, we want to be anti-communist, we want to fight them, we want to kill them, but in our Army they want to recruit those poor villagers to fight against those Communists, but they don't to let their son to be drafted in the Army, you see. And even now, coming to this country, those people who said that they are anti-Communists; they want to have a resistance in Viet Nam of the people who are draft dodgers and never contributed any. So I had the idea, but I am not a top man so I cannot make reform and as a little man, I cannot start a revolution. If I start a revolution, big mess over the problem, but I cannot compete with it, what our own people with the westerners, with the financial aid at the meantime with the Communists' revolutionary side, see? That's the point that I, my fellows, feel, that I'm caught in the middle, see? And many people had the idea to ask me. Many real patriots in both side; the Communist side like in the Nationalist side cannot succeed because we are not committed right to the top to have a reform.

C: What was the background of Nguyen Cao Ky?

B: Huhn?

C: What was the family background and past of Nguyen Cao Ky?

B: Well, Nguyen Cao Ky was from, I don't know, from a normal _____ of France in north part of Vietnam and and come engage in the Army and become an officer of the older (overt?) operation Vietnamese.

C: He was not a Mandarin?

B: Well, not completely a Mandarin. Maybe he have some key position in their village or their district. He's mostly a playboy. He got married to a French woman when he left training in France as a pilot or something like that so that he considered himself as a Frenchman. And the only thing pride they have is that they can speak French, they can get married to a French, and French are superior to the Vietnamese.

C: Good.

--end of interview--