Sgt. Bob Vandewalker: From the El Toro Marine Corps Station, this is Staff Sergeant Bob Vandewalker, bringing you a special interview with Corporal Michael Tharp, who just returned from Vietnam. Mike, how long were you in Vietnam?

Cpl. Michael Tharp: A total of eight months, off and on.

BV: When did you go over and when did you come back and so forth? Can you fill me in on that?

MT: We initially went overseas in June of ’64, and Vietnam slightly after that, and returned to Okinawa from Vietnam in October of ‘64. Then in March of ‘65 when the Marines landed there, we went in with them again.

BV: Where were you stationed over there?

MT: Da Nang and Hue Phu Bai most of the time.

BV: And what was your job?

MT: Primary job was operations clerk. Secondary job was a helicopter gunner, SAR member.

BV: When you say SAR what does this job consist of?

MT: Search and rescue. Not sea search and rescue, but actually on the land and in terrain there.

BV: In other words, were there two types of rescues that a person went out and did?

MT: Oh, yeah. You have your terrain, your land rescue, and your sea rescue.
BV: Does a problem lie in rescuing somebody from land?

MT: It could considerably if you had the high rain forest that you had there in most of the area. Trees run from two- to three-hundred feet high, and with the hoist on helicopter only one-hundred foot, it’s very hard to get a downed pilot out if he is in the rain forest.

BV: In other words, we’re talking about forest that is really thick.

MT: Very.

BV: Where you can’t see anybody, is this right?

MT: Visibility is probably not more than ten yards.

BV: How high are they flying sometimes if they’re looking for people over the forest and jungle area?

MT: Right at treetop level most of the time.

BV: Just over the top of the trees?

MT: Yes.

BV: As a corporal, your job was what part in the helicopter? What did you do?

MT: Port gunner.

BV: Plus looking out, seeing if you could see things going on?

MT: Right. Observe all the time.

BV: At anytime did you run into any fire from ground fire from the Viet Cong?

MT: Only several times that you know of. Of course, most of the time flying a thousand or fifteen-hundred feet, you wouldn’t know unless you actually saw the muzzle flash or got hit.

BV: Mike, how do you feel the morale of the Marines and the other services is over in Vietnam?

MT: Very high.

BV: As a young man, what is your feeling about these people back here that are against this Vietnam War, the young college students?

MT: I feel that they’re misguided, misled. They talk in circles, generalities. They say that our position over there is immoral, but since when is it immoral to help a suppressed people fight communism or fight even mass murder in some cases?
BV: We’re fighting sort of two kinds of war over there. One is the bullet kind.

How about this Civic Action Program—have you had an opportunity to get involved with this, or see this working over there?

MT: The softhearted American always helps out the lower privileged people, especially the kids. I feel that the best approach for this civic action is through the head of the family, in lieu of the way that I have seen it done, which is through the children. The Oriental mind works that the father is the head of the family, and that he should get the whole livelihood. When you put the child in a situation where he or she might make twice as much in one week as a father makes in a month, this naturally drops him as the figurehead of the family.

BV: In other words, we’re talking about, let’s say, three cakes of soap, you give it to a child when you really should go through the father to give him the soap or whatever else is needed for the family. Right?

MT: Yes, I feel that you should.

BV: But this would not be true if an individual Marine just gave a child a piece of candy or something, is this right?

MT: No, I don’t feel that. Most of the time the children are so hungry that if you give them a piece of candy they’re going to stand there and eat it. They won’t take it home.

BV: Now, you were over there for quite a little while. Did you see the change in the kids when you first went there? For example, a young child, were they sort of afraid of us at first when we arrived there?

MT: Yes, in a way, but fear seems to be something in a child doesn’t know. They’ll come right up to you if they think you can do them some good. We didn’t have too much trouble making friends with the children.

BV: Now that we’ve been there some length of time, do you feel that the people are much more friendly to us?

MT: Considerably, especially when the individual Marine or the individual serviceman tries to learn the language and a little bit about the culture. Even if you do wrong, or say something wrong in the Vietnamese language, the people appreciate it because they know that you’re trying.
BV: Is it pretty difficult to speak the Vietnam language?

MT: I only was able to pick up a few words, and I was over there for eight months. I thought it was pretty hard.

BV: Do they sort of get a kick out of us when we do mispronounce their words or try to talk their language?

MT: Oh, they’ll laugh at you a little bit, and then try to correct you.

BV: Mike, at anytime did you work with the Vietnam soldier?

MT: Well, for the first tour I spent in Vietnam was all with the soldiers, the Vietnamese soldiers. There was very few Americans over there at the time, maybe one or two advisors to, say, a company of the Vietnamese.

BV: Do you feel that they are, really want to learn from us how to fight this war and so forth? Do you feel that they’re trying?

MT: As a whole, yes. Naturally, there are some groups that seem to back off a little bit, but I feel it’s the lack of training more than not wanting to learn. They should be trained considerably better than some of them that I’ve seen.

BV: In other words, longer, do you feel? Is there an education problem though, where we’re dealing with the Vietnam people? They don’t have a very high education now, do they?

MT: No, they don’t.

BV: In many cases, no education, is that right?

MT: This is right.

BV: Are you familiar at all with the medical problem that these people have, the sickness? Are we sort of helping these people in this respect, the Vietnam people?

MT: Yes. Most of their problem there, I’ve seen a lot of malnutrition. This comes from not knowing how to cultivate their crops properly, and, of course, from the Viet Cong taking a lot of their food. But their own livelihood is being supplemented by our giving them food.

BV: Well, getting away from this bullet war still, and getting back to this helping, do we have any type of a farm program? I don’t mean the Marine Corps, but is the government teaching them how to grow their corps?
MT: The government is, and you will find considerably that the officers in the Marine Corps and the Army, who have degrees in agriculture, on their off times, they’ll actually go out and show the Vietnamese peasant how to work it.

BV: Even though he might be a pilot, a jet pilot or otherwise, regardless of what his job is, he’s out there showing them how to become good farmers?

MT: Right. It’s a twenty-four-hour-a-day job, and you’ve got to really get in, not only to fly your missions and fight your little war, but to help the people along with it.

BV: And we are getting some good response in return for this? In other words, they’re helping us better?

MT: Yes.

BV: Where I understand at one time if a Viet Cong, going back several months, was in the area, nobody would tell them about it, but now it’s pretty hard for Viet Cong to get in certain villages. And they would come and talk to them about it. Is this true?

MT: This is true. This has come about since I have been back from overseas, but from what I understand just by reading the newspapers and so forth, and what I’ve heard from people that have come back recently, this is the way it is. They have a hard time getting in, getting the support of the people now.

BV: Because we are so friendly, and they’re much with us and so forth.

MT: Yes.

BV: How about getting your laundry done and so forth? Is this a sort of hardship over there? The ladies come in and do your laundry?

MT: Yes, they do. Actually, there is no problem getting your laundry done, it’s getting it done right. What we’re used to back here in the States, for instance, all of my utilities and so forth were done with cornstarch. This is all well and good, but when they start doing your under clothes with the same corn starch it gets a little uncomfortable at times. Especially in that humidity.

BV: They’re putting starch in your underclothes too?

MT: Regular starch wouldn’t be bad, but it’s that, not cornstarch, but that rice starch. Rice paste, I guess that’s what you could call it.

BV: This becomes quite humorous among the Marines then, I guess?

MT: Well, if you can find enough humor in it, I guess you could laugh. I didn’t.
BV: Mike, can you think of any unusual experience you had while you were in Vietnam?

MT: One I think, would be when I was first there from June to October of ’64, we were living in the old French barracks, as I said before. It was just a small Marine unit there. We were living pretty high on the hog compared to what they are now, and we had our houseboys, which is common over there in the Orient, for American servicemen to have houseboys. There was this one particular little kid that was in charge of our barracks. I’d say he was about fourteen years old. His name was Thong. We got quite attached to him, needless to say, and after about three months he came back on the base there one day—he had been gone for three days—and he came back on the base, and said that his father had died, and that the people that were in charge of the houseboys had fired him because he hadn’t reported in or come to work, or anything like this. So, actually, we were all sorry to see him go, and gave him our luck and everything, and threw up the old clothes we wanted him and his family to have, you know, just human interest part of it, we wanted to help them out any way we could. I’d say about a week after that, we got a call for emergency Medevac to draw some Viet Cong prisoners, bring them back to Da Nang, that had been captured out in the fields somewhere, and several of them were dead and there was a couple wounded, and I just happened to be in this particular helicopter that brought these men back. One of the dead Viet Cong was our little houseboy.

BV: Corporal Tharp, where is your hometown?

MT: Louisville, Kentucky.

BV: Getting to your personal record in Vietnam, how many missions were you involved in and so forth as far as flying over there?

MT: I flew a total of twenty-nine missions.

BV: Did you get any medals for this?

MT: The combat aircrew insignia, which is just a pair of wings, and the Air Medal, one Air Medal.

BV: How many missions must you fly to get the Air Medal?

MT: Most cases it’s twenty, but in some cases, if you have a real tough mission you can get a one-mission Air Medal.

BV: But actually you are not a real crew chief, is this correct Mike?
MT: No, absolutely not. I was just somebody that rode along to protect the port side of the aircraft.

BV: Did this happen in many cases? In other words, you were just an added member of the crew?

MT: Right. There’s one crew chief who covers the cargo side of the aircraft, and you have an additional gunner that rides along to cover the port side.

BV: You must be school-trained to fire this particular weapon though, don’t you?

MT: Yes, they school trained us before we went out.

BV: So they can grab almost anybody that would fly as an extra member to man this gun?

MT: In our entire squadron, there was only four or five people who weren’t qualified and didn’t fly. That was their own accord. They didn’t feel that they wanted to.

BV: At any particular time did you go out on a rescue mission?

MT: I had a total, I guess five or six rescue missions.

BV: You picked somebody every time or what was it?

MT: No, this was more of a safety precaution. In case a plane did get shot down in a hot mission, we’d be there to pull them out.

BV: Another thing I wanted to ask you Mike, what is the feeling between Marines and the Army and the Navy over there? Do they feel it’s a team type of war?

MT: Everything seems to be worked in a team over there. You don’t have any conflict at all. The conflict comes when you’re on liberty or something, and you haven’t got anything better to do.

BV: In other words, most of your conflict comes from back here more so than from over there, is that right?

MT: There’s no problem at all over there. It’s all back here.

BV: Because people are going out and saying just bad things, is that right?

MT: They don’t understand to begin with.

BV: Mike, a lot of fine organizations and schools back here in the United States are writing to the Marines in over there in Vietnam. Do you feel this is a good morale factor?
MT: Yes, it definitely is. The people over there that are doing the actual fighting and living in the dirt and mud, they need to know that the people back here are supporting them in some way, even if it’s by just writing a letter. Most of the things they hear about over there are the demonstrations and so forth, and this is tearing the morale down.

BV: So you feel that some young boy or girl in the grade school writes a little letter, even though it isn’t very long, that this is really helping the Marine or the Army and the Naval personnel over there?

MT: Yes, it definitely is.

BV: Mike, when did you arrive back in the States?

MT: June 1st of this year.

BV: Do you feel if you had the opportunity, that you would like to go back to Vietnam, when it came your turn again?

MT: When it came my turn again, I’ll be more than glad to go back over. I don’t feel like I should go over if there are other people to go first. But there again, there’s a job to be done, and people that are needed, if they want me to go back, I’ll gladly go.

BV: Do you feel this is the way most all Marines feel? That they feel that the war is worthwhile, and they are trying to do a job?

MT: Yes, I’d say so.

BV: We’ve got a real important job to do over there.

MT: More than most people realize, yes.

BV: Can you sort of sum up this thing for me, Mike, as a finale? On this interview to let me know, let the people know what your feeling is on it.

MT: Naturally, I’m a supporter of the Vietnam War, and the things that the American people are trying to do for them. I disagree wholeheartedly with these demonstrators. As I said before, they don’t really know what the story is. They talk immorality but they don’t know the meaning of the word.

BV: Well, Corporal Michael Tharp, I want to thank you very much for talking to me today, and I certainly want to wish you an awful lot of luck in your future endeavors in the Marine Corps.

MT: Thank you, sir.