Sergeant Bob Vandewalker: From the Marine Corp Air Facility in Santa Anna, California, this is Marine Staff Sergeant Bob Vandewalker interviewing Sergeant Thomas MacDonald. Sgt. MacDonald, what organization are you with here at Santa Anna?

Sergeant Thomas MacDonald: I’m with the 165th.

BV: Now you just returned from Vietnam, what month did you return?

TM: June of ‘65.

BV: And how long were you over there?

TM: Eleven-and-a-half months in the area itself, with a two week lay over at Okinawa.

BV: Sgt. MacDonald, can you start from the beginning, when you left the States and what outfit you were with and what you did from the time that you left and what organizations were involved?

TM: I was with HMM162, under Colonel Curtis. We departed El Toro in May of ’65, ended up in Okinawa, picked up our airplanes, departed from Okinawa around the 28th of May, went aboard the Valley Forge, and flew into Da Nang.

BV: In other words, you flew off the carrier, your organization flew off to carrier into Da Nang?

TM: This is right, the whole outfit.
BV: Now at the time that you arrived in Da Nang was there airfield? What type of airfield operation was set up there?

TM: We had, as I recall, we had the one main strip, which as I recall, was four thousand foot in length. We set up in the old French hangar over by the air terminal next to the ARVN Air Force.

BV: What was this ARVN Air Force?

TM: That would be a Republic of Vietnam Air Force. They were training in HUSs same type aircraft that we had.

BV: Now you say you were in Vietnam for eleven months? Was there a tremendous change as far as build-up at this particular Da Nang Airbase in eleven months?

TM: Oh, unbelievable. The first time we were in there, we were a taxi outfit more than anything else. Plus re-supply of chow and what have you. From that time on it rapidly got more intense. The Air Force moved more people in, the Army moved more people in, and by the time it was all over with, at one time we had three Marine helicopter squadron themselves operating out of there.

BV: What type of construction? Did they build barracks or build runways and improved the runways or anything like this?

TM: The runways were under improvement. The roads were still the same muddy selves. It don’t seem like they ever improved at all. The first time we were in we lived up in the old French compound. We had the French barracks up there. The second time in, we in and built up a tent city down at the end of the runway at Da Nang, and then we went and put up a detachment up at Hue Phu Bai. We built up a tent city at Hue Phu Bai also.

BV: Sgt. MacDonald, what was the mission, particular mission of your squadron over there?

TM: Re-supply and moving troops from spot to spot.

BV: Can you tell me about some of these experiences that was involved in the squadron?

TM: Well, it seems like a sea story every time somebody comes up with them, but they are really not. Some of the landing zones over there you couldn’t believe. It
seems a couple of times that I’ve actually had to lay on my belly, and direct the pilots
into a landing zone. It was that tight. I can remember one place up by the border at Khe
Sahn, up on top of Tiger Tooth, which I believe was six thousand eight hundred feet that
they had to fly in and out of the clouds. You’d have to go up and orbit, and when you
seen a hole in the clouds, you’d go down and get into the strip. Actually, it was just a
zone, and then wait for the clouds to roll by again until you could see an opening to get
out.

BV: Were talking about the jungle, is that right?
TM: This was on top of a mountain top.
BV: And you were landing Vietnam troops in there?
TM: At this point, I’d rather not say.
BV: Well, did you work at all, your helicopter squadron, work all with the
Marine infantry troops? Let’s put it this way.
TM: The second time we was in there, I had hauled several Vietnamese nationals
who were dead. Naturally, you see a dead person and you have a little remorse. Well it
didn’t really strike me until such times that we started hauling Marine dead. And we, at
one time, I hauled a dead Marine that was less than six minutes away from the airstrip at
Da Nang. In fact, there was fresh blood in the cabin when I got him back to the airstrip,
which we use the water out of their canteens and wash the blood off.

BV: In other words, you had went up to where the Marines had encountered
some Viet Cong? When was this? Any particular battle that you can remember this
happening?
TM: I was there when they started the offensive of out of Da Nang itself. In fact,
our squadron made the landing at Chu Lai, and put troops in at Hue Phu Bai. We off
loaded the ammo ship, I believe it was the Sacramento, off of Hue Phu Bai. Three days
of doing nothing but flying and hauling ammunition at a ton a time. Your question about
in combat with the American troops, I went out on the first reactionary strike. We had
got to the mountain to pick these people up. I believe it was something like six minutes,
and took them out into the field. We was drawing fire when we went in with them, and
they tried to clear the area, and push the VC back across the river and into the fields. But
they had gotten into the villages where they were putting out sniper fire. There was no
big force of people as you would think as combat troopers.

BV: How was the morale of the Marine infantry at that particular time?
TM: At times, I have actually had to take and put my arm across the door to keep
our younger-type Marines from jumping out of the helicopter before the wheels settled.
They were at the time, when we first started hauling they were eager to go. They wanted
to get out.

BV: How many missions did you have over there in Vietnam?
TM: One-hundred three.
BV: Did you ever have any unusual experiences in any this missions that you
remember?
TM: The only thing that I have in the back of my mind right now, is the day we
went into one small jungle village, and I think Sgt. Hedges, whose was in the same outfit
myself were in there in the two plane flight, and some of the villagers come out wailing.
We went down to find out what it was all about and there was a small boy, possibly three
or four years old. At night the VC had come through and threw in a hand grenade into
the hut, and killed the mother and father and the youngster had picked up shrapnel. All
we had in the airplane was our first aid kits and we tried to take care of his wounds, and
make him as comfortable as we could.

BV: Did you get him back to the hospital and everything?
TM: Oh yes, we flew him out with us when we went out.
BV: On some of these missions did you ever go out on a search and rescue type of
mission?
TM: Yes, I was one of the crew chiefs that were selected for SAR North. This
would entail going up to Quang Tri, watching our airplanes go over, and waiting there,
until they come back from up north until we was clear to go back to our base in Da Nang,
which was about sixty miles away.

BV: As a crew chief on a helicopter, what did your average day consist of from
the time you got up until you went to bed that night?
TM: That’s a rough one. We’d get up if our airplane, which, our airplane would
be in commission, we’d go down on a pre-flight. This would be, we would have it pre-
flighted by dawn’s light. We would be ready to go. We’d wait for our frag orders to come in. This was usually, would come in the night before, so we knew what we were going to do the next morning. We’d load up cargo, either troops or livestock, or whatever the case may be, and fly out to these different outposts and re-supply. This would go on all day. You’d come in, refuel, and go back out. Then at night, when you come in, if your airplane needed maintenance or if you needed a check, you would have the airplane completely finished before you secured. We were able to keep real good ability this way.

BV: Now you had some perimeter defense at night. Who took care of this, and how was it done?

TM: Well, we had our own guard set up, our own interior guard, set up with in the squadron, at the squadron level. Everybody was assigned to a platoon. We had our troopers walking guard down around the airplanes. When they hit the alarm, we’d all fall out in platoon formation, so to speak. We’d have our assigned offensive positions, which we would go to.

BV: This didn’t matter, in other words, if you worked all day and you had something up every night, everybody went out and tried to do their job. Is this right?

TM: That’s the only thing you could do.

BV: And these young people that were standing guard duty at night, were actually working out of this helicopter during the daytime?

TM: They would stand their four to eight hour guard, or whatever the case may be, and they wanted be down there the next morning to fly as a gunner or to help in any way they could taking care of the aircraft.

BV: What type of chow facilities and living conditions did you have there in Da Nang?

TM: As I said before, when we went in the first time, we were living up in the French compound, and we were the only squadron in. The chow was outstanding. There was no way it could have been improved on. The second time we went in things got a little bit rougher, and we was eating C-rations. We were living in tents. We couldn’t get the lumber to hard back with, so we had cots set up, which was on the ground within
tents, eating out of a field kitchen. All in all, the tools that we had to work with, or the support people had to work with, they done a magnificent job.

BV: Sgt. MacDonald, in any of your missions did you have the chance to see or pick up any Viet Cong prisoners or see the Viet Cong? Can you sort of describe them to me?

TM: This was rather commonplace. One that sticks out in my mind more than anything else right now was one that we picked up Khe Sahn, which was a big mountain area up north near the border. It seemed like this person had become disenchantment with everything that everybody was telling him about the North. And from what the people told us that brought him up to the airplane that he had surrendered. He was rather tall person in shorts, short sleeve. They didn’t have him tied up as they do the usual people, and everybody was around patting him up on the back, smiling, and offering him food. We put him in the airplane and brought him back down Da Nang, which was about eighty to ninety miles. All the way back down, he was looking out the door, looking like he was really relieved to be back. He showed no real fear of the Americans, although we were armed. There was no apprehension on his part at all. On the other hand, I have gone into a command post that had just been hit. The command post had not been hit, but a truck convoy had been hit, and they’d been bringing the bodies back to the command post, and I went back to the command post to get some information to find out where they wanted the bodies taken. They had two women VCs in there, and they, on the other hand, they showed hatred all throughout their actions, their speech and the whole works.

BV: In the description of these Viet Cong, were they older people or younger people in most cases?

TM: This is a pretty hard question to answer. When we first got in there, we were we were taught or told that all of these people were to be treated, until they proved otherwise, as a, well to put quite bluntly, as an enemy. We would never turn our backs on any of them. In fact, I have flown with these people in the airplanes, and come back in off of hops, and I have found hand grenades under the seat. Of course they had just, I like to think that they had just fallen off of the people’s battle gear. I don’t think I had ever hauled anybody that was trying to blow the airplane up, but to tell whether they were young or old would be hard to say.
BV: Well getting on the other side of the fence to the Vietnamese, in your time in Vietnam, did you see where, in your own opinion, whether these people sort of started liking us, or feeling that we were trying to do something for them?

TM: I have never gone into a landing zone to where there had been Vietnamese people en mass that haven’t come up and smiled or tried to shake my hand. Or come up and just touch me. That’s all they wanted to do, was just touch me, and I have had children up at Quang Tri. I have flown into Quang Tri, and actually had to set the airplane down, and I jump out and get back and chase the children away, so we could set the airplane down. And that’s all they wanted to do, is just come up and pat you or touch you. And if you took and put your arm around one in a friendly gesture, or on their shoulders, you couldn’t get rid of them.

BV: Did you ever have the opportunity to see how our Civic Action Program was working? Were we at this particular time giving food to the Vietnamese or clothing or anything like this?

TM: Not, I don’t believe, on an organized basis. No, I don’t believe.

BV: We were assisting them in some other ways, to your knowledge?

TM: To my knowledge, yes. I had nothing to do with it. Of course the squadron had us all pretty busy, but the Sea Bees were out drilling holes for wells, for well water, and they were putting up schools up in the upper regions of the country.

BV: Well, do you feel after spending your time in Vietnam that the human kindness war is as important as the bullet war over there?

TM: My own opinion, I think if we don’t start putting out medical gear to take care of these people, we are in a world of trouble. We have to fight the hard core VCs with bullets, bombs and bayonets, as the old saying goes. But the young people that are impressed, we can do much more with a good Navy corpsman with a satchel on his side full of medical gear.

BV: Sgt. MacDonald, what other squadrons, helicopter squadrons, were operating with you in Da Nang at the time that you were there?

TM: We had 365, who we followed over there, 163 and 161 was operating off the ship.

BV: And who was your commanding officer of your squadron?
TM: Lieutenant Colonel Curtis.

BV: Sgt. MacDonald, a final question. How did you feel about your own personal role in the Vietnam War?

TM: That’s a pretty hard question to answer. The Marine Corps sent me over there to do a job, but as a Marine, I do have the prerogative of thinking for myself. These people need help. Without getting too corny about it, I’m just thankful that I was able to help some of them, and I hope some of the people that we hauled out after they had been shot, we hauled back to get medical treatment, pull through. If they didn’t have the helicopter there, they would have never made it otherwise.

BV: Keeping on the same question, do you feel that our role is necessary in Vietnam?

TM: This is another hard question. My own personal feeling of this, if we don’t stop these people there, we’re going have to stop them some place else. I would just as soon see them stopped there, than have to worry about them in the in the cities of America or trying to push them out of the mountains here, which may not happen in our lifetime, but if this aggression is not backed up against the wall, and showed that we’re not going to take this foolishness, it will surely happen.

BV: Thank you very much Sgt. MacDonald.

TM: You’re welcome.