Colonel Edward Dupra: This is an interview with Lieutenant Colonel J. K. Knocke. The interviewer is Colonel Edward Dupra. Interview conducted at the Marine Corps School, Quantico, Virginia 14 December, 1965. The interview will be unclassified. Colonel Knocke, where were you stationed while you were in Vietnam, and what was your duty assignment?

Lieutenant Colonel J.K. Knocke: I was a commanding officer of the 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines deployed from Okinawa and stationed in Da Nang TAOR in Vietnam.

ED: Will you discuss any major combat actions in which you participated citing the dates, the locations, and would you describe the part that your battalion played in supporting these operations, please?

JK: We took part in the clearing and sweep operation of Duong Son and Cam Ne in mid-July and early August. My battalion was initially attached and later in direct support of the 9th Marines.

ED: Did you encounter any peculiar problems in these particular operations?

JK: Not exactly peculiar, but something of vital concern to us was the initial difficulty we had in getting the precise locations and intentions of some of the small-unit actions and particular patrols. The artillery requires detailed and accurate information on patrol plans and constant liaison is necessary. Wherever possible, we had a forward observer with the major patrol action.
ED: And what would you recommend to overcome this difficulty in the future? Is it a matter of educating the officers concerned or what would your recommendations be?

JK: Sir, I think it’s a combination of training and using our present doctrine, which I view as entirely sound. A matter of educating both the artillery, and infantry in the necessity to give each other these vital facts and data as required; and I think one of the best things we can do, is to train together wherever possible back in CONUS or Okinawa or wherever.

ED: This then is nothing new. It is something which we should be alert for at all times and not have to do on the battlefield?

JK: Yes, sir, this should be routine once we get into action.

ED: Now would you discuss from your particular point of view, the influence that Vietnam weather and terrain had on personnel problems, logistics problems, or things of that nature.

JK: I personally was very highly pleased with the response of my battalion. We had been for many months very short of personnel. When we deployed we were at about seventy-five percent of manning level, and worked as hard as we could, and stood watches, of course, at night as required. I felt the morale was outstanding. The troops responded extremely well. They felt they were doing a job for which they had been trained, and we finally were getting at it. They were carefully supervised. The non-commissioned officers and the junior officers did an excellent job of keeping a close handle on the troops’ response to particularly the heat. In July-August we had some very hot, dusty days. I only had one heat casualty in the battalion in those two months.

ED: Did you have any problems with logistics or resupply?

JK: Yes, sir, we found that first of all, our maintenance problem, to which we had paid a great deal of attention, paid off very well. However, we did have a considerable problem in getting adequate tentage, and in particular sandbags, barbed wire, and engineering stakes. We used approximately fifty-thousand sandbags to properly bunker a howitzer battery, and about seventy-thousand for a headquarters battery command post, ammunition storage and related installations. Also, I believe the adequacy of the present
 allowance for illumination ammunition should be very carefully examined. In my view, it is grossly inadequate to support the infantry in a counter-insurgency environment.

ED: Based on your statements about illuminating rounds, did you ever reach a position where you were forced to deny a request for illumination fires?

JK: I reached a point in about the middle of August where it was necessary for me to reduce the illuminations requests to only those which were absolutely necessary, and then it was reduced to a one-gun illumination mission.

ED: I understand that you had some unusual problems in personnel who were with your particular organization. Would you discuss those please?

JK: Well, I don’t know how unusual it was, but I had an ARVN artillery officer who was assigned to my battalion as liaison officer. The problem was, although he was of excellence use as an interpreter, I was unable to find any real definitive information on the extent to which he would be cleared for any type of classified information. Accordingly, we had to be extremely careful as to what he saw or what he heard with respect to future plans of the supported units.

ED: Do you have any personal observations on how this particular problem could be corrected?

JK: I think one thing that might be done is a very careful screening of the people which were assigned or which are assigned to us, with a view toward knowing exactly to what level they can be cut in on our operational commitments.

ED: Did you have any unusual problems in the operations area?

JK: Well, we had one particular problem that I considered to be serious. The area of greatest concern to the infantry invariably turned out to be avenues of approach, which either were in fact villages or fairly well-populated areas. As such, we were not able to conduct conventional artillery registrations routinely. This would in turn mean that if we had to fire a mission in support of an operation that our data would be suspect.

ED: Did you, as a result of your inability to register, were you ever plagued with short rounds or things of this nature?

JK: We had some short rounds but I don’t think it was attributable to the suspect data. It was just plain-out gunnery errors.
ED: At what ranges did you customarily fire? I understand there are some difficulties with the longevity of artillery pieces due to continued firing with charge seven.

JK: Yes, sir. The problem, however, seemed to be confined more to the heavier calibers, the 155 and the eight-inch, firing max charges. My direct support artillery—105 howitzers—fired a considerable amount of charge six and charge seven, but we noticed no unusual ordnance problems. Not in our calibers, at least.

ED: Would you discuss combat intelligence as you saw it, and was it responsive to your needs.

JK: I was very pleased with the speed and accuracy of the information that I received from various sources, in particular division and MAF. I attribute this to a good understanding on the part of the personnel in these echelons as to the need for this information on a timely basis. Also, we had an excellent communications situation in which various hotlines were utilized to maximum benefit. There was a good flow of information both ways.

ED: Would you discuss the coordination of supporting arms as you saw it, particularly your relationships with your supported regiment.

JK: Well, initially the 2nd Battalion, 12th Marines, was attached to our LT9 and later, after being detached, was placed in direct support. So I was fortunate in working with the same people throughout the time I was in Vietnam. Our relationships on a personal and professional basis were truly excellent. I had made as a matter of policy an effort to get the best man I could as my fire support coordinator at the infantry regiment. We had no particular problems. We worked very closely together, and as a matter of accident, we were very close together geographically so that I could walk over to the FSCC very easily and I was over there a good share of the time.

ED: Based upon your experience as an artillery battalion commander, what would you advise those artillery lieutenant colonels going to Vietnam as to what they should or should not do in order to insure a successful tour of duty?

JK: I would advise, first of all, stick to existing Marine Corps doctrine. In my view it is sound and it works. My personal experience has been that many of our problems have arisen directly or are directly attributable to deviating from existing
doctrine. I would insist on good sound procedures and following them as unfailingly as possible, particularly in gunnery. I would continually re-emphasize to my junior officers and to my non-commissioned officers the necessity to keep in mind the mission of the field artillery, and that, of course, is to support the infantry. I would keep a very close finger and personally supervise my maintenance program, particularly motor transport and ordnance. Communications presents a lesser problem because you have a trained specialist that can give you help in that area to a better degree, usually, than your ordinance and motor transport. I would investigate also the feasibility of a concurrent training program, as odd as this may sound in a combat environment. For example, I had a formal forward observer school, and prior to sending forward observers out with the infantry units—this is the replacements I’m speaking of—we required them to attend a formal school in which they fired twenty or twenty-five practice missions, simply to insist on good procedure.

ED: Would you have any observations as to possible improvements which could be made in the equipment provided the field artillery organizations?

JK: As far as the equipment is concerned, I think there has been a great deal of dissatisfaction expressed with the 107mm howtar. I think we are whipping part of the problems, which were of a technical nature relating to the sighting system. We definitely need a lightweight howitzer that can be easily lifted by helicopter, and we need lightweight, long-range ammunition.

ED: Would you have any further observations which you would like to make at this time with respect to what you saw and what you did in Vietnam?

JK: No, sir, other than to make one final observation, and that is in retrospect, what we have been training our troops to do in our schools and in our fleet Marines force units in fact works.

ED: Thank you very much.