Robert Olivia: This interview is being conducted with Capt. Patrick G. Collins by Master Sgt. Robert H. Olivia at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia. The subject of this interview is reconnaissance patrols. This interview is unclassified. Captain Collins, would you state your name, grade, and service number, please?

Patrick Collins: Patrick G. Collins, captain, United States Marine Corps, 076230.

RO: What were you duty assignments while you were in Vietnam?

PC: The entire period that I was in Vietnam, from March until December in 1965, I was company commander of Delta Company, 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion.

RO: Where were you physically located within Vietnam during these periods covered, sir?

PC: Our entire operations were in the Da Nang enclave.

RO: Would you discuss in detail the deployment of reconnaissance patrols, please?

PC: An issue when the Marines went into Vietnam, they were sent in as a battalion landing team organization. Each BLT at that time had a reconnaissance platoon attached. Initially, when 1/3 and 2/3 went in, they had a platoon from Delta Company with them. Three/Nine had a platoon from Alpha Company, and 3/4 had a platoon from Bravo Company. These BLTs existed with their reconnaissance units from early March until the 12th of April 1965. At that time, the platoons were sent back to the parent unit, which was Delta Company, and we became an operational reconnaissance company for the 9th Brigade in Vietnam on or about the 13th of April ’65. From 13 April ’65 until 27
May ’65, Delta Company operated as the 9th MEB Reconnaissance Company in Vietnam. During and prior to the 27th of May, the reconnaissance battalion itself landed in Vietnam on or about the 7th of May ’65. Once they got organized and they moved into the Da Nang enclave, the companies were relocated, leaving A and B Company at Da Nang, Bravo Company at Chu Lai, and Charlie Company was sent up to Hue-Phu Bai. The area I’ll speak about mainly is the Da Nang enclave, which is the one I know the best. In Da Nang from the end of May up through September, A and D Company worked at Da Nang enclave. A and D Company worked with the 3rd Marines from around the 27th of May to the 11th of July. At that time, the 9th Marines became an operational unit in Vietnam and D Company went under operational control of the 9th Marines. So, the alignment at this time in July with the reconnaissance units was A with the 3rd, B with the 4th, Charlie Company at Hue-Phu Bai, and D Company with the 9th Marines. This setup lasted up until the 9th of September at which time the entire reconnaissance battalion became under operational control of the division and all the companies went back working for the battalion who in turn, of course, was working for the division. Our operations initially in Vietnam, going back now to April, working with the 3rd Marines, we started out on the 20th of April sending out patrols in daylight, from 0800 and have to return back prior to dark, working in the Vietnamese countryside. These were mainly to orient ourselves with the terrain and the people and to make contact with the villagers. I believe the popular terminology at that time was we were passing out candy and making friendly contacts at the time. On the 22nd of April, Delta Company had its first contact with a Viet Cong unit at a little town called Bin Tai. From that time on, the contacts were frequent throughout that portion of the Da Nang enclave. When A Company moved into the area, our activities in the Da Nang enclave as far as reconnaissance was concerned was working within close proximity of the infantry units. This is from 2000 to 6000 meters in front of the infantry units, mainly operating observation posts and working patrols throughout the countryside watching for enemy movement. Starting in June, we started to expand our patrol activities further into the west and to the north. This was into a mountainous area looking for further VC activity throughout the area. These patrols sometimes ranged as far eighteen miles from the nearest friendly unit in the Da Nang area. Sometime during the month of July there was established within the TAOR and
outside the TAOR, an area known as the RAOR: the reconnaissance area of
responsibilities. This area around Da Nang and also around the other two enclaves was
an area where Marine reconnaissance units could work at much greater ranges than they
had been working. Starting in July, our patrols started to range out fifteen, eighteen,
twenty miles from Da Nang. The main mission of our patrols was surveillance, looking
for VC units, and as the summer months drew on and getting into the Fall, we became
vitally interested in looking for large units moving into the Da Nang enclave. In October
of ’65, the reconnaissance battalion itself started to operate as a unit in the Da Nang
enclave. On 18 October through the 24th of October, the reconnaissance battalion with C
and D Company went on their reconnaissance battalion-sized patrol into the complex
known as Happy Valley at which time they discovered a large VC encampment in the
area and had numerous contacts throughout that patrol with VC units. Into the month of
December of ’65, the reconnaissance battalion was starting to operate at greater ranges
than they had been working. The idea was established for company-sized patrol bases in
the mountains to the west and to the north with the main mission of surveillance and
keeping it under observation and making contact with VC units throughout the area. The
recon units in the Da Nang enclave from April through December had a variety of tasks
besides surveillance and observation-type patrols. They made two amphibious rubber
boat night operations on the coastal areas around Da Nang. They made numerous river
searches in the Da Nang area. They were involved in some demolition work. They got
involved in quite a few operations where they were acting as surveillance observation and
a sort of a screen on the flanks of infantry units working in the Da Nang area. They were
involved in tank operations, long-range patrols, utilizing tanks on the flat side area of
south Da Nang. They’re involved in one operation which might be called a kidnapping
operation, which wasn’t too successful. But of the entire period, basically the unit was
involved seventy-five percent of their time in patrolling throughout the Da Nang enclave.
These patrols consisted of anywhere between ten and eighty men going out anywhere
from three to ten days, coming back in and resting for a period of a couple of days and
going out again. Again, the mission always was surveillance and observation, but of
course, these surveillance and observation missions quite frequently turned into making
contact with the Viet Cong and having some quite spirited actions throughout that time.
In reference to some of the contacts we’ve had with the Viet Cong, initially the first contact with Viet Cong units in Vietnam was by a reconnaissance unit on the 22nd of April. This was with Delta Company working for the 3rd Marines. I might make reference at this time to an operation which took place on the 14th of May of ’65 involving three ten-man patrols from Delta Company that were working into an area known as Elephant Valley, which is twelve to fifteen miles northwest of Da Nang. Patrols on this particular day were sent into this area to three different locations to reconnoiter the area out, to gather information, which was to be sent back to the 3rd Marines CP, so that they at that time could determine some future course of action for an operation they’re going to run into that area. Initially, patrols went in on the night of the 13th of May, the first ten-man patrol went into the landing zone, led by Second Lt. William VanCant, made contact with five VC and killed all five of them. The second patrol came in shortly after them led by myself, a ten-man patrol, and we moved off into a different direction. A third patrol landed about two miles to the east of us. As we moved into our areas at night, we stopped and bivouacked for the night and a large VC unit moved into the valley in the area we were at. In the particular area where I was at, a VC unit from fifty to seventy-five men moved in a camp approximately 150 meters from us for the night. Prior to daylight, they moved out to the west leaving nine men behind. At daylight, these nine men were about 100 meters from where we were located at, so we jumped them, killing two of them. That small group of VC proceeded due west down the road towards the direction where Lieutenant VanCant had his ten-man patrol. At that time, I radioed him and told him they were coming and he jumped them, sustaining casualties on them, but how many, he wasn’t sure. At that time, he himself took two casualties. He radioed me that he was moving to the high round where he was initially supposed to go, and was starting to move up and as he moved to the high ground, he ran into a hard-core unit that was entrenched in the high ground, which they inflicted some more casualties on his small patrol. Upon hearing this, my group moved out of the low ground, proceeded to the west up a road trying to come to his assistance and we ran into a hard-core group entrenched on a bend in the road to our front and to our flanks. After a small encounter with this hard-core group, out of the ten of us that were moving along the road, there was four casualties on this group. Upon hearing our conversation between
myself and Lieutenant VanCant over the radio, the third patrol started to proceed to our assistance. Now they had to cover a distance of about three-and-a-half miles. As they were proceeding into the area we were at, they came upon a VC unit that was dug in, in an ambush position across the road which they were coming, but the ambush was laid in, facing due west. In other words, the ambush was laid in facing the direction of which we would have to come out, so this small group led by First Sergeant Rogers attacked this ambush position and inflicted casualties upon the VC, drove the ambush off, taking some casualties themselves. During the course of this entire action, we radioed our reports back; our communications, we had difficulty with our communications. We had to relay through an Army OE who was flying overhead and was relaying our transmissions for us. These transmissions in the course of the relay from myself to the OE back to the 3rd Marine CP were very garbled. In addition, what added to the confusion as far as communications was concerned, a VC unit somewhere in the high ground was sending transmissions to the OE also in clear Midwestern-accented English, which greatly added to the confusion. The 3rd Marines initially were going to send a group out to give us a hand out there. But the information they received from the OE and from this VC station added to the confusion and the relief force was not sent out mainly due to the fact that they believed a much larger unit of VC were located in the area. The VC that were actually in the area, the main body of the VC were located on the high ground above us and to the hills around us. Apparently, we’d blundered into a VC unit that was encamped in the dense undergrowth. The aircraft that came into the area to give us assistance initially were Marine H-34s and Army Hueys. They received an intensive volume of ground fire. This volume of ground fire resulted in two H-34s being shot up badly and Army OE being shot down and the Army Hueys receiving quite a few rounds into their fuselage. In due time, Marine Attack Squadron 513 sent aircraft into the area and they attacked the VC upon our direction. We marked the areas where to go with smoke and various means we had at hand and they went after the VC unit entrenched in the high ground into the jungle with their 250-pound bombs and then napalm. The unusual thing for the VC, which is one of the few times in the course of the months I spent in Vietnam, the VC determined the course of action to stand and fight it out with the aircraft attacking them and as soon as the jets would come in and dump their load, the VC would hide and
as the jets passed over, they’d open up on them. So, for a period about from 6:30 in the
morning until 2:00 in the afternoon, we had a very spirited action going throughout this
area. A dense undergrowth in the terrain added to the difficulties for ourselves and for
the VC. They had difficulty deploying the units to get after us and we had difficulty
maneuvering in the area. An Army Huey came in and evacuated the one patrol by
Lieutenant VanCant, which had, by that time, one dead and four wounded. They brought
them out; one Army Huey carrying ten men out. It took an intense volume of ground fire
when they came into the zone. His gunner got out, covered the Marines loading the
wounded into the aircraft, they took off with all ten Marines in the Huey, made it back to
the 3rd Marine CP where he crashed landed the whole works at the 3rd Marines CP. By
that time, the group I was with had moved back into an open area. We started digging in
with entrenching tools, formed a small perimeter, we were fighting out with the VC in a
large open area there. Thanks mainly to the assistance from the aircraft, from the jet
aircraft from the Marines, they greatly assisted us keeping the VC off our backs. We were
vastly outnumbered and it was through the assistance of the aircraft, we kept them off our
backs. The other patrol had difficulty. Marine H-34s pulled them out. The time the two
patrols were out there, they brought some helicopters back in with jet coverage and they
pulled our group out which had, by this time out of the ten of us there was five wounded
and we got them out. The overall course of the action for that day covered a period of
about eight hours. How many casualties were inflicted upon the VC, it is not an accurate
count. I estimated twenty-two KIAs among the VC. That’s what we know for sure just
by after-action reports. With the modern aircraft that were in the area, it was a possibility
there could’ve been heavier casualties among the VC. Later on in the afternoon, they
broke contact and they withdrew, and this of course enhanced our abilities to get out of
the area. This action by members of Delta Company was one of sixty-two similar actions
we had in Vietnam at that period of time, but it was one of the most intense operations we
had; not the most intense, but one of the most intense because at that time it was the first
contact with Marines against a hard core unit in Vietnam.

RO: Would you discuss with us, Captain Collins, some of the problems of
reconnaissance, please, sir?
PC: There are a variety of problems you encounter in reconnaissance units, but I believe right now, there are three problem areas which affect the effectiveness of reconnaissance units either in Vietnam or throughout the Marine Corps. I think the prime problem you’ll find in a division reconnaissance unit is the selection of personnel that worked reconnaissance units. I don’t mean to imply that you need a super Marine to be in a reconnaissance unit, but you do need an individual in a reconnaissance unit preferably who has prior infantry experience. The fallacy that you encounter in reconnaissance units altogether too much is that the individuals in there are entirely inexperienced or they’re out of ITR or straight out of basic school in the case of second lieutenants, or you get individuals that are on the division reconnaissance units that are sent from other organizations because they are some sort of a misfit. For a reconnaissance unit to be effective in the Marine Corps it’s going to have to have personnel support. I believe for the first time in the history of reconnaissance battalions since they were formed seven or eight years ago, this past May, reconnaissance battalion and particularly my company got a great deal of support from the 3rd Marines and the 3rd Division in the selection of personnel. All we got were individuals who wanted to be there, to do a variety of different type of task work in support of infantry operations. They had experience. By experience, they had two or three years in infantry battalions and they’re just a little bit older than the average Marine. This maturity of individuals in reconnaissance units, I think, is a prime factor in the fact that working in the standard infantry operation, you work with a large volume of people normally in an area that’s relatively close to your base of operations, whether it be on the main line of resistance or a company-sized patrol base or something similar. For reconnaissance units, ideally, you’re supposed to be working in areas that area somewhere between 2000, 18-, 20,000 meters from their nearest friendly unit. To enter these types of operations working with nine or ten men or platoon-sized operations a long ways from home, it does take somebody—I feel—that’s a little bit older and little bit mature and who does have a great deal of experience. You should get people in reconnaissance battalions that have had the basic training so you don’t have to spend so much time working and training him in the basics before he can start getting in the more sophisticated areas of reconnaissance. By sophisticated areas, I mean the techniques of scouting and patrolling. I feel the average Marine is deficient in
his techniques of scouting and patrolling and it does take a quite a deal of good hard work

to make a unit proficient in the scouting-patrolling techniques and procedures. In

addition with the personnel, after you get in there, I found that the main deficiency in the

training that Marines have coming into a reconnaissance battalion, this is from PFC

through the lieutenants as platoon leaders are, that we had a great difficulty in the lack of

ability of the Marine to read a map. Now, an individual working, say, 1000 meters from

his position is not much trouble; if he’s got an average background in map reading and if

he knows the training, he can find his way out, find his way back. It’s a different tune

when you have to work ten to twenty miles from your nearest friendly unit for a period of

eight to ten days. Your knowledge of map reading has to be extremely good. This, I felt,

was the greatest difficulty I ran into. I thought I had extremely capable individuals in the

platoons; corporals and sergeants, platoon sergeants, etc., but I just couldn’t send a

squad-sized patrol out or two-squad-sized patrol out with the, say, buck-sergeant squad

leader taking a patrol because he just couldn’t read a map. He was capable of everything

else, but it took such a great deal of time to train this individual into reading a map

proficiently. We also found this in the lieutenants coming out of basic school, had this

difficulty. Or, as far as that goes, the lieutenants we had in the battalion had that

difficulty, it was in map reading. If an individual worked in a reconnaissance unit before

and had worked with map reading, he was all right, but if he hadn’t had too much

infantry experience or reconnaissance experience, he experienced a great deal of

difficulty in his map reading. Another area that we found difficulty in was one of

primary importance in a reconnaissance unit is communications. For a reconnaissance

unit to be successful, you have to be able to send your messages back to someone who is

going to take action on them. In a system that we set up, rather Lieutenant Colonel

Blanchard set up in Vietnam, was a system where the a patrol would be carrying two

radios with them. They’d spot some type of enemy activity. That information would be

sent back directly to the regimental CP that the patrol was working out of. As this

information was sent back in the regimental CP, it was also monitored at the recon

battalion. It was also monitored at the division G-3. So, you had three sources there that

were receiving information, any of which could take action upon it and this might be

requesting artillery fire, evacuations, or maybe sending information back in that the
regimental commander could formulate some plan of action on. So, the necessity here
for a reconnaissance unit is good communications. The PRC-10s we had in the
companies, where you rate thirteen in a company. Example of ones I had were issued to
Marines in the early 1953 when they first came out. Out of thirteen PRC-10s, somewhere
after the first part of May, I only had four that I could count on and this caused extreme
difficulties for us. By using a variety of field antennas and spotting various
communication vehicles around the countryside where we could establish communication
links, we had successful communications. I worked at ranges of up to eighteen miles of
PRC-10 directly into the regimental CP. There are times our communications failed us.
This is due to the lack of the type of equipment. The PRC-47 is a good radio, but after a
period of five months of extensive field use, we found that the vox meter in the radio, we
had difficulty with that. The radio—I just could not count on that radio, taking it on a
patrol. We’d invariably go on patrol and the radio would not work after a period of a
couple of days. Towards the end of our tour in Vietnam, we started to receive the PRC-
25s, and my initial impression on that radio is that it’s an extremely capable radio. When
we received these radios in the units, our communications capability, I’d say, increased
two-fold. For reconnaissance units to be successful, again, I stress the point that you
need personnel to work with, you don’t need a super Marine by any means, you don’t
need anybody who’s going to run around with a green beret and sunglasses and pull all
kinds of fascinating stunts. You need a good, solid infantry man who’s mature and need
some good communications equipment to work with. With these two factors in mind, an
individual or a reconnaissance unit working as a support unit for an infantry can give
them the support that they need. Without this, you’re going to have difficulties and
altogether—or in instances, rather—there is times when the reconnaissance units have not
given infantry units the support that they need or requested and usually that’s due to the
difficulties that I’ve mentioned here previously. That’s all I have to say now.

RO: Thank you, Captain Collins, for this interview.