Sergeant Bob Vandewalker: From the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station this
Marine Staff Sergeant Bob Vandewalker interviewing Sergeant Dan Gage, who returned
from Vietnam on November 1, 1965. Sergeant Gage spent approximately five months in
Vietnam. Dan, what outfit were you with over there, when did you leave the States, and
what other outfits have you been stationed with?

Sergeant Dan Gage: We left the States November 1, 1964. I was in BMFA-513. I stayed with that outfit for the entire tour of duty in Vietnam.

BV: Who was the commanding officer of your outfit?

BV: What type of aircraft were they flying in your outfit, and what was your job in the unit?
DG: I’m an aircraft fire control technician. The type of aircraft was F-4B Phantoms.

BV: What did your average day consist of in Vietnam, from morning to night?
DG: Well, I was on the crew that worked from twelve midnight ‘til twelve noon. We would go in at twelve midnight to relieve the day crew, as we called them. Actually they worked from noon to midnight. And actually, our main purpose was to keep the aircraft up, the radar up, so that they would be operational for both bombing and missiles shooting.

BV: Now what was the mission of your squadron?
DG: The mission of my squadron is to search and destroy all designated targets that are handed down from us from what we call, the RAG orders that come in from the Air Force in command in Vietnam. They have the highest commander over there. He is in command of everything air, operational air. And he hands down the RAG order, and he will give us so many missions a day to fulfill. Plus, whatever emergency missions that come up.

BV: Did this include day and night missions both?

DG: Day and night.

BV: Now, you were stationed at what base there?

DG: Da Nang.

BV: Can you give me a sort of break down of what Da Nang, what it consisted of, as far as living conditions and so forth? What you had?

DG: As far as the Marine Corps went, the living conditions were for the air wing were mainly tents. Some Marines lived in old Vietnamese barracks, but these were division Marines. The ones that were attached to division, 3rd Marine Division Headquarters. Now, this is not actually 3rd Marine Division Headquarters as we knew it, but it all came over under the Provisional Brigade Command by Major General Walt. He was our commanding general, of every Marine in Vietnam. Now, the living conditions as we knew them, weren’t the best, but I guess they could have gotten worse, because we heard of the Marines out and actually doing the fighting defending the base, that they lived in, just from hand to mouth, so to speak.

BV: What type of perimeter did you have set up as far as defense against people that might want to come in to the base, like the Vietnamese?

DG: Well, we had both Vietnamese and Marine Corps personnel out guarding the perimeter. The Marines were basically out there to protect us. The Vietnamese were out there to question infiltrators, and to make sure that if anybody did get in, they either were the correct people, or if they were incorrect, such as, they tried several times to infiltrate with spies and informers. That they wanted to know if they ever got on base. So that they could be apprehended.

BV: At any time were you in Da Nang, was the base attacked?
DG: Several times. Usually they would send in a suicide squad, what we called
“probers.” They would probe at a certain area to try to find a weakness to come in and
destroyed our aircraft. That was the big thing that they wanted, that and fuel dumps.
They blew up the fuel dumps several times, and they, on July 1 and July 2 of 1965, they
did hit our area pretty heavily and destroyed three aircraft.

BV: All right. Now could you tell me what happen…This happened at night?
DG: Yes it did.
BV: Can you tell me what you know about this?
DG: Well, I was off duty that night, and I was asleep when it happened. I woke
up to firing, to what sounded like mortars, light mortars, and a tremendous sheet of flame
rising up in the air about a hundred feet. It looked as though the whole world was on fire.
And what had happened, some Viet Cong had cut their way through the concertina wire
and the fences we had up. They had slipped past the patrols out on the road, and gotten
in there and blew the planes up. Not with motors as we first expected, but with hand
grenades, and with—they couldn’t tell for sure, but they suspected—some satchel
charges.

BV: They got this close to the aircraft?
DG: Yes, they did.
BV: Did anybody ever figured out how many there was?
DG: They figured approximately twenty.
BV: Did we capture any of these or kill any of this people?
DG: We did. One man in our outfit, a Corporal Davis, was standing guard duty,
he was corporal of the guard that night, on a M-60 machine gun. And he was credited
with killing four.
BV: Did you have a change to talk to Corporal Davis at all afterwards?
DG: I did.
BV: What did he have to say to you in regards to this?
DG: He said that the reason he was effective—he had never been in combat
before—and the reason he was so effective with this machine gun, was because of his
spotters that were working with him with the gun. He had a guy there that had
tremendous eyesight at night, and this guy, more or less, directed his fire. He was a
young Marine PFC, and they were also there when the machine gun barrel got too hot
after they fired a hundred rounds in five round bursts. They would take over then, and
start the automatic fire from the M-14.

BV: Going along in this same style of fighting, Sergeant Gage, do you feel that,
you’re in navigation, that you are being taught, or were taught before, enough infantry to
be effective in case this happened to you?

DG: Well, I was taught the same way. Every Marine is a basic infantryman no
matter what other MOS he picks up, and we are assured of the same training that they
have. Although, they get their infantry MOS, we are first trained as infantry, and then we
pick up our military occupational specialty.

BV: I’m going back to for example, your training you had in your squadron, in
your basic training here at. Were you station at El Toro before?

DG: Yes, I was.

BV: Did you learn things in your basic training that; you feel that this was
educational to you?

DG: For this type of warfare, yes. We, in our basic training, we learned nothing
technical about our work. It is all infantry; this is stressed four times monthly, usually on
a Wednesday or Friday.

BV: Do you feel that after being over there and seeing what happened, that basic
training should be important to your aviation squadrons?

DG: Stressed even more heavily than it is. I do believe so.

BV: You realize that it’s more than before?

DG: Yes, you would, naturally, having ever being in combat you would realize
the importance of infantry training.

BV: Do you feel there’s anything they might have missed in your training?

DG: Not specifically, other than more of it, is about the only thing. The Marine
Corp doesn’t miss much when it comes to something like that. They pretty well train you
for what you have to face.

BV: Well using this as an example, do you feel that you could go out and operate
a machine gun? Were you taught when you got over there if it was necessary?
DG: Well we were taught here how to operate machine guns the basic ways to if they malfunction, how to clear them. We had classes on the M60s. We were well acquainted with most of the weapons that an infantry platoon would use.

BV: Now who stood your perimeter defense, the same men that work on your aircraft, people like yourself, in our immediately area?

DG: No, sir, it was two companies of 9th Marine Infantry Regiment. They stood our immediate area, to watch around our immediate sector. Now in other places, there would be different battalions and companies, but it was usually from the infantry end of it that stood actual watch, and the patrols out along the river and around the perimeter.

BV: In other words, Sergeant Gage, people that worked on the aircraft did they stand guard duty also?

DG: Very much so. In fact, we had our own defense platoon for our immediate sector. This is inside the wire, next to our living quarters. Now, they were expected to do their work, their normal working hours, which is usually twelve hours, although some people did work longer. And when they got off work, they were responsible for standing this guard duty. Now sometimes it wasn’t much because of the intelligence that came in we weren’t due to be hit. But if the intelligence did come in, a report that we might be hit that night by the Viet Cong, then everybody was in the trenches with their ammunitions their rifles equipment.

BV: How was the morale of your troopers in your outfit?

DG: Well 513 is supposedly the lowest morale outfit in the Marine Corps, but there’s not man in the outfit that won’t, you can ask, and he’ll tell you truthfully that it is best. They’re proud of the outfit. I don’t know whether the morale was really high or low, because Marines, I’ve never seems them act before in combat, and this is my single experience. But I can say this, if I did have to go back in combat today, I would rather it would be with the men I was with this time, than rather choose a new outfit.

BV: How did you feel, as only being a sergeant and an enlisted man, the team effort was over with the other branches of service?

DG: You mean inter-service wise?

BV: Right.

DG: Such as the Air Force.
BV: Working together and getting along together.

DG: Well, the Marine Corps is basically a lone outfit. I mean, they try, they cooperate with the rest of the services. But the Marine Corps has a reputation for getting things done, and they don’t necessary like to have to depend on, too heavily, on other units. Now for instance, if a Marine battalion is pinned down, and they need air support, Marines are going to give it to them, if they possibly can, if there’s any way possible, it will be the Marines first, and then they will rely on the Air Force and Navy second.

BV: Did you ever get a chance to talk to any infantry people in regards to the air support of they felt about the aviation people?

DG: Well, I talked to several people from 3rd Force Service Regiment, they had their engineer battalions there, and to several people from the infantry regiments that were there, and they said that the F-4B phantom, bar none, helped in the field in an actual attack more than any airplane they had ever seen, because the Viet Cong were tremendously afraid when they heard this thing coming. It was like a shock to them. It makes a tremendous amount of noise in a dive and this seemed to terrorize the Viet Cong. And they were always glad to see this aircraft show up.

BV: Sergeant Gage, what do you feel about your own individual role in the Vietnam War, as far as what you did, going back, and whether we’re accomplishing what we’re trying to do over?

DG: Well, I don’t really know if we’re accomplishing what we are trying to do. We’re certainly spending a lot of money, and we’re certainly putting in a lot of long hours. If anything can be done, and if the military tacticians believe that this is the thing that should be done, then certainly it couldn’t be done better. Now as far as my personal role in Vietnam, I did what I was told, and that’s about the extent of it. You’re more or less in a state of shock over there. You’re numb. You’re usually tired, and you complain quite a bit about the conditions, but after you get out you look back and you realize that other people went through the same thing and it really wasn’t so terrible.

BV: When you came back from Vietnam, did you go back home on leave?

DG: I did.

BV: Do you feel, you said before this was your first time in a combat area. Do you feel that you appreciate more things than you did before?
DG: Well, it’s kind of hard to get rid of twenty-two years of life like that. I’ve always taken freedom of speech, freedom of religious, and that for granted. And as long as I’m an American I guess I will always will. Because there will be people continually from America, fighting for this, and as long as that happens I believe that America under God is invincible in a place such as this. I mean, no doubt, somewhere, somebody could probably beat us in war. But when they do beat us in war, they’ll know they’ve been in a fight.

BV: Now you were over there when all these anti-Vietnam things, demonstrations, were going on back here. What was your feeling, and the people you worked with feeling on this particular subject?

DG: You mean like the draft card burners and things of this sort?

BV: Yes. Saying that we shouldn’t be in Vietnam and all this.

DG: Well, I don’t necessarily agree with them. But however, I do believe that if they pay their taxes and are otherwise good citizens, that certainly have a right to express an opinion. Now, if this is not the majority opinion, it shouldn’t necessarily hamper in any way, the way we are carrying out our obligation in Vietnam, and also, it should not reflect in the actions of the nation or in the way the president makes his decision or in the laws that Congress passes. Because as I say, most polls seem to think that this is a very small minority of the people, and as long as it stays like that, they can do us no harm.

Now as far as out-right violation of the draft law, this is a crime. And Americans are taught when they do something wrong, when they break the law, they have to suffer the consequences. And I believe that if a person burns his draft card, and it’s against the law, he should be punished accordingly. However, I believe, if person has a lawful demonstration, and says that he does not agreed with the policy in Vietnam, as long as he leaves it to that, and uses purely an orderly speech, an orderly manner of conveying his idea to the public, then there’s nothing should be done about him. However, no one, not usually, people do agree with what I have said here. They are very much against these demonstrations. Most of the people feel that if the college kids believe we should get out of Vietnam, that they should come over there and see for themselves, how the people are living in squalor before they make their hasty decisions.
BV: Well now you probably talked it over with other troops in your squadron.
Was this quite a discussion over there on this?
DG: Very much so, everybody talked about it and to a person in combat it’s very
demoralizing to think the people of the United States are against him rather than for what he is doing.
BV: Do they realize that this is a minority though?
DG: Sooner or later I mean, at first when it first came out, nobody told them
anything. They, most of the newspapers we read said that it was a minority and after we
read them long enough and heard the newscasts long enough, we began to believe them.
BV: What is your own personal feeling about going back to Vietnam?
DG: You mean would I like to?
BV: Well yes, would you like to if your turn came, or would you volunteer or
how is your feeling on this?
DG: No, I don’t think I would go so far as to volunteer. Now, this is not
necessarily because that my views conflict with views of the nation. I don’t necessary
want to go burn my ID card, but I’ve been in the Marine Corps almost six years. This in
itself, I think I’ve done my share for my country in relation to, in the first place they only
require four year service, but I volunteered for two years extra, active duty. This will
give me a total obligated service time of almost six years, and I believe that I have now
served my country in full. Unless of course, of a national emergency, and then I
wouldn’t hesitate to reenlist.
BV: Did you have chance at all to get out and talk to Vietnamese people. I don’t
mean verbally, because there is a language barrier, but did you have a chance to get their
feelings to see if their behind us in this particular thing we’re trying to do in Vietnam?
DG: It’s about a fifty-fifty proposition. You take any people that are living in
squalor, and anyone that offers them a veritable utopia, such as the Viet Cong, they say
that they can work wonders if only the people would listen to them, and become
communist orientated. In other words pick up the communist doctrine. There will be
more rice more food. And when a man is hungry, that’s the first thing he’s going to think
of. However, US is making great strides in the fact that they are more less practicing
what they preach where the Viet Cong are not. Now, some places the Viet Cong are
making head way, but in more place than not, they aren’t. They’re going back because of their terrorist campaign. In other words it’s like the old saying, you can fool some of the people all the time, and all the people some of the time, but you can’t fool all of the people all the time, and the Viet Cong are finding this out.

BV: Well, Sergeant Gage I want to thank you very much for talking me today and I certainly want to wish you a lot of luck.

DG: Thank you.