Alan Richardson: This interview is being conducted with Cpt. Lionel V. Silva by
Gunnery Sgt. Allen B. Richardson at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia. The
subject of this interview is operations in the Le My area. This is a pilot model for Marine
Corps Civic Action Program and is unclassified. Captain, would you state your name,
grade, and service number please?
Lionel Silva: Lionel V. Silva, Captain, 070097.
AR: What were your duty assignments while you were in Vietnam?
LS: I was the S-2 and Civil Affairs and Psy War Officer for the 2nd Battalion, 3rd
Marines.
AR: What period did you serve in these particular billets?
LS: With the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines, the period 10 April to 5 October, 1965.
Then in constant with the inner division transfers that were going on at the time, from to
5 October to 16 November, '65, I was the Assistant III in the TAOR of the 3rd Battalion,
9th Marines.
AR: All right, could you give us a dissertation now on the operations in the Le
My area please?
LS: Generally, these operations commenced during early May of '65. This was
just after the Marines were given the word to expand their operations within a TAOR
around the Da Nang complex. Two/Three’s TAOR encompassed an area some 100
square miles to the northwest of the Da Nang airfield. During early May, we commenced
our operations in Le My specifically. This particular piece of ground and village had been
under VC control since the Geneva Accords in 1954. As a result, the people were completely afraid of the military introduction in that area having been exposed to the VC propaganda that the Marines upon entering were going to accomplish three things and one was to shoot all military men, of military age rather; two was to molest the women and three was to burn the villages. Consequently, as we moved into the Le My area, we received initial resistance which was overcome and by the battalion. The key in the battalion commander’s way of thinking is that in order to effectively control this area, we would have to remain there. It been the experience in the past where Vietnamese forces operating in this particular area would come in, stay for two to three days, and then pull out. This led to the to-and-from flow of the VC in that area and they were able to maintain control. Our first step then was to actually assure the people that we were going to remain in that area. We did this by talking to the people through the village chief who would, not living there, but had joined us for this operation with his Popular Force people, and moved in with us as far as occupying the Le My complex. Now, this Le My complex extended along the Cai Dai River and ran south toward the Hill Mass 368. This served as an opening into the Elephant Valley area which has always been heavily infested with VC. We established the defenses in that particular area, utilizing the current fort that exists right at the riverside and stretching back along the road that we then made our MSR back to the battalion CP, which lied behind Hill 368. Our fist step as far as the introduction of civil affairs in this particular area was one wherein we expounded on the normal Marine Corps capability for people-to-people activities. The most natural that we relied on and as our kicker was the business of medicine. This was noted through the use of our corpsmen and patrols. Now, initially, the people themselves were afraid and as a result, there were very few that actually accepted treatment. By virtue of our remaining there and corpsmen on the patrols and the doctor himself actually, more or less, working out from a circle from a center point and going into various huts and treating the villages for their ills, we finally broke down the resistance in this respect. It was then that we established the Le My dispensary. That was initially set up and remains today in a building that had been pretty well shot up. It was formally occupied by the village chief. It is his home as well as his office. During the VC occupation, this was also the village chief headquarters for the VC.
AR: Excuse me, Captain. How soon after you entered the area did you start the Civic Action Program?

LS: The Civic Action Program as far as the medical portion is concerned, actually was in consonance with the operations. As we went in and any wounded or sick that were in the area, the corpsmen made their initial contacts at that time. Then the expansion was just a matter of days because after we set it up, the establishing dispensary actually forwarded us two capabilities. One, it was affording medical services to the villages in the area as well as acting as a forward aid station for the company that was occupying the ground in the defensive complex. Initially, as I pointed out, there was a reticence on the part of the people to avail themselves of the medical services. This is a, further stated, was broken down and they started to start trickling into this Le My dispensary. We put up a little red cross. We had some Vietnamese signs made up by the interpreters indicating that this was a doctor, or bac si as he’s known in Vietnamese. In addition, we had the village chief send out Popular Force elements to the people informing them that this capability existed here; that they could have a doctor. To understand this doctor business and what it means there, I might give you a little bit of the medical background that we learned through the village chief. At the hamlet level, they just have what is known as a rural health worker and he would be comparable to a nurse’s assistant or nurse’s aide. Then they had the next step up which is village nurse and we’re talking about something that could cover to two to three to five to ten square miles. This village nurse would be comparable, say, to our corpsman. Our corpsman is probably as trained if not better. At the district level, you had your district health technician and this person would be comparable in training to a registered nurse. Then at the province levels was the first time you ran across a doctor. So, when you mention doctor or bac si to the people over here, in many cases, they’ve never seen a true doctor. So, exploiting this and letting them know that here was a trained doctor that they normally would not have come across unless they were in a hospital or if they were all the way back at the province headquarters itself, this gave them an indication that someone was actually concerned about them. Now, in addition to this set up that we had wherein the people were coming to sick call, I might point out that the average daily sick call in a neighborhood of a 100 to 150 after had it leveled it off. Initially, once they
understood us and were coming in, we had as high as 250 and 300 people a day and this
tapered off primarily through the efforts of the doctor and a board that he used. He
established a little board that had the American and Vietnamese and it listed primarily
most of the ailments that a person would be involved with, the diagnostic terms. The
Vietnamese could point to the board. If he had a pain in the stomach, he could point to
pain in the stomach; it would be written in Vietnamese. This gave an indicator to the
doctor generally what was the matter. Whenever possible, we afforded an interpreter to
the doctor, but interpreters have always been in short supply and in this case here, the
military operations to the patrols that were conducting the defense of the area required the
interpreter to be out with them. Now, the Le My dispensary then picked up from that
point where they had the initial corpsman contact, and then the doctor working generally
at familiarizing themselves with the people in that area and then him establishing a
central area where the people then came to him and got in a pattern of coming into him.
It developed to that degree. Now, medical supplies were primarily our own supplies
initially and then we went out on the, more or less, the scrounge, to gather what supplies
we could. We derived them from the Catholic Relief Society, good example. Some we
got through the advisors to the Political Action Team. Some we were able to acquire
from the district dispensary, but this was very minimal. As things progressed in this area,
and I’m talking in a time frame now of three and four months later, medical services
remain the same. Of our two battalion surgeons, we always had one out there; they ran in
a rotation basis when they were working there. We were able to establish relations with
our own surgeons and the hospitals that were in the Da Nang area in the city of Da Nang
itself wherein serious cases that they may have picked up could be evacuated back into
Da Nang Hospital. We also established a program wherein children who had congenital
defects, such as the cleft palate which is very common over there, and set up
arrangements whereby we would fly them down to Saigon and have them operated and
would have their family go with them—usually the mother—would go down there with
them. She could live with the daughter or the son—the operation—and them bring them
back. This normally took about a week’s time. Now, the last step that we pointed up for
and we were working for in this area is actually two-fold, or two steps, rather. One was
the idea that it was obvious that we could not always be in the Le My area. Even though
we occupy it today, we knew that eventually our operations would necessitate our
moving out. So, with this in mind, we also commenced a nurses training program in the
dispensary itself. This consisted of talking to the village chief and explaining to him that
if he had anyone that would be interested in training to become a rural health worker or
village nurse, whatever the case may be, that we would provide the medical background
and teaching from our doctor. We would also assure that there be an interpreter to cover
as far as the language difficulties. This worked out quite well in that we initially started
out with two young ladies about eighteen years old each and one young fellow at
nineteen. All three of these youngsters here were exposed to the training and they were
exposed for about, I guess, two months training. We then took them down to the district
dispensary, they were tested, the results of the test were submitted to province, province
sent back certificates making them all rural health workers. The next step here, of course,
was in for the village chief through district to petition the province for moneys to pay
them as rural health workers so that they could work within the village itself. After we
completed training this crew, we started another. Prior to my leaving, they were well on
their way to being a rural health worker. The last item we worked on was through the use
of the Political Action Team that was working in our area. Now the PAs were interested
in a little bit of civic action on a Vietnamese-to-Vietnamese level. We encouraged this.
This afforded us more people in the area and a little more of the people themselves doing
the work. In conjunction with this, we submitted plans that the doctor had drawn up for a
very simple dispensary that could be established for the village and the PAs were going
to then acquire the materials and perform the actual construction of this dispensary itself.
This would be something that was built by Vietnamese for Vietnamese and the
connotation that the people would see would be that this was from the government
assisting them and they, in turn, would be receiving moneys because for labor to actually
construct this with the people. We thought this would work out quite well. So, in
essence, in the medical end, we found this to be most important. Medicine is probably the
first inroad because it’s the first one that shows any direct results as far as the people are
concerned. In conjunction with the establishment of this medical program, we also were
concerned about marketing. Our prime concern here was the control and the location of
markets within our company defense areas that we had established out in the Le My
complex. In conjunction with the district chief and the village chief, we established a site for each area. This then gave us the capability of knowing where the people would be at any one large group at any one time. Our normal patrol activity throughout the village and beyond the village and within a TAOR itself afforded us a control element there, but within the area, going to the marketplace, an area where the VC could if they wanted to infiltrate and come in, we wanted to be able to pinpoint. So, we established a location of the markets themselves and we placed the village chief, more or less, in charge. Now I use the term, “we established” and “we placed.” In essence, what we did is that we talked to the village chief and inferred that these would be best if we could best get along together. Our whole efforts were designed to work through the government that was established per say, in that area. So, he was then in charge and the inference here being that if there was any problem, he would be the man we would see. This also led to the establishment of fair prices because as soon as they started, not only was the markets servicing the people within the area, but they were servicing the Marines that were stationed in the area. The marketplace became really a good morale factor; it gave the Marine a chance to leave his position during the daylight hours, come down, might have time to have a Coke or something of the like and a little something different here because he’s normally stuck out in the position there for two and three weeks at a time.

AR: These markets contained necessities of life as well as luxuries then, I assume?

LS: Well, yes. The only luxuries that were there were those that would be of interest to a Marine. It might be a pillow, for example, that he could utilize or there would be mats, grass mats or straw mats in that area. Chairs, they were great ones for lounge chairs or something of this nature here that someone might want to pick up. Very seldom did gaudy items that they had in that area—those were strictly aimed at a Marine buy. Of course, the normal local beer and the local soft drinks.

AR: Then the profits going to the Vietnamese themselves?

LS: Right, the profits. The main thing here was that the money, the exchange of moneys here, we felt here what would boost the economy in that particular area because the normal economy—the fact is they had in the area was some fishing in the Cai Dai river and, of course, their rice harvest plus bean and peanuts and the like that’s in that
area. This supported them other than the ground and the natural elements to boost their economy in that area. So, the markets were established and these markets, surprisingly enough, really grew up. We found that they established an area and initially, they had maybe two or three stalls. Then as the popularity of the marketplace itself increased, the stalls increased. We had quite a few. We ended up—we had some barbers here. We had the corpsman check the barber equipment there and we even in some cases provided alcohol and the like to clean out the combs and what have you; our troops were getting some haircuts down in that area. This was a tremendous service there. There was a laundry established there where a pick-up point that we utilized so that they could pick up and get these items that they needed, leave it there, and fair prices once again were established. In addition, the markets became a good source of information. The village chief exploited this by assigning either some of his senior members of his Popular Force or the policeman here. In this case here, the village policeman would frequent the area quite often and was able then to listen to the people and give us more or less a survey of how the people felt as far as the military efforts. I might point out that it was explained to me by a village chief who said that he broke down the introduction of US forces into three areas. He said that first when they came in, that they were extremely afraid for the reasons I mentioned earlier about the VC propaganda. It was effective. The Marines themselves were classified as animals. They were going to just actually stomp everything in the area. Then as a period of time went by and I would liken this period to about one month or two months there after the people had more or less got associated with us. He said that this stage was when where the people said in their comments that we weren’t as bad as the French. Now, they likened us to a comparison value with the French themselves who’d occupied this area years ago. Then the last stage—and this would be in excess of four months, four or five months beyond—they said that it was a completely new concept that the Americans weren’t bad at all. Their theory here was that we didn’t tax the people, we took nothing from them, we assisted them where we could. Might point out that this in many cases where it’s actually giving them means with which to work. We didn’t do things for them. We tried to get them so they’d do it themselves. This included from the village chief right on down. It would be very simple for them to fall back and let you do the work. Well, getting back to this business of the marketplaces,
the last portion here on a marketplaces, one of the central markets is right by a refugee
center that we’d established and some refugee homes. Might point out that the set up in
here was through a good coordination through the various government Vietnam officials.
Now, this consisted primarily of an initial meeting that was set up with the battalion
commander and this was with the province chief, the district chief, and the respective
village chief here. In it, we tried to lay out what we had in mind. We had heard from the
village chief of Le My that the people up in the Elephant Valley area in the Pho Nam-Nam
Yinh complex wanted to get out, but they also had an investment there in that they
had a rice crop that was in, plus they had their animals and a lot of their livable,
furnishings and the like from their huts. So, when they first made the first overture and
this was a covert overture; this was nothing where they came out and said, “We want to
come.” They let it slip through people. First contact, of course, going all the way back to
medicine. The people would come down river by the boat for treatment at the center.
Now, of course, they would go back and explain and how the people there were getting a
fair shake and then they were exposed to the people talking saying, “Well, yes. Some
Marines have been here. Their attitude has been tremendous in a sense that they haven’t
bothered us. They haven’t bothered our children, our women, our land. They haven’t
really done a thing. They’ve just stayed out of the way and provided us security.” So as a
result, we got the covert or the information that they wanted to come out. At the same
time, the VC, after a period of time, found out that they wanted to come out and
threatened them and indicated that if they attempted to leave, they would be shot. So,
they were in a quandary of how they were going to get out of there and still their crops
and the like they were concerned about. Their crops had reached a point where they
didn’t need any more tending. It was just a question of time for harvesting. Some wanted
to stay, some wanted to come out right away. So, this brought up the basis of the meeting
and as a result of it, we came up with an operation wherein we would go in and secure the
area and afford them the protection to come out. Now, at this stage of the game,
guidance from higher headquarters gave no indication that they would object to
utilization of some of our military equipment to help them on their coming out of the
area. So, our first refugee operation, we used LVTs going up the river and making the
landing and with the village chief, the district chief in attendance and two platoon of
Popular Force which amounted to about fifty-two men, we right in and we talked to each person. It was a two-company operation. The companies had already swept through and established security and myself and the interpreter and the district chief and the village chief and the Popular Forces, we split up into groups and went and talked to the people themselves. The prime questions here being that if you want to leave, protection is afforded now, bring your gear down to a staging area, which we established with the LVT for all parts. This was then accomplished. People brought their gear and the colonel himself didn’t think that we would have too big a reaction to it and we didn’t know what they would bring. We found out later, the LVT part that we had established was tremendous. The attitude of the people, the desire to leave was amazing. They left a lot of their goods there. The key items they were concerned about was some of the foodstuffs that they had already prepared in the area and then brought in. This consisted of pigs, animals; we had the carabao and the like. Well, the pigs, and the chickens, and the like we could handle on the LVTs. The foodstuffs we handled on the LVTs. The bulk of the heavier draft or the draft animals themselves, we informed them to walk them on down the road and we’d provide security along the way, which we did. This operation did pull them all out, those that wanted to come at that time. The ones that did not want to come indicated that the only reason that they hesitated in coming is that they had their crop itself to tend, they weren’t ready to really leave it and abandon it in at that time. We then told them that, fine, we would think in the future about another operation in that particular area. Might point out then that the next operation did occur in that area other than normal military operations and a few of them trickling back was the rice harvest operation. We went back in in the same concept, only this time we took a lot of the refugees that had already come out plus the refugees that wanted to come out and utilized them in a harvest of the operation. We had a massive harvesting and collecting of the harvest and pulling it out. We pulled it out by helicopter and by the LVTs again. Now, this was to be a three-day operation. After our first day-and-a-half of operation, we received word from higher headquarters that we could not provide any more transportation to haul the items out. As a result of this information, we informed the village chief and we told him that we would still remain as a security element and they would have to use their own means to get it out. This they did by carrying it on their
back through the use of their draft animals and through the use of the small boats that
they had to come downriver.

AR: In other words, you provided protection while they harvested some of their
crop.

LS: We provided security. Initially, we provided security and transportation and
then we were told to hold back on the transportation end, so we continued security. This
fell in line with the colonel’s operational plans because as soon as they had all pulled out,
he pushed further on in and we had our, what started out to be a three-day rice operation
as far as getting them out, ended up to be a week to ten days-operation in the objective
area that we wanted to work anyhow. We hoped that we could suck in some VC so that
when people pulled out, we would push in and we hoped to make contact, which we did.
So, generally, the rice harvest then, [?]. So while we had people, we had them established
in a refugee center. Some of the people who were of Catholic origin moved down to the
Catholic village of Hoa Tan which was to the south of Le My. The balance of the people
that had relatives that were in the village area of Le My or on its costal area, another
village that they want in and such as that moved to these villages here. But we ended up
with the bulk of the refugees, some 400 or so, that were actually in the Le My area which
is relatively small when you look at in the map. These people then had a problem; they
had their problem rice here, they went ahead and threshed the rice, made a communal
distribution of the rice within the area. We were then faced the problem of schooling.
We had all these children in the area and school's a big problem. So, working through the
village chief and the district chief, we kept punching and punching for a little activity and
getting a schoolteacher and get the school going. We got the youth leader to start holding
classes within the village itself and then shortly followed by the schoolteacher who came
in. When a schoolteacher came in, we had a grand opening; children were tremendous.
This is the first opportunity they’ve had any schooling since 1954. So this then was the
key to what we thought we wanted to work out with. We felt that we had medicine, we
had the marketplace for the control, and then we came in with the business of schooling
and schooling here in a sense that we’ll educate the youngster, give them an opportunity
to see what is actually in his area. The old people really appreciated the school. In fact,
we established what is known as the, kind of a PTA in that area. It was not only the
parents, but the village elders in that area. We listened to their requirements and their requests, rather, and their suggestions and more or less made them direct their suggestions and requirements to the village chief and then we encouraged the village chief then to satisfy them where possible. So, the schooling was a big thing. Now, I might point out that all of these here have now become a little more sophisticated. This was strictly grassroots at this time. The things have progressed now to a point where we started off here keeping in mind that Marine Corps did not have a capability for civic action. Our only thought was, “Okay, it’s people to people and we’ll just expand on it.”

Now, a Civic Action Program is established within the 3rd Division and within the 3rd MAF for that reason. There is a SOP that is a very good guide for the unit commander who goes into the area. The only thing I can say for civic action per say is that if it does not have command interest, it’ll fall on its face and it goes back to the old business, it’s a people’s war and you’ve got to have the command interest. This is how we felt about it; this is the approach that was made at all levels. One other thing I might point out that we talked here in Le My. There were other villages involved and we controlled this by establishing a village to a company. Each company commander had responsibility for a village within battalion TAOR. Worked out that we did have five complete villages within our TAOR. At the battalion level, I then was able to work with the company commanders as well as respective village chiefs. I was utilizing a more less a selfish interest here, intelligence information. Through the business of neutralizing the people initially by assuring that they weren’t helping the VC and then by pushing them for information, we were able then to get them working for us and once they start working for the government and I always identified our military operations with the Vietnamese government, they then no longer could say that if the VC came back in, they could not tell a VC I didn’t do a thing for the government. It was known that they were then working for the government. We were able to derive a black list of personalities; used this black list in patrols, our own patrols going out. We were able to get information of VC movements, especially up in the Elephant Valley area and to the west of our particular FEBA that we had established up there and a culmination of both then gave us the opportunity to really make meaningful operations. Now, they weren’t large
operations, they were small, but they were based on what was good information that was then, became good intelligence for us.

AR: Okay, Captain, thank you very much for your interview.