Sergeant Bob Vandewalker: From the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station, this is 1
Marine Staff Sergeant Bob Vandewalker interviewing Staff Sergeant John Baran. John,
to start things off, would you please tell me when you went to Vietnam and how long you
served there?
Sgt. John Baran: I went to Vietnam September 20 of 1964 and approximately
was down there about four months. Got relieved, and went back into the Philippines,
from there, into the States January the 4, 1965.
BV: You were there last Christmas, is that right John?
JB: Yes, I was.
BV: What kind of a Christmas did you and the troops have last Christmas?
JB: Well, we started out, I think it was pretty quiet, and then from there is we had
alert, and then we went on operation against the 159, in the Phuoc Chau Valley in the
Quang Tin Province.
BV: Now, while we’re talking about last Christmas, what is your feeling on this
twelve hour bit that they’re trying to ask the United States to go into this year? Did they
have this last year?
JB: Well, they had the truce last year for Christmas, and also they had one on the
Vietnamese Tet New Year. And both times is whenever the VC claimed that they was
giving this truce in order that the Vietnamese troops to have save conduct to go
throughout all the provinces to their homes. And the meantime, they used this as a lever to attack some critical area, and try to bring it under the VC controls.

BV: Now in other words, after these people got home you mean?

JB: Well, after the people go home, plus they used this as a lever. In order to thin the critical areas out that has been patrolled and secured previously.

BV: So there is a motive behind their ideas of this twelve-hour truce?

JB: Definitely there is. I feel there is.

BV: Do you feel they would do this same thing this year after seeing it, being over there last year?

JB: I think they would use it as a lever, and they’re going to continue using it as a lever.

BV: John, what was your job over there in Vietnam?

JB: My job was in a light infantry unit, as a light infantry weapons unit advisor.

BV: In other words, you would advised the Vietnamese.

JB: Yes, sir in the weapons.

BV: You did not work with the American troops at all?

JB: No, sir.

BV: Do you feel that the Vietnamese over there, when you were working, understood what we were trying to do in Vietnam?

JB: Well, I believe the Vietnamese troops did understand. If they got the proper leadership, the proper training and the proper equipment, I think they can take this war under control and do it themselves.

BV: This will take a little time, do you think?

JB: Well, I think it’s going to take many years.

BV: In your own opinion, what is the problem over there as far as the length of this war? What’s all involved in this? Terrain? Many, many things is there?

JB: Well, I feel as though what’s happening right now, it’s definitely… The war is going to be conducted on a small unit tactics. And the disadvantage that we have over there, and what I’ve been talking to these other fellows coming back, is the terrain is something that we have never been involved in before. The only terrain that’s matched it was the Korean War. And then also, in order to go in there and trying to take this area
under control and pacify it, first thing you have to do, you have to know the country, you
have to know the cultural of the individual people, you have to know what their traditions
are, and plus you have to know their language, even a working knowledge of the
language. Plus, you must have an interrupter to go with you in order to interrupt certain
things that you see along the trails, which is civilians, or the way bush is laid out, and
also just the general lay of the ground.

BV: Now while you work with the Vietnam people, did you get to understand
them pretty well? Could you talk to them? Did you learn any of their language?
JB: No, I didn’t learn the language in depth, but I learned some of it, the
indications that they had. They had a problem in there, and the problem was, I felt, is that
at first they resented you being there is because of the attitude that the French established
while they were over there. So I know that, from my own personal experience, when I
went into the village there on a clearing operation, they thought that we were French
troops. This is how far back they were in the woods.

BV: In other words, because of education, this is a real big problem.
JB: Well, a lack of education is ninety percent of the whole thing. Over there,
with the way it was set up there, well, the schools would be open from six o’clock in the
morning up to nine or ten o’clock at night. All right, the boy would be able to go to
school only two hours a day, the teacher works in relays. So, I feel that the lack of
education is one of the biggest problems over there right now. They need more schools
and more teachers.

BV: What’s your feeling on the bullet war and human relations war over there as
far as winning or loosing this war?
JB: Well the bullet relation war can go on and on and on. In order to win the
country, you’ll have to go out there, and do…For one thing, you don’t know who the VC
is. He can be the housemaid, he can be the laborer, he can be the farmer, you don’t
know. But as far as the pacification, if you have a good pacification team going into the
village, and win these people over to your side, and let them gain your trust, I think that
this, the human factor, is going to be ninety percent of winning that war.

BV: How will we do this, in your own…?
JB: Well, for one thing, the way I think it should be done is that there should be, well-picked teams. First, send your infantry in or whoever you want to be designated, and search and clear the area completely by sectors. And then, immediately when a sector is cleared, is get your specialized team as pacifiers, have them go into this area here, and start pacifying these here people, by putting up a school, and getting a teacher in there who speaks their language, and I’m not talking about a Vietnamese. Get a foreign teacher in there who can be recognized as a foreigner. In this way the people can gain trust by observing the foreigner, the way he behaves himself, and that he is willing to live with the people, and just generally be accepted by the people.

BV: Now you have a pretty good knowledge of this, simply because you were away from everything. You were actually in the villages working.

JB: Yes, I have. I have been in many villages over there, and what I have seen is that the villages are just generally run-down, and there’s nobody to taking care of them. The VC is not taking care of the people, and the Vietnamese troops that come in there are still not taking care of them.

BV: Well, because the Vietnamese do not have any more money or anything to take care of it. We’re actually the only people that have any source of taking care of these people, is this correct?

JB: Well, I don’t know about the money angle over there.

BV: I meant clothes. I’m talking about clothes, soap, or anything else like this respect. Medical things.

JB: Well, I’m not talking about the about the clothes, is because the man over there, the only clothes that he has is what’s on his back. But like I said, it’s the education. If you get in there, if you educate these people, if you can educate them enough, they can make their own clothes. And built their houses, and get your sanitations team in there and clear it out, get your medical teams in there, and get good agricultural experts in there, and then start pacifying these people by districts or by sectors what ever they want to call it.

BV: Well, now in the short time you were in there, did they get in a habit of practicing…So you lived there. How did you live, in a tent?

JB: I lived in a Vietnamese hut.
BV: Now, did they practice any sanitation? They saw you shave, which they probably never saw anybody do. Were they curious about a lot of things that you did as far just taking care of yourself, your laundry and so forth?

JB: Well, in the area that I’ve been in, outside of this one city, adjacent to the province headquarters…I was with a battalion. The amount of the battalion, it’s whenever they would decide to defecate, they’d defecate out in the field. After three days of this, the battalion defecating out in the field, and it gets kind of smelly. So we got the battalion commander, and we got together with him, had a conference, and told him to have each company dig a slit trench, and far as I know, from what I observed, this is the first time they did something like this.

BV: In other words, sanitation is another major problem.

JB: Sanitation is. It’s bad over there. As a matter of fact, I don’t think there’s anything such as sanitation.

BV: And some of these people have probably never seeing a doctor in their lifetime, have they?

JB: This is very true. I feel there’s no more than ten doctors in throughout the whole Vietnam country.

BV: Now, you worked with the Vietnamese soldier. What is your opinion of the Vietnamese soldier?

JB: Well, my personal opinion about the Vietnamese soldier, I think he is outstanding. Considering the time that he’s being fighting this war, and the type of equipment he has, and the type of training and leadership. I think he’s holding up his own.

BV: Do the people in these particular villages you were at, do they know what’s going on in the other part of the country or they are sort way out by themselves?

JB: Well, I doubt that very much. For one thing there’s a lack of communications. There’s one in particular, these Phuoc Chau Valley there, like I said before, they thought we were Frenchmen. French being out of there in 1954, and there’s way, no means whatsoever to get in there and establish certain amount of communications because like it is, the VC has everything blocked and have these people hemmed in. And I feel that if they can get communications in there, even by planes
flying over and broadcasting certain messages over or even sending in broadcasting
teams in playing records and showing them this is what’s happening outside. Even not in
Saigon they will say Phuoc Chau Valley is about fifteen kilometers way from Tam Khe.
Just tell the people, “Look, this is what’s going in Tam Khe. This is what’s been
accomplished.”

BV: Do you think the military forces in the United States should be taught some
of this civil affairs bit of adjusting? We are fighting men, but what’s your feeling about
going in there and trying to help these people, too?

JB: Well, we’ve been fighters for a long, long time. Ever since the Second
World War over in the Asia part of the world, and I feel that we know how to fight. We
know our small unit tactics and we know how to employ them. But we have never, as far
as I know, had any lectures on civic action. Civic action had gone on during the Second
World War and it went on going on during the Korean War. And I think right now, civic
action is one of the biggest factors in South Vietnam.

BV: We’ve had civic action, which was a necessary program for every war we’ve
been in. They’ve had when we took over cities in Europe and Tokyo. So civic action
should be very, very, important to Vietnam then.

JB: Definitely, it is.

BV: Sergeant Baran what is your job here at El Toro?

JB: Well, I’m an instructor in basic in the Marine Corps Air Station basic training
program.

BV: Do you feel there’s any parts of our training that should be changed or
improved to adjust to the Vietnam War?

JB: Well, I feel that there should be bigger emphasis placed on the Civic Action
Program, the counter-guerilla operations, our side of view, and also, the side of view that
stems all the way from China onto Ho Chi Minh. I think these points should be
emphasized more than having something, for instance, interior guard, guard duty,
sanitation and hygiene, and general military type subjects. We should go on a technical
level and teach these technical levels.
BV: In other words, you think the young Marine would like to know, and should about how this government is set up over in Vietnam and so we know what the heck we’re doing over there?

JB: Well, I think definitely it should be geared toward Vietnam right now.

BV: Now, along this same line then, Sergeant Baran, do you feel we should be taught the history of Vietnam?

JB: Yes.

BV: In other words, could you sort of explain some of your knowledge of how this is set up, Vietnam itself?

JB: Well, when I got my orders go to Vietnam last year in September, I had no idea whatsoever what was happening down there. But I did have a working knowledge of the country and some of the traditions and culture, as previously before that, I got myself enrolled in the United States Army Special Forces course, and also, the Special Warfare course pertaining to counterinsurgency. And this right here helped me out quite a bit. But for a good example is this, is that how many people would you, that you would stop in the military and asked them how many provinces in Vietnam? He has no idea whatsoever, then you can explain to him that each province has a province headquarters, this province headquarters is just same as a state capitol. In each state capitol, in each state, you have your counties, townships, your boroughs and cities, and your provinces have the same thing. They have province headquarters. They have sectors, the sub-sectors, and those even are broken down into smaller buroughs or cities, whatever you want to call it. And each one of them are controlled by a village chief.

BV: In other words, the village chief is like a mayor of this particular village?

JB: Definitely, he is.

BV: And then he has his own officials, too.

JB: Yes, he has.

BV: Do you feel that going to these schools really educated you when you got over there? You had a better working knowledge of it?

JB: Well, I think I had a very good working knowledge of the country after I completed this information course, plus the course that I had when I got in Saigon. We went to fourteen days school down there, and they gave us the brief outline on the
advisory effort over there, plus it was geared to our part and also to the South Vietnamese part.

BV: In other words, you’re feeling on this is if rather than going out of doing an hour of drill or marching, if you spend an hour in teaching these young Marines the education of history over there, that we would accomplish a little bit more.

JB: Well, I think we accomplish a lot if we can incorporate more of the history of South Vietnam with the trooper. I think we can do quite a bit.

BV: What do you feel about your own particular role over there? When I say this I mean, do you feel that you saw some changes? That you accomplished what you went over to do?

JB: Well, my own personal opinion on this again, is I feel that I was very important. Because the commandant of the Marine Corps had enough trust in giving me set of PCS orders, and sending me as his representative into South Vietnam, and yet as an infantry unit advisor. And that time when I went in there, I was only one man, one Marine. We had one Australian, and two Army, but I was the only Marine there, and everything that I did, my actions, my behavior would reflect upon the commandant Marine Corps and also the whole Marine Corps effort. So therefore, I feel that I was very important.

BV: Now how about when you were relieved? Were you relieved over there by another staff NCO, or how did that work?

JB: No, I was relieved by an Army sergeant, E5.

BV: Now, did you have a critique with this particular man when he relieved you? This was not done on a day basis was it? How was this set up?

JB: Well it was done immediately. I flew out on a Friday morning out of our area, and the man come in on Tuesday of the following week. I seen him once in Da Nang, but far as having any association with him and the anything to do with it whatsoever. I don’t even know the man, just by face.

BV: But don’t you feel it would have been better if they could have sent him in at least a month, or three weeks, where you could take him around? What is your feeling on that?
JB: No, because I understand all the Army personnel who’s assigned the Vietnam
gone through a counterinsurgency course in Ft. Bragg, North Carolina. And I feel he has
the working knowledge of what goes on in Vietnam. But now as a Marine there who
goes down as advisor, he has no knowledge whatsoever. He’s picked right out of the unit
and said, “Here’s your PCS orders. You are going to Vietnam as an advisor.” You have
no idea whatsoever, and I feel before a Marine is given these orders he should be given
TAD orders to go to Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, go through a counterinsurgency course,
and then immediately upon graduation send him right into Vietnam.

BV: Sergeant Baran, would you go back to Vietnam if the choice is your own?
JB: Well, I would definitely go back to Vietnam. It’s my intentions are—to get
off the subject a little bit—is that the way I feel towards Vietnam, is what could be
accomplished there is that I’m due to retire here in about three months, if I can get out.
And I intend to go over there as a civilian and try to go into one of the aid programs. In
order to do something, what I don’t know, but I feel that my services could be used, and
as far as going to Vietnam, like I said before, I would go right now, as an advisor because
I feel that are so much over there to do. I’m not too much concerned about the older
generation, but you have little boys over there, little girls right now and nothing to do
whatsoever. Go to school two hours a day, and from there there’s nothing, they sit in
their hamlets and do nothing whatsoever. So as far as I know is that there’s just existing
day-to-day.

BV: Well, this is where the program is going to be a long, drawn out program,
because we have to set schools up and educated these kids. It’s pretty rough. It’s going to
be a long program, you feel?
JB: Well, with all the money that is going into Vietnam, I can’t understand why
we can’t get teachers from these other countries. We’ll say Japan, we’ll say Okinawa,
Korea, Guam, Philippines, in the Malaysia countries, is get teachers, recruited teachers
and put them into a hamlet. Put them into one of these hamlets whose controlled by
government forces and establish their own schools. And by utilizing the oriental over
there, is putting them into South Vietnam that he’s changed from the better way of life to
the primitive life is not going to be so hard of a hardship upon him. And he’ll be able to
adjust much better than putting a Caucasian over there.
BV: Was it necessary to protect these people though, when the Viet Cong might come in and kill them or something?

JB: Well, it definitely is. I feel it’s a village under government control, it has to be fortified. Trenches dug around it, you have to recruit your own security force, put them in there, arm them. The security force personnel have to be trained and have to act as out-guards when the villagers go out and harvest the rice or go to the markets and whatever has to be done in the case such as that.

BV: Another important question, Sergeant Baran. Do you feel that our role in Vietnam is necessary?

JB: Well, I think definitely it is, because the Pathet Lao, they gained, I’m not saying all of the control of Laos and Cambodia. So now if they get any control of South Vietnam, then there’s nothing stopping them from going over into Thailand, and from Thailand over into the Philippines and reactivating the Huks again.

BV: In other words, projected thinking a hundred, maybe a hundred years or less, we’d be fighting right at our shores. Is that right?

JB: Well, I think eventually they would move right over here to the coast.

BV: John you got two citations in Vietnam. What were they?

JB: Well, one citation was a Bronze Star with Combat V.

BV: And what did you get this for?

JB: Well, I got this just playing a smoke signal on our battalion front to keep us from getting strafed.

BV: Now, how about the other citation?

JB: Well, the other one is, I was with Number Four Company going into Phuoc Chau Valley where the VC made a morning assault on Hill 159. And this right here it’s, to this same day I feel it was it was a propaganda move because two years previously, the VC was push out as valley in Phuoc Chau Valley in Quang Tin Province out side of Tam Khe. It’s a rice belt, it’s a valley, it must be about a twenty-square-mile area, and there’s nothing but choice rice that’s grown in this area. And the VC, when they got pushed out they told people that “We would be back,” and we would be back to take this here valley before the Vietnamese New Year of 1965. Well, so they kept their word. They come in there one morning about three o’clock, and they made an assault upon this hill and
overrun it completely. And that same time we moved out, and at this time we were 
moving out we engaged the enemy across the river, and our company there more less was 
at the point of it, and the advisors who were there got decorated for it.

BV: We’re talking that you were working with the Vietnam Army at all times is 
this correct?

JB: Yes, I was.

BV: Sergeant Baran, how has your involvement in the Vietnam War affected you 
personally?

JB: Well, at my outlook toward the Vietnam War is something is that it is 
something that is going to have to be accomplished, and I feel that it’s going to have be 
done more or less on a personal basis as the individual been over there, he’s seen what 
was happening, what is happening to the civilians on account of the Viet Cong. The way 
the Viet Cong is gaining the control of these civilians, I feel that, this personally, is that I 
would definitely, like I says before, go back in order to established certain points that are 
still not clear. Good example here, that it was never told to me directly, but I know that 
while we were living in this one Vietnamese hut, we had a soldier who was part of the 
Civil Guard from Tam Khe. This soldier was a guard at the province headquarters power 
station. So we were alerted one night, and we went on operation and we come back the 
next day, and this individual soldier picked out of many soldiers in Tam Khe got 
assassinated. The question is why? I feel the VC assassinated this soldier because he 
gave his house to the American advisors and also to the Vietnamese troops, the battalion 
staff.

BV: Were the Viet Cong fussy about who they did kill? I mean, did they kill 
children, women, intentionally or unintentionally?

JB: Well, I had reports, I had some reports come through from Da Nang that 
stated that the VC did kill Vietnamese chiefs, kidnapped them, and decapitated them, left 
their heads on fence posts, such as this. I feel the VC is doing this only to the area that 
has been secured, pacified.

BV: In other words, their using fear?

JB: And under government control.

BV: They’re using a fear program?
JB: Yes, they’re using a fear program. Going into these villages and showing the
villages, “Look. Your village has been pacified. You have government troops in here that
control, under government control. But yet we are strong, we can do this, we can do
that.” So what they’ll do is kidnap the village chief and nine chances out of ten that he is
an Army official, anyway.

BV: Well Sergeant Baran, I want to thank you very much for talking me today
and I certainly want to wish you a lot of luck in future endeavors in the Marine Corps.

JB. All right.