Oral History interview with Charles Lutz, retired DEA Special Agent

Interview conducted July 6th, 2026

Question: Please tell us your full name and your years of service.

(00:05) Charles Lutz. I began with the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs (BNDD) in 1969 and served for a little more than 32 years.

Question: Why is the global nature of DEA's mission important?

Charles Lutz (00:21):

DEA's global mission is a result of the simple fact that most of the drugs historically that have plagued our country originated overseas, and it required cooperation, coordination, information sharing among countries to have an impact on the global drug market. The person who set the standard was Harry Anslinger, the first commissioner of narcotics. In 1930, he was appointed head of the Federal Bureau of Narcotics and almost from the first day created a committee of 100 countries such as France, Italy, Canada that would meet to discuss, to share information in those days, of course, heroin and opium coming out of China. And Anslinger was also the first administrator of narcotics to station agents overseas. Actually, the first agent was assigned to El Paso, Texas, which isn't exactly overseas, but his responsibility was to coordinate with the Mexican law enforcement authorities. And later Anslinger assigned agents to Italy and France. And of course, today DEA has hundreds of agents stationed overseas in many, many countries.

Question: How do DEA's international operations help improve the American people's safety and security?

Charles Lutz (02:08):

International operations have improved the safety and security of Americans over the years historically. Good examples being the French Connection, where our agents worked with French law enforcement authorities to end that French connection, heroin trafficking. They worked with the Italians to stop the mafia's importation of heroin to the United States, worked with Turkish authorities to end Turkey as a major producer of opiates. And Asian heroin is a great example where DEA and cooperation with Thai law enforcement authorities virtually ended the reign of Khun Sa and his heroin; well, the warlord of heroin in Southeast Asia, Asian heroin dominating along the East Coast of the United States during the 60s and 70s. We were able to end that through international cooperation.

Question: Who were Sukree Sukreepirom and Hoi Se Wan, and why were they important to DEA?

Charles Lutz (03:26):

Sukree Sukreepirom, according to DEA's intelligence back in the day, we're talking back in the 60s and 70s, Sukree was identified as the very first Asian to produce white water-soluble heroin, Asian white, taught to him by Turkish chemists. He was the very first, and he was an important narcotics trafficker. When I got involved with this case, it was back in 1975, and we were pulling our troops out of Vietnam. The Army Criminal Investigation Division was about to leave Bangkok where I had just been stationed. And one of their officers had an informant he wanted to turn over to DEA before he left. I went over; I interviewed this informant. He told me about this Sukree Sukreepirom that he had actually worked for and was now in a competitive type business. And I thought he was just trying to eliminate his business competition until he said that Sukree wanted to smuggle 25 kilograms of heroin to the United States. Obviously that got my attention.

(05:02):

I devised an undercover role as a Pan Am cargo supervisor, and I got another agent, Matty Marr to be a mechanic based in Bangkok and convinced Sukree that we would be able to hide his heroin in a 747 aircraft and deliver it anywhere in the world he wanted it. As it turned out, he actually wanted it sent to Holland. Neither Matty or I had ever been there. So believe it or not, DEA actually paid for Matty and I to go to Holland, which I think is indicative of how important this guy Sukree was just to be able to come up with a good story as to how we're going to deliver it back to him.

(06:06):

And when we met in a hotel room in Bangkok, I laid out a schematic diagram of 747, showed him where Matty was going to hide the heroin in the plane. He said, "I'll be back in an hour." He went to his apartment building and outside met with another fellow. They opened a trunk of this other fellow's car and the police that had followed them from the hotel, the Thai police, saw boxes in there, and I gave them the go ahead to arrest them. There was no conspiracy laws in Thailand. So they went ahead and arrested Sukree and with him was Hoi Se Wan, who was another major international drug trafficker, a Malaysian, who had actually put a contract out on the lives of several DEA agents who had seized in Southern California a number of his kilograms of heroin. This was obviously a major blow for the Asian heroin trafficking. President Ford was so impressed that he actually sent a letter from the White House to Matty and I congratulating us on the case.

Question: Can you tell us about the case that became the storyline of a Blockbuster movie?

Charles Lutz (07:52):

Well, the blockbuster movie that was part of an investigation that I was involved in is called *American Gangster*. Denzel Washington portrays the New York drug trafficker, Frank Lucas. And in it, Lucas is claiming to be involved in the heroin trade from the farm to the arm, going to Southeast Asia, to the golden triangle to purchase this heroin and bringing it all the way back to the United States into the arms of the addicts in New York and New Jersey.

(08:37):

It's simply not true. The real American gangster was a guy named Ike Atkinson, the fat man. Herman Jackson and Ike Atkinson were retired US military non-commissioned officers. And upon retirement, Herman Jackson went to Bangkok and opened up a bar where he would entice GIs on R&R from Vietnam and those stationed in Thailand to corrupted poker games. And they had a number of scams going on. He convinced Ike Atkinson when he retired to come over and give him a hand in Bangkok. Eventually they decided that heroin was much more lucrative for them. And through Herman Jackson's paramour began purchasing heroin in Bangkok and shipping it to the States.

(09:52):

They subverted US military aircraft. They bribed US military personnel to carry heroin back for them. They used the Army post office system, and there was a flood of heroin coming out of Thailand that was supplying many of the drug traffickers on the East Coast of the United States, including Frank Lucas. Frank Lucas in the movie is portrayed as a guy who broke from the mafia and started selling the best heroin, and it was. However, Frank Lucas would've been nobody had it not been for Jackson and Atkinson. The case was, I have to say, was dumped on me because I was working on another case at the time and Herman Jackson had been arrested in Denver with a couple of kilos of heroin that he had smuggled back to the States. Leslie Atkinson was in jail being held by local authorities for a kilo of heroin that he had shipped back to the States.

(11:19):

So they had a few associates left in Bangkok that were rumored to still be involved under direction of Atkinson in particular, sending heroin back to the States. So we had a surveillance team in Bangkok. I put them on those remnants of Atkinson's group and that was it. We had nobody on the inside. We had no real information about what was going on. And then I got a call from an agent in San Francisco. There had been two soldiers in Japan arrested with a couple of kilos of heroin. They had smuggled there from Bangkok and one of them decided to cooperate and said he would be willing to identify the person who had hooked him up to buy

the heroin in Bangkok. He identified him as a 3M employee who worked nights playing and singing at Jack's American Star Bar in Bangkok. Well, I thought, wow, this may be what we need.

(12:34):

The agent was Lionel Stewart. He and Mike Nerney, the prosecutor in that case from San Francisco, flew over to Bangkok. I found this employee of 3M. We gained his cooperation, and he ended up introducing Lionel Stewart undercover to the source of the heroin that was the former bartender, Luchai Rubiwat, the former bartender at Jack's American Star Bar. We were able, I know using the term lure is not wise legally, but we lured Luchai to the States to bring some additional heroin with him and told him we'd hook him up with a couple of Las Vegas dancers if he was willing to come, which he did. And we arrested him, we prosecuted him. He had a courier that brought the heroin, and he was arrested and prosecuted. During that whole process, we identified another retired military NCO, non-commissioned officer who was in charge of another load of heroin.

(14:07):

The final load, this was at the end of the Vietnam War era and Atkinson realized that all of his military means of shipping the heroin back to the States were going to disappear. So he had two large shipments, over 100 pounds each of heroin secreted in furniture. We seized one in Bangkok. One got through to the States and was released, but the fellow responsible for that, we were able to identify and get his cooperation as a key witness against Atkinson. Atkinson ended up serving more than half of his life in prison. When he got out of prison, he was interviewed for a book.

(14:58):

During the interview, he complained that Frank Lucas had stolen his identity as the American Gangster. He said he was the American Gangster. And so here you have two crooks. Most criminals will claim their innocence, and here these two are arguing over who is the bigger crook. In the movie, another myth was perpetrated. The first one being that Lucas had gone to the Golden Triangle. We were able to document Lucas only having been to Bangkok once, stayed in Bangkok and due to jet lag, never made it out of his hotel. The other myth is that he had smuggled heroin back to the States in the coffins of military killed in Vietnam.

(16:12):

As far as we know, that never happened. Atkinson used the military facilities and equipment to move his heroin back to the States from Thailand to take the heroin from Thailand into a war zone, into a guarded mortuary at Tan Son Nhut Air Base, then ship it back and have to get it out of funeral powers in the United States. It's ridiculous to even think that happened, but it was a myth that had been perpetuated not only by the movies but in the media. And I think it had a

lot to do with the fact that it further denigrated the Vietnam War that the media with no due diligence were very happy to perpetuate.

Question: What was Operation Bahamas, Turks, and Caicos (OP BAT)?

Charles Lutz (17:15):

Operation Bahamas, Turks, and Caicos was probably the first true drug suppression interdiction type operation ever undertaken by DEA. The quickest and most favored route of the Colombians to smuggle their cocaine into the United States was through the Caribbean. It's the shortest distance and they were able to fly aircraft directly into the United States. When the US Custom Service strengthened its border interdiction, it made it more difficult to fly into South Florida. Carlos Lehder and George Jung working for Pablo Escobar pioneered the flying of cocaine by general aviation aircraft onto islands in the Caribbean in the Bahamas and then taking it by fast boat on the cover of darkness into South Florida.

(18:32):

They purchased Norman's Cay that I called Pablo Escobar International Airport. It was probably just as busy as many international airports with landings of cocaine out of Columbia. Ironically, it was newscaster Walter Cronkite that ended that for them. He was out on vacation on his yacht and stumbled upon Norman's Cay and saw these Colombians with machine guns, told the local authorities who then had no, obviously authorities knew about it, but they had no option but to chase them off of the island. So with the advent of GPS, the Colombians started air dropping to boats in the Bahamas and moving it into South Florida again under the cover of darkness. So in 1982, DEA developed an operation whereby DEA agent advisors would travel with their Bahamian police counterparts on US military Black Hawk helicopters and a couple of Coast Guard H3 helicopters to intercept these boats or aircraft that were still landing on the islands in the Bahamas and seizing the drugs and arresting the traffickers, the smugglers, and seizing the aircraft. It became very difficult for the Colombians.

(20:30):

They started looking elsewhere and all of a sudden, now this is about 1987, President Reagan brought in the military into the interdiction zone. So we had additional resources that were able to track these aircraft in addition to the customs aircraft and an aerostat balloon that was erected at Georgetown. We were able to track all of these aircraft and without bat able to interdict these loads of cocaine as they were landed or airdropped. Basically they put up no trespassing signs all over the Bahamas and discouraged the Colombians from using their favored route. So of course the Colombians had to adjust and all of a sudden we started seeing seizures of cocaine on Haitian freighters along the Miami River. So we started looking at Haiti.

(21:43):

We saw not only a proliferation of clandestine airstrips springing up like fever blisters over the island. We also noted the immigration of hundreds of Colombians into Haiti, many of them directly tied to Colombian cartels. So I asked for permission to open an office. At that time, I was the assistant special agent in charge of Miami for all of our Caribbean operations. I asked permission to open an office in Port-au-Prince. Went down and set up an office down there. Walter Brown and Juan Rodriguez were selected as the agents. And for the grand opening of the Port-au-Prince country office, I brought down two helicopters from the Bahamas, two OPBAT helicopters. I asked the Coast Guard to station a ship off of the southern coast of Haiti, and we sat there waiting to intercept these aircraft as they landed in Haiti. Well, there were none. So rather than just waste everybody's time, we decided we would set up Disney World East.

(23:19):

Many of these Haitian law enforcement authorities had never been in an airplane or a helicopter, so we started taking them up and flying them around so they could see their own island. And after a week, I sent the OPBAT teams back to the Bahamas, but it wasn't a total waste of time because on the streets in Columbia, in Medellin and Cali, the word was, "Don't go to Haiti. DEA is everywhere." We had two guys stationed there with the no trespass signs in the OPBAT and put up in the Bahamas. And then with the Colombians fearful of going to Haiti, they had to look for yet another option. And I don't want to overstate it, but I think to a large degree, it is what forced the Colombians to make an alliance with the Mexican drug cartels. The Colombians wanted nothing to do with the Mexicans.

(24:36):

They were very happy with the Bahamians who very peaceful people, just happy to take a few dollars for their services. The Mexican cartels were every bit as ruthless as the Colombians, and they wanted a piece of the action. We forced that alliance between the Colombians and the Mexican cartels, which of course may have ended up creating an even larger problem, but we did our job in the Caribbean. During my three years as manager for the OpBat program and others in the Caribbean, 165 tons of cocaine had been seized and almost a thousand tons of marijuana.

Question: Tell us about Operation Blast Furnace.

Charles Lutz (25:37):

Operation Blast Furnace was the first operation that actually went to interdict, to seize, and destroy cocaine paste laboratories. In this case, it was in Bolivia. It was about 1987, I believe. And the US military, SOUTHCOM, had provided helicopters to transport Bolivian paramilitary forces and DEA advisors to the sites of these cocaine paste laboratories. Eight laboratories were

destroyed. I'm not sure how long the operation ran. I believe it was only a few weeks. And it caused a tremendous disruption in Bolivia and Colombia because the Colombian cartels relied on the coca paste coming out of Bolivia and Peru to make their cocaine hydrochloride in their clandestine labs in Columbia.

(27:03):

As a result of a Blast Furnace, the coca leaf market collapsed, prices soared, Colombian buyers of the paste fled. So after the operation ended, they had a conference in Panama City to see what they could come up with to sustain this disruption. And they decided on Operation Snowcap that would expand this Operation Blast Furnace throughout South America.

Question: What was Snowcap?

Charles Lutz (27:58):

Operation Snowcap actually expanded the scope of Operation Blast Furnace by looking not only at the cocaine paste laboratories themselves but to try and interdict the chemicals that were needed in these laboratories and also the transportation of the finished product to Columbia by both air and river.

Question: Tell us about the regions where Snowcap operated.

Charles Lutz (28:33):

When Snowcap first began, it was in a dozen countries in South America. And again, looking for not only laboratories but chemicals and the transportation modes and methods and organizations that were taking this paste to Columbia for conversion into cocaine hydrochloride. By the time I took over Operation Snowcap, it had been running for about two years when I was asked to go to headquarters in 1990. And by then, by 1990, Snowcap was centered in Bolivia and Peru, which by then had been identified as truly the two countries most responsible for providing the coca paste to the Colombians.

Question: What was your role in Snowcap?

Charles Lutz (29:52):

Well, I was brought to Washington and it became clear to me that two things needed to be done. Operation Snowcap was very successful. It was successful from the start. However, having worked many years overseas with DEA, it became apparent to me that there had been an attempt to run enforcement operations out of headquarters. And I thought that was a non-starter. So part of what I tried to do and in fact accomplished was to integrate Snowcap into the country offices in Bolivia and Peru, essentially giving the country attaches the resource, the Snowcap teams, to be able to carry out their enforcement mission.

(31:03):

One second. Okay. The second thing I tried to do is better integrate the Snowcap program into the traditional role of DEA overseas. It was being perceived by many of DEA as being outside of the normal operations of DEA. And I tried to integrate it into DEA's primary mission of intelligence collection as well as the enforcement operations.

Question: Who were DEA's partners in Snowcap?

(31:53):

Well, of course, the State Department was a key player in this. As I understand it, Operation Blast Furnace, there were, I'm not sure how many helicopters provided by *cellphone rings*

Interviewer (32:08):

So sorry. I thought I had turned that off. I'm sorry.

Charles Lutz (32:13):

Okay. So as I understood it, Operation Blast Furnace had a number of military helicopters to fly the teams in to interdict these cocaine pace laboratories. But in order to do that, they had to lay down a footprint of about 160 military and the State Department didn't want that. So they offered to provide the air transportation, the helicopter support to the Snowcap teams, which was a critical aspect of Operation Snowcap.

(32:59):

As far as the Riverine, we had the US Coast Guard help us with Riverine Operations and we had the US, I guess it was border patrol helping us with road interdiction, particularly of chemicals. But probably the most important ally we had in this operation was the Department of Defense. And they had provided training to not only our own agents but to our host nation counterparts. For our agents, they provided Spanish language kind of survival training, jungle survival training. They provided logistics. They opened up their warehouses to us to provide whatever types of equipment we needed, and they provided transportation for our teams down country and back. So the Department of Defense at that time, they were a critical resource and ally in this Operation Snowcap.

Question: What were DEA's greatest assets in Snowcap?

Charles Lutz (34:27):

Well, there's no question that the greatest asset for DEA was the Snowcap volunteers. These were agents who literally risked their lives to assist these host nation counterparts in doing their work to reduce the amount of cocaine paste going into the laboratories in Columbia. It was their guidance, their setting an example for their host nation counterparts, helping to professionalize these people, and that truly was the greatest resource that Snowcap had.

Question: What were DEA's greatest challenges in Snowcap?

Charles Lutz (35:26):

In the field, I would say perhaps number one was the environment. These are jungle environments. There are heat. There's reptiles. There are threats that are uncommon to us in the United States in a jungle and living in a jungle environment. Needless to say, the drug traffickers themselves, the producers, the transporters of these drugs were a threat to our agents. But also the terrorist organizations, for example, in Peru, there were Luminoso that is estimated to have killed 10,000 innocent civilians in Peru, which was a threat that our agents had to deal with every day.

(36:35):

There was also, of course, you had the agents in the field with their threats. I had to deal with the threats in Washington. There was a lot of dissension against the program because of senior managers who didn't understand the actual role of our agents in the Snowcap program in Bolivia and Peru. But there was also, our operation created a lot of disruption within domestic field divisions. What many had not realized was that DEA had received 277 positions from Congress to compensate domestic offices for the volunteers used in the Snowcap program, the 277 more than we ever recruited into the program. However, the agents that were volunteering out of domestic offices, many of them, we would only allow them three-month tours twice a year, but they would go back to their office for three months. They couldn't hardly develop an informant network. They couldn't do a lot of things that agents were expected to do because they were going to be going back down range in another three months.

(38:20):

So there was disruption, there's no question about it. There had been a proposal to create a Snowcap division, taking those 277 agents, creating a division basically in headquarters. It would be like a foreign tour, a hardship tour, two years. You could extend for another two years, then you went back to a domestic office. And by doing that, it would've allowed these agents to specialize in these operations for two to four years and not have a disruptive impact on the domestic divisions. But for whatever reasons, it was never accepted or implemented within DEA. So I had faced these issues as the drug suppression chief, and I often wondered who had it more difficult, the agents in the field or me.

Question: Tell us about the drug trafficking organizations investigated during Snowcap.

Charles Lutz (39:30):

When I took over the Snowcap program, one of my goals was to transfer responsibility for enforcement operations to the country attaches in Bolivia and Peru, and they maintained the records of arrests and seizures. I mean, we tracked it to the extent of being able to brief the

administrator and others on the success of the Snowcap program. But basically we were focused on the organizations that were producing the cocaine paste, that were transporting by air and river to Columbia. Those were the organizations that we focused on. But our agents had those individuals, the traffickers to deal with, but they also had the local population, many of whom were dependent for their livelihoods on the coca market. So our agents faced a lot of obstacles there in their operations in both Peru and Columbia, excuse me, Peru and Bolivia.

Question: What do you think were the major Snowcap victories?

Charles Lutz (41:07):

I think the major victories of the Snowcap program were number one, we became the centerpiece of the United States Andean strategy to deal with the cocaine trade. Quite frankly, we were the only thing that was working in the Andean strategy. The State Department, their programs are eradication and crop substitution. Well, in Peru, it was legal to have coca bushes because of its use in religious activities. So they could not be eliminated. In fact, if a helicopter landed in a field and happened to break off a branch of a coca bush, the farmer had a right to be compensated.

(42:16):

The crop substitution, it's great to be able to switch to producing fruits and vegetables. The problem was there was no means to get them to market. In the Andes, there are very few roads that would allow access to major markets before these fruits could get there, they would rot. So the only thing that was successful in the Andean strategy was Operation Snowcap. I think another positive for Operation Snowcap is when I took over the program in 1990, I wanted to make the operation more integral to DEA's traditional strategy. And lo and behold, in 1992, the creation of the Kingpin Strategy. The Kingpin Strategy looked at the Colombian drug cartels and broke it down into the different components of these organizations, the financing, the transportation, the communications, the leadership. Well, I argued that the cocaine paste coming out of Bolivia and Peru was as important part of the Kingpin strategy as any of the other components. And of course, we were dealing with limiting and disrupting the Colombian cartels' access to their needed coca paste.

Question: Tell us about Operation Central American Drug Enforcement Centers (aka CADENCE).

Charles Lutz (44:19):

This was about 1992 when Administrator Rob Bonner called an executive meeting. I was not a senior executive at the time, but I was invited to attend because of being the Chief of Drug Suppression. And so I sat in a chair against the wall. Felix Jimenez briefed the group on a new phenomenon, and that is that the US military aircraft, tracker aircraft, were identifying general

aviation aircraft flying out of Columbia, landing in Guatemala on clandestine strips in the jungles of Guatemala. From there, the presumption was the cocaine was being loaded onto trucks and then transported across the porous border into Mexico and up to the southwest border for eventual smuggling into the United States.

(45:32):

The Guatemalan government had absolutely no capability whatsoever to deal with this new problem. So Administrator Bonner said, "Does anybody have any ideas?" And there was dead silence. So after a moment or two, I raised my hand and I said, "Mr. Bonner," I said, "I think given some Snowcap trained agents using Operation Bahamas Turks and Caicos tactics, transporting teams of Guatemalan and DEA agents out to these clandestine airstrips, we could probably do a lot of good in interdicting these flights." The meeting broke up. I went back to my office. Administrator Bonner's assistant, Russ Hayman, called me. He said, "The administrator loves your idea. He wants to call State Department. We need a name." So I got out my dictionary and I'm going Central America, *CA*, Drug Enforcement, *DEN,* Centers, *CE*, CADENCE. So I called Russ, I said, "Operation Cadence." He said, "Perfect." The next thing I knew, I was sent down to Guatemala to brief the ambassador there on this new proposed operation.

(47:17):

Within several months, we had, with the help of the office there, the Guatemala City country office, we identified counterparts, provided some preliminary training. We got State Department helicopters there. We got a safe house to live in, and we were operational within two or three months. We started interdicting aircraft right from the get-go. The Colombians were startled, so they ordered their pilots to start flying at night, which of course is much more dangerous for them. We were scraping up probably as much cocaine off of the crash planes from runways as we were actually interdicting aircraft because the State Department, we actually had to shut down for a while while the State Department pilots got trained in night vision. We went out and we just kicked butt. Within one year, we totally shut down Guatemala as a transshipment country for cocaine headed for the United States. I mean, this is a remarkable achievement. It shows what can be done by DEA, but it's an operation that few people have ever heard of.

Question: If Operations Snowcap and CADENCE were so successful, why were they shut down?

Charles Lutz (48:56):

Operations Snowcap and CADENCE were extremely successful. However, in 1994, a new administration came in, and they had a different philosophy. They felt that we should only be risking our agents' lives in our country, and it was a responsibility of other countries to risk the

lives of their personnel in their country to solve the problem. And they had a right to their view. However, I thought it was a little bit naive in a sense that the problems that these countries, Bolivia, Peru, Columbia, Mexico were facing were a result of our demand for these drugs that created these cartels and these smugglers and the production of cocaine. It was to satisfy our demand. And it was our money that we were paying for these drugs that was corrupting their governments and preventing even their honest law enforcement officers from doing their jobs.

(50:15):

By being with them, with the host nation law enforcement authorities, side by side, as I put it, one step behind, but prepared to defend themselves and their counterparts. We were helping them to help us. And I think that it's unfortunate that the operation had to be shut down or was shut down, but it wasn't an easy thing to do because the State Department loved it. It had become the centerpiece for their Andean Strategy. The Department of Defense envied it. They wanted to be the tip of the spear. They wanted to be doing what we were doing. So we became their surrogates. And through us, they were able to accomplish their goals. And so it was very difficult just to shut down because of the inter-agency interest in the operation. But when we had that tragic plane crash in Peru that killed five of our agents, three Snowcap volunteers and the two pilots, that there was enough empathy within the inter-agency community to allow DEA to stop the program. I'm convinced, and I have no way to prove this, but I'm convinced that had Snowcap continued to this day, the magnitude of the problem that we faced in the intervening years would've been far less.

Question: Tell us about DEA's role in restoring diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Charles Lutz (52:16):

DEA played a primary role in establishing diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam that I think few people realize. I was asked to go back to Bangkok in 1995 in charge of all of DEA's operations in Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. When I arrived, I was following Operation Tiger Trap, which had eliminated the infrastructure of Khun Sa the warlord in Burma, who was producing the majority of Asian heroin. The people who were moving his drugs through Thailand and into the international markets, the people who were handling his finances, the people who were buying his beans and bullets for his army. They were all arrested, transported back to the States for prosecution. There were still some remnants of these individuals in Thailand. So one of my goals was to clean that up, to finish that. But also we had intelligence that some of Khun Sa's chemists had moved to Northern Laos.

(53:47):

We had an office in Vientiane Laos closed in 1975 when Saigon fell, Vietnam fell. And so I was interested in regaining cooperation with the Lao to see if we could do something about the heroin problem moving into Northern Laos where they had no capabilities. Cambodia was of little interest, but Vietnam wasn't even on my list.

(54:31):

I happened to be a Vietnam veteran, but I knew nothing of the drug trafficking and use abuse in Vietnam. And it was the last thing on my mind. But in 1995, President Clinton decided it was high time to normalize diplomatic relations with the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. It took us about 20 minutes after World War II to begin to rebuild the two most ruthless enemies ever faced by the United States or perhaps anyone in the history of mankind, the Japanese and Nazi Germany. It took 20 years for the United States to even admit that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam even existed. There was a reason for that. We hadn't won the war, which was traumatic to a lot of people. And also we lost 60,000 Americans there, and there was great empathy for the families of the victims of that war. So I understand it. However, I agreed with President Clinton. I'm a Vietnam veteran and I agreed with President Clinton.

(56:08):

The State Department opened a consulate in Hanoi, and then they searched for an issue to begin dialogue with the Vietnamese. Well, guess what they picked? Drugs. And who now was Mr. Drug in Southeast Asia? Me. Assistant Secretary of State, Bob Gelbard, Assistant Administrator of DEA, Steve Green, also a Vietnam veteran, and I, after a whirlwind tour of the Golden Triangle of Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, went into the belly of the beast into Hanoi and began that dialogue with the Vietnamese. In Washington, Bill Clinton went ahead and normalized relations regardless of whether they cooperated on the drug issue or not. But cooperate, they did. We were convincing enough to them that they realized the benefit to their citizens to cooperate with DEA. We put on the first training school there in Hanoi for their law enforcement officers. I assigned Tommy Harrigan, who later became a chief of operations for DEA.

(57:50):

Tommy, as the coordinator of our operations with the Vietnamese, I personally made 11 trips to Hanoi over the next three years, building relationships with the senior managers there in Vietnam. We were the only law enforcement agency there. In fact, perhaps maybe the only agency of the US government in those early years. And as a result, our relationship developed. An office in Hanoi opened a year after I left, and as I understand it, is still operating to this day. DEA played a crucial role in developing the relationship with the Vietnamese who happened to be in this fickle world, one of our better, at least trading allies in Southeast Asia.