

Interview No. 58
Southeast Asia History Writeup
Jerry Forth and Alden Jones
August 17, 1977

Jones

This is Interview No. 58 for the Southeast Asia History Chronology. Today is August 17, 1977. I'm here at the Chehalis woods headquarters with Jerry Forth. I'm Alden Jones. Jerry, what were you doing over here at the time that you had a chance to go over into Southeast Asia?

Forth

I was the logging foreman here at Pe Ell and at Vail. I had been at Pe Ell when Claud Masten had the chance to go, then they asked me to go to Vail and take his place, and I was there for a year prior to going out to the Philippines.

Jones

Good. That sets it up. And then, what do you remember as your first contact or involvement in Southeast Asia affairs? How did it happen that you went over there?

Forth

Well, Bill Johnson called Charlie Pike one afternoon at Vail and said that Bill would like to see me right away. It was a rather embarrassing situation because I just had cork shoes on and I think I was the first one that was ever in there with cork shoes on. So we met and by chance, Lloyd Roberts, who was already assigned to Milbuk, was home getting some business straightened out. So we discussed the goings-on for half an hour or so, and Bill laid down some rather broad guidelines as to what he expected. So, in due time there, I had the opportunity to get ready to go. I was going to be assigned to Indonesia. But some problems came up - and they were going to have some personnel changes at Milbuk - and having already met Roberts, and we seemed to hit it off fairly well, I guess he interceded there and I changed directions in the middle of the stream. And ended up in the Philippines.

Jones

Now what was the date of that, Jerry?

Forth

My wife and I left here on April 14, in 1972, and went to Milbuk via Hong Kong and Manila and Davao, and then into camp. And it was quite a surprise to take your wool underwear off here and get off the plane there in Manila.

Jones

That's a pretty lasting impression, isn't it, when that first happens?

Forth

And I think, for my personal part, the weather was the toughest to adjust to.

Jones

How long did the adjustment take?

Forth

I would say probably three months, before it didn't bother me anymore.

Jones

Before you felt at ease over there.

Forth

Right.

Jones

Was that the rainy season or the dry season, when you hit over there?

Forth

Well, we got into camp the 19th of April. And it rained - well, that July we had 46 inches of rainfall. And then it moderated up until about September. One afternoon I was giving one of the old Manobos a ride. And he could speak a little English. And he was looking out the window of the Toyota and he said, "No more rain." And it didn't rain for six months.

Jones

We oughta put him on steady. As the weather forecaster.

Forth

Right. Well, I often wondered about that, how he knew. But, that let us achieve the allowable cut. We got it the last day of the year. Because they had had a lot of work stoppage there, because of the religious battle between the Moslems and the Christians. And they'd only worked a very few weeks through April. There was still a lot of unrest. I could hardly believe it.

We went out to the woods for my first tour on a Saturday morning. And they only worked until 2:30 on Saturday. As they came out, every man had a weapon of some sort, from homemade shotguns to refined automatic rifles. Pistols, everything. I said, "What in the hell kind of a logging camp is this?" But, that went along and it was just SOP for those people and everyone carried

their weapon. I even carried one at times. Until martial law was initiated there and then, I guess, you might say only the bad guys and the military had them.

Jones

They took the weapons away from everybody else, huh, or made them leave them home?

Forth

They confiscated most of them and Andy Macs and Lloyd had quite a struggle to - for our security guards to keep theirs. They finally convinced the PC, which is the national police there...

Jones

Philippine Constabulary.

Forth

Yes. That they were needed, so that problem was more or less solved. We had a few more run-ins. The military leaders would change in the area. But we got there and got established and lived in the guest house for about six weeks. Elmer Renken and his wife were occupying the house that we were going to get, and he was being transferred out of there, back to the States. That took some time for Elmer to get his affairs shaped up. Then we got moved in and everything just seemed to fall in place.

There in camp, it was, I felt, a good relationship with the people there. They all tried, for the most part, to please and they, there again for the most part, they were all fair workers, some better than others, and the better ones could have competed here. But they had a little more going for them, I think, than they did in Indonesia because of the logging experience, through the years. Kind of like it was here when we were kids. Everyone had some feel for what was going on in the woods, and so that went pretty well. And then it took a little while to get used to the snake situation and the unusual amounts of rainfall, we would get.

Jones

did you have any experiences involving snakes?

Forth

Well, I've seen quite a few of them. It was kind of humorous. My wife wanted to go up and see the old nursery that they had there, out toward the Kraan area. They had some kind of a dying rose garden there. This was on a Sunday afternoon and it was the first snake I'd seen. She saw it first and said, "Jerry, there's a snake." And I looked around quickly, you know, expecting to really see something, and it was a little devil maybe 12 inches long. And the leaves there, as you know, are kinda large to huge.

Jones
Elephant ears.

Forth
Yeah. And he crawled under one of those. And I stomped down on the leaf and was going to kill it. Well, I didn't hit him just right and he came out the other side of that was just practically standing right up on his tail striking out at anything. I was well away from him, and I finally killed it with a stick.

Then I saw four more, just at a distance. Well, after I would see each one of these snakes I would ask some of the Filipino supervisors there what it was. I always got the same answer. It went something like this: "Sir, I think that's a Filipino cobra," and they weren't remotely the same. So I just thought, "Well, you don't know any more about these snakes than I do, and I'm not about to ask anymore."

But I think the closest I ever came to getting in trouble with one was walking up a construction pioneer road one morning. The cat had broken one's back and disabled it. It was there and it still had some fight left in it. And I was walking along the road and watching the cutters down below. And it was just one of those situations where you kind of look before you just put your foot down. I would have been way too close if I'd taken that last step. So, that kind of makes the hair stand up on the back of your neck, for a little while.

But we changed a few things around there and we got the logs coming a little better, mostly because of some of the road systems and one thing or another.

Jones
Let's talk about some of those things, Jerry. I think this might be important, in illustrating some of the corrections and some of the actions that you had to take over there, to get things squared away.

Forth
Well, I - on the roads, the big problem was, I suppose, not enough experience on the part of the engineers. People in the past had let it go by. But, trying to pull adverse grades, up to 15 percent and around hairpin corners and things of this type. I've always felt they ought to come out of there like the water, run downhill. And we changed quite a few of the road systems, as we would finish the areas. We didn't just abandon everything, that was there. But, as soon as the opportunities came up, that we could do this, why - and as time went on we eliminated all these problems like this. We probably increased the productivity on the trucking there by at least 50 percent. But, I'm not knocking anybody. I suppose we all see things a little differently.

Jones

I understand completely, Jerry. And at the time when you first hit there, were they still logging on the Kraan or had they moved over pretty much to the Wasag country?

Forth

They were right around Wasag. And, well, I guess we set the record, and I imagine it still stands there. I can't remember the old fellow that was out there as superintendent, but he had gotten the allowable cut one year and a month's production record of 23,000 some cubic meters.

Jones

Now, this was prior to the time that you...

Forth

Orris Burrill.

Jones

Okay. I just wondered if it was Orris.

Forth

...was his name, and then Lloyd took it over from him, as I understand it, and then I, in turn, took it from Lloyd. And Lloyd was running the mill and then the camp administration there.

Jones

And what was the production that you achieved?

Forth

I don't remember exactly, but 24,300 something like this in a - it was a short month actually, 21 or 22 working days there. But a lot of this was due to motivating those people and getting them to understand that, on this bonus situation, if you started at the first of the month instead of the last week they could do a lot better. And I think this is one of the problems with those people, they realize that they can or could, at that time, get a bonus. After we went over 12,000 cubic meters, then they started getting this bonus situation and it would amount to, for the choker setter types, probably as much as 100 pesos a month if we did well. So they had this pretty well in their minds, and we were in some fair timber. We held the distinction, at that time at least, of being the only year there, in '74, that the allowable cut was attained or achieved, and everyone went on vacation. We got it in a week less than ten months.

So, things were going pretty well as far as the work, but there was quite a bit of unrest with the Moslems, who were defying President Marcos on his martial law. And some of the neighboring

logging concessions there had people shot or ambushed, scared, and every time our boys would get wind of this, why, things would slow down. And on extreme days, why, they wouldn't even go to the woods. And it's very hard to reason with people who believe in ghosts and things like this. So, in March - around the first week in March of '73 - my wife, Alice, and Lloyd's wife, Bonnie, were evacuated out of there after dark and flown to Zamboanga in the company plane because we were supposed to have a large body of men coming, with bad intentions, so the story was.

This didn't materialize, of course. It was just another rumor. But then my wife never came back. She and Bonnie stayed in Davao then, after Zamboanga. We had flown them to Davao to stay there, in the Insular Hotel. There weren't too many good facilities in Zamboanga. Then she stayed there three weeks and I was scheduled to go home on my annual vacation. She just stayed here in the States then and I finished the last year, out there by myself, except one trip home for Christmas, in '73.

Jones

How had the word of that rumored invasion come to you, Jerry? Did the Manobos carry word or something like that?

Forth

Manobos had supposedly told the engineering superintendent, whose name I can't say right now. Cesar...

Jones

That wouldn't be Bajada?

Forth

No, he was the engineer. Cesar something. He had the ice cream store there, in Milbuk. Made ice.

Jones

I don't place him at the moment.

Forth

Well, this got everything in an uproar. The mayor came roaring in, with his people. That was quite a gentleman in his own right. He never went anyplace without an armed guard.

Jones

That's the mayor from Palimbang, huh?

Forth

Yes. And they were all armed. But, he wanted to find out and sift through all the information and, as you probably know, it's kind of hard to sit in on some of these Filipino discussions,

and get the fine points of what is going on. They could all talk English. The mayor, he'd use a little English and a little Filipino, then a little Moslem or whatever. I learned a few words but I never could converse with them. But we got on pretty good terms, the mayor and myself. He probably rode around through the area one day a week with me, part of the day. In a way, it was a waste of time and, in other ways, why, I think it helped our relationship there, because most of the people, majority of them, looked up to the mayor and they figured if we were speaking, why, I wasn't too bad an animal. So...

Jones

You'd stop off at Palimbang and pick him up then, one day a week?

Forth

Yes, or he'd send word that he'd like to go look at something and, of course, he always had, in the back of his mind, that he was going to con us out of something. It was all kind of a game. We did end up building a bridge across the Palimbang River there, so the people could travel at any time. Because it flooded a lot. And we rigged up an old piledriver there and drove piling into the river and, as far as I know, it's still there. You couldn't get a crib span to take that, but the piling, we got about 20 feet of penetration on those, and capped them off and put stringers on, and it did all right. I know it survived several floods.

Jones

Prior to then what did they do? Just ford the river?

Forth

Wade it and I guess quite a few people had been drowned there. You get swept off your feet. It's amazing how fast those peaceful little streams can become a real raging piece of water. I'm sure that, many afternoons, we would get from two to four, maybe five inches of rainfall there. We had six-inch gutters on the house and they wouldn't handle the water. It would spill right over them. And that was another thing. The drinking water there in camp was caught in about a 300-gallon tank, channeled down to it, off the roof. They cleaned that damn thing out once a year.

Jones

Whether it needed it or not?

Forth

Yes. And there was lizard this and lizard that in there. The first time I saw them clean it, there was about six inches of sludge right in the bottom of it. You couldn't believe it. But, from that tank, it was taken inside and boiled. I think the gal boiled it for 20 minutes and then it was strained through a filtering crock and then into the refrigerator, so it would be cool. It was funny-tasting for a while, but you can get used to anything.

And then, they were great party people. They would have their fiesta days every summer, I think around the last of July, no, the last of June. And they would decorate the veneer mill storage sheds, like you wouldn't believe possible with the facilities at hand. And they would have a dance and a little beer, and everybody'd have a good time. One of the things I hated the worst about it, every time you went to one of these functions you were asked to make a short talk. And it got to the point that you get very short. Because they wouldn't listen to you, but about the first two minutes anyway, and then you could see them all start to talk to each other.

Bill Johnson would come around periodically. He would get out there every few months, prior to his assignment as vice president of the Far East. Then after that he was there a little more often, but not too much. And Charley Bingham and Harry Morgan were there on different occasions, while I was there. It was always entertaining to see someone from the outside come in there. Let's see, what...

Jones

You always knew when they were coming, did you? They didn't surprise you anytime? Hard to do with all the spies around.

Forth

We had the plane and if they wanted to get in they had to call for it.

Jones

Well, fair enough.

Forth

No, but there was no reason to be concerned about it. They had their eye on the sorting yard for a little while. They had not bucked the logs in the woods to any certain length. Most of it was done just where they could cut it. They weren't taped, and so there were lots of trimmed ends laying around the yard and they were trying to put those things in there to hold up the 980s.

Well, that just wasn't working. They had tire bills there that were out of this world. The mud was so deep that it had the hydraulic system under the machines just caked solid and they were running hot, and this or that. In fact, the area down to where they dumped into the water was such a rut, from back-and-forth traffic with these 980s, that you could just see the top of the canopy, running through there. So it was a hell of a mess. And we got some rock close by, on the hill there, and

eventually got it fixed up. But Harry had heard rumors about the mess and that was the first thing he wanted to see, when he and Bill came out there the last time I was there. But we had that problem solved long before that.

So it was pretty much "just look around and see how you were doing," and I think it was a morale booster to have them come and visit. Those camps get pretty darn small when there's only a couple people there that speak the same language, you know. Oh, the women would go out frequently. The plane went to Davao most every day, to pick up parts or something. And they had the opportunity to go without creating any extra flying. It was good for them because there wasn't too much going on there, to occupy their time and thoughts. So it worked out pretty well.

For the first six months we were there, we were on a tourist visa and, among other things, this required that you leave the country every 59 days, to keep this in good standing. So we went to Hong Kong a few times and made Singapore once. Never did get to Taiwan. But then after the six months we were on a treaty trader visa, and that only required that you go out of the country once a year, as I recall. But still, every three months or 90 days, the company would pick up the tab on getting out of Milbuk. Because we were working seven days a week there, either shipping or logging or some problem.

Hong Kong was a different type of a place. It was like Christmas shopping all over. But we met John Wilkinson and his wife there once and had lunch at the American Club there in Hong Kong and they showed us around a little bit. So we were pretty well entertained all the time.

Jones

On your flights over to Davao from Milbuk, was Buddy Capaciti still the pilot there or was someone else?

Forth

Yes, Buddy was - would fly the Beechcraft but Nardo Flores was the head pilot. And I guess that he had had experience with the Philippine Airlines on a domestic flight as well as a pretty good line of BS so... And he was quite a fellow. He could stay up all night and fly just as well as anybody, the next day. I had one time a private pilot's license myself, and I usually got - if there weren't any important people on - I would fly co-pilot and usually take it across country to the terminals and then he would land it. So I always enjoyed my trips out on it because it was something to break the monotony.

We occasionally would try to schedule maintenance flights, that would have to go to Manila, to coincide with our leave period so we would ride that, whenever it was available. And it was a little more interesting to go in that, than it was the domestic jet. We couldn't see too much out of the jet, they usually flew at 31 or 32,000 and we'd cruise along at maybe eight or ten. I got some excellent pictures of a lot of the coral reefs that surround some of the little islands. You may recall the different colors that you have seen looking down into those.

Jones

They're beautiful.

Forth

And along with the plane also, we could, on the early morning flights quite often see sea turtles and occasionally we would see sharks kind of basking in the sun and maybe waiting for their next meal to come by. But it was my first opportunity to be in the South Seas. I'd been overseas in the Korean War and was stationed in Japan for a short time, but I'd never been exposed to that part of the world.

Jones

Did the little fellow, name of Almadin, fly with Nardo at that time? Was he still flying with him?

He was a little Filipino fellow who...

Forth

Almadin was the mechanic when I first got there, and then, as time went on, he worked himself up to fly copilot on the Beechcraft. They had another young Filipino lad there, Joe was his first name but his last name escapes me. He married the girl that was Renken's maid. He had a few hours of single-engine time beyond his license, but he wasn't too swift, in my opinion. I don't like to fly with a man that crosses himself every time he takes off. He was Catholic, you know, and he would cross himself.

But this went on with Joe for sometime. He usually flew the Cessna 180. Well, he always flew that. He wasn't checked out in the twin-engine. And one day he was taking Lloyd Roberts into Davao and he just about flipped it there, on the runway, and that was the beginning of the end for Joe. It wasn't too long after that, that he was transferred to another department, because he was just too nervous.

Jones

Do you have any idea what's become of Nardo, whether he's still over in that country or whether he's over here?

Forth

I heard from Gordy Boyd, through Gordy Boyd, that Nardo was flying for a U.S. firm there in Manila now. It seems that it was a steel manufacturing company, but I'm not positive of that.

Jones

I hope to see Gordy next week and I'll ask him if he has any late information on it.

Forth

And Buddy Capaciti, I understood, was flying for Philippine Airlines, on the domestic route.

Jones

Is that right? He moved up to the commercial?

Forth

He was pretty conscientious, much more so than Nardo. Nardo had far more experience, but Buddy was - he knew more of the finer things of what he was doing than Nardo.

Jones

Okay. I will be going over to the Far East in November, to interview the people over there, and I'd like to run into Nardo, because he could tell some stories too, I'm sure, of his experiences.

Forth

Yeah, he's seen a lot of us come and go.

Jones

Yes, he has.

Forth

Did you ever know the Filipino logging superintendent there named Quinko?

Jones

Yes, I remember running into him, when I was over there.

Forth

Pretty well built and good size for a Filipino.

Jones

I'm having a little trouble getting a picture what he looks like, but the name is familiar and I know I've...

Forth

Pretty husky fellow, maybe weighed 180 or so. He - what he didn't know he was quick to grasp when you would show him and he did pretty well, outside of the fact, which you probably know, they all hire their family members. If you weren't in that clique, why, it was kinda rough. But this went on pretty much the same routine. I missed out on the fireworks, really. Like I said, when we first started this discussion, they'd had a religious battle there, and I left in the first of June of 1974 and then, I think, if my memory serves me, around the 16th or so of September, they ambushed a crew bus and 17 or so of our workers were killed. I'm not sure of the number but it was somewhere in that amount. And then, the superintendent from Camp Baker...

Jones

Dick Nesbit.

Forth

Dick Nesbit, right, replaced me there. I guess he didn't stay too long. His family didn't think too much of all the fireworks around there at times. Well, one Friday night we were sitting out on the patio having a few drinks and they...

Jones

This was at the guest house?

Forth

No, at our home.

Jones

At your home residence, yeah. Okay.

Forth

Was right across the street, from the guest house.

Jones

Yeah, there on the waterfront.

Forth

We were the end of the row, the end house in the row. And my wife had already gone home. All of a sudden, I suppose it was around 8:30 at night, the Moslems cut loose with a machine gun on the hill, right behind the airport. We already had the hangars sandbagged with bundles of veneer, so they couldn't fire into the planes. This had been going on sporadically for a week or two. This Friday night we were there having a beer and this machine gun cut loose and tracer bullets were coming

right up the street there, in front of the picket fence. And I think this is what happened to Nesbit, something along this same line, because I heard the bullets hit the house and just terrorized them. He got his family out of there immediately.

We had a typhoon come in there in, I think it was about November of '73, and we had several thousand cubic meters of lauan ship-side, or in the boom sticks ready to go shipsides, when this typhoon hit there. You can guess what happened. We had logs scattered for 30 miles up the coast to the north of us, toward Cotabatu. So that was quite a little round-up there. Every Moslem that had a boat, I think, was trying to pull our logs into some little cove and get them out of sight. But we didn't lose but a very few sticks. It took a couple weeks of using the tugboat and a barge. We just hauled the D6 along and we'd jump it off whenever we couldn't take it by land and get the logs back out in the water and raft them up and go on.

And we did a little fishing there, on occasion. We'd get a pond boat and - Capaciti was quite a fisherman. He liked that. We'd go after tuna and whatever we'd get and maybe 20, 25 pounds is the biggest we ever caught, but it was too damn hot, to be much fun. Of course, I weigh about 230 pounds and every time I turned around on one of the pond boats I was breaking something. It had little bamboo strips on the floor for slats. I think the old boy got tired of my riding because, every time I got out of it, he had to go to work and fix it up again.

I can't say the man's name, from Basilan now.

Jones
Don Weselsky?

Forth
Weselsky, yes. I met him and his wife. They came to visit there at Milbuk occasionally. I only got to Basilan once and we were in a hurry and never - he met us there at the airport, we visited for a few minutes and then had to go on.

Jones
Now, that's the airstrip down by the mill?

Forth
Yes. That's quite an airstrip. For the first time you come in on that, you don't miss there.

Jones
Better not. Don and Leonor are living down in California now, did you know?

Forth

I heard that they were in southern Oregon. I don't remember who was telling me that.

Jones

We had a Christmas card from them last year with a Ukiah, California address on it.

Forth

That's right. I remember now. I forget who was telling me this, but they thought they might go back over to Basilan, sometime this year. He had a rubber plantation there that was partially destroyed by the Moslems when they took over the area in - let's see, they were down 17 months to the day. They didn't turn a wheel there. So, that would have been just about the, in December of '72, when the Moslems took that over and put Basilan out of action. They got their first load of logs out a day or two before I left Manila to come home, in '74.

It was kind of interesting, on our first trip into Manila from Hong Kong. I had bought a transoceanic radio that was fairly expensive. And this Max Sagrado was going to arrange to have their courier bring that through customs. Well, it worked out that we didn't meet the courier and I had it in a black satchel and they didn't even inspect it. But Sagrado was awful nervous until we got to the guest house that night. He said he saw me walk through the terminal. My wife wasn't with me, for some reason. She was guarding some baggage or something and he was looking for two people, so we didn't make connections there. But I heard that Max died there a couple of years ago. Mrs. Jallorina, who is the wife of the accountant we had, corresponds with my wife occasionally and she said that Max had died.

Jones

He died very suddenly, heart failure, when he was out on a timber inspection job with Bill Johnson.

Forth

They were together?

Jones

They were together. And I believe this was on Luzon up north of Manila, someplace in that northern area. Well, have we about covered the bases, then, Jerry?

Forth

I think so, Alden. There's lots of things that I know I'm overlooking, but that pretty much...

Jones

It's been good coverage. We've talked of a lot of different subjects here, and you've given me some good material to include

in the writeup. Some of it refers to activities that other people have referred to also, and this gives a kind of a cross reference on things, different points of view, which is very helpful.

Forth

Lloyd Roberts was there at the same time. We worked closely together. If you interview him, he could add a lot to some of these stories.

Jones

I'm planning a trip, week after next, to go down to Texas to visit our son and his family, and then, on the way home, we're going to make a swing over into Mississippi and Arkansas and catch Lloyd Roberts and, oh, Dick Allen at Columbus. I'm going to see Elmer Renken in Arkansas and maybe a couple of fellows there, Larry Kirkwold and maybe Ed Sheppard.

Forth

Well, say hello to those guys. I know Renken and Roberts well. Say "hello" to them for me, if you will.

Jones

I'll be glad to do that. I sure will.

Forth

It's kind of like the army. Once you pull out of the traces, why, your paths don't cross too much anymore.

Jones

That's the way it goes, isn't it? Okay, shall we tie it off here, then, Jerry?

Forth

I think so.

Jones

Appreciate it very much. Thank you kindly.

Forth

Okay. It was nice talking it over.

Jones

Sure.

12/16/77