Robert Olivia: This interview is being conducted with Master Sgt. Charles R. Strathman by Master Sgt. Robert H. Olivia at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia. The subject of this interview is Operation Piranha and V.I.P. visits. This interview is unclassified. Master Sgt. Strathman, would you state your name, grade, and service number please.


RO: What were your duty assignments while in Vietnam?

CS: I was in Vietnam assigned to the CIB, which was actually a headquarters 3rd MAF, CIB Section.

RO: What period did you serve in these billets and where were you physically located within Vietnam during this period covered?

CS: This period covers the month of September 1965 and the locations that I was at was at Da Nang, Phu Bai, Chu Lai, and areas that covered Operation Piranha which was ten, fifteen miles south of the Chu Lai sector.

RO: Would you discuss, in detail, Operation Piranha, please?

CS: I would like to discuss that from primarily from the ISO and photo aspects. Arrived at the 3rd Division Headquarters area in Da Nang about 1 September and prior to that time plans had already been made for the operation. Our earliest briefing or association to this Operation Piranha, which D-Day was 7 September, was about the 4th of September. About that time we had been informed that we would have to break up into teams, which was my responsibility to assign the personal for this particular operation.
First, however, they told us the area that we were going into and roughly gave us an idea of what the military situation was going to be. Then, the assignments were made. We broke down into five teams, one team with each battalion and two teams to be in a mobile status so that in the event things were happening in an area where there was no team at the time, they could get us to that location. A team consisted of two motion picture cameraman, one still cameraman, and an ISO reporter, and depending upon the rank the senior man was in charge of each detail. Prior to going out to the field on this particular operation, we were given a set of orders from the commanding general, 3-MAF Major General Wall, spelling out our mission. We were told to use these orders whenever it was felt necessary. They were orders specifically spelling out transportation and our priority for transportation, which was very high. As far as I was concerned it was, I guess, ammunition and wounded would be the only ones that were ahead of us. Once the teams were broken up, as I mentioned there were five teams, I believe it was on the 6th of September we proceeded from the CIB section in Da Nang and went out to the air strip of Da Nang, took a C-130 and flew to Chu Lai and from there we reported into the 7th Regiment and from there we eventually were dispersed to the units which we were going to go in with. Those going with 1/7 went aboard ship. Those going with 3/3 went with the outfits that—3/3 was to be the outfit in reserve aboard the LPH, and those going with 2/7 went with that. The teams were broken up. Team One was aboard the Bay Field, that’s an APA. It was APA 33. Team Two and Three were also with the Bay Field. Teams Two and Three were the mobile or the flexible teams, which would be utilized to be put in wherever the trouble spot was. Of these teams I don’t recall exactly which team went with what but from the Bay Field one team was transferred over with the LVTs and they went in very early the morning of the 7th, in fact they were right behind the M-125 line charges that went off as scheduled. Another unit was transferred to an LSU and eventually made the landing with the tanks and then another unit left the Bay Field about 0800 and transferred with what was to be the CP group. Once the team had landed with the LVTs, the first team, which went in with the first wave, they proceeded inland with the troops that had made the initial first wave. It worked this way almost throughout the whole operation; as example the people that went in with the LVTs stayed with those troops. The persons that went in with the tanks and troops that went in on the LSUs
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1 stayed with those. The people with the CP, this was one of the mobile units, and it was
2 felt that by keeping them with the CP area they would be able to find out what was
3 happening and where they could be most likely used. Along the same lines, the person in
4 the CP group could find out information relative to the forthcoming sweeps or patrols and
5 make assignments accordingly. At the end of the day during this Operation Piranha, a
6 helicopter, which had been prearranged, came into the CP area of each one of the units
7 and they made a film pick-up. Warrant Officer Carpenter was the officer in charge of that
detail along with Sergeant Fellows. They came into the area, picked up what exposed
8 film there was, motion picture and still, and whatever copy or notes had been prepared by
9 the ISO people. This was all packaged or thrown into bags and picked up and if there was
10 a requirement for a resupply of film or if there was a need for exchange of equipment he
11 had this equipment aboard the helicopter. This was planned for 1700 hours each day in
12 and around the CP area of the respective battalions. As I mentioned, this plane, this
13 helicopter came from Chu Lai and when it returned to Chu Lai they went through the
14 routine of making out the necessary paperwork and sorting it and packaging it and get the
15 film out as fastest means possible to return to Commandant, Marine Corps, Code AO-3P.
16 The days that followed, the 8th and 9th of September were pretty much routine days. Each
17 morning the man in charge of his team checked with me to find out what was on schedule
18 for the day. I had previously checked with the S-2 and -3 to find out what was going on
19 and people were dispatched accordingly. One note that would be good to add to this was
20 during the operation of Piranha action that they wanted to cover specifically was any
21 firing or any actual firefights that developed, coverage of various weapons firing. As the
22 records show, there wasn’t a great deal of this and in some cases we were able to get this
23 coverage and others we weren’t. Briefly that covers the Operation Piranha ISO/ photo-
24 type information. I would like to make some remarks referencing the V.I.P visits to the
25 3rd Marine or 3rd MAF area, 3rd Marine Division, 3rd MAF. While I was there I had an
26 occasion to cover two V.I.P visits mainly Mr. Nixon, ex-Vice President, and Ambassador
27 Lodge. Both of these visits were pretty much identical as to the procedures that went on
28 as far as the visits were concerned. They were all handled in a pretty heavily-classified
29 type thing because of whom they were as to their time of arrival and in some respects
30 trying to get enough information knowing where they were about to go. However, by the
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time the information got to us and we generally greeted these people or met them at the airport, and they were met by General Walt and we filmed them at the airport, the normal greetings and generally they arrived in a small twin engine jet, I believe it’s a T-39 and from there they transfer it to helicopters. We generally had a helicopter available to us and to the other members of the press, civilian press. We followed them to their respective destinations. Normally they always took them to the little village Lai My, which had one time been heavily damaged and then the Marines Corps efforts built it up and this was more or less of a showplace. They were taken into Lai May and shown some of the buildings that had been reconstructed and these things were all photographed with the V.I. Ps in the front. In conclusion, it’s my opinion that a lot of the coverage of the V.I. P visits will only serve the Marine Corps for a historical or a record purposes only. Most cases the civilian medium was along with us on the V.I.P coverages and naturally their methods and their means of getting it released to the public are a lot faster than ours.

RO: Thank you, Sgt. Strathman, for this interview.