E.J Godfrey: This is a Vietnam interview tape of Second Lt. William H. Stuckey, 089310 at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina. The interviewer is Major E.J Godfrey, US Marine Corps. The date is 1 February 1966. The interview subject is Lieutenant Stuckey’s experience between May and July 1965 as the ISO of the 3rd Marine Division in Da Nang, Chu Lai, and Phu Bai. The classification of this tape is unclassified. Lieutenant Stuckey, when did you first get to Vietnam?

William Stuckey: I arrived in Vietnam at Da Nang, which was at that time the 3rd Marine Division Forward Headquarters and also the headquarters of the 3rd MAF, in the early part of May, 1965.

EG: What was your duties at that time?

WS: Upon arriving, I assumed the duties of the informational services officer for the 3rd Marine Division.

EG: Why don’t you go head and tell me about some of the problems you ran into with ISO, both before you got there and if there are any you know of, then after you got there, how you operated?

WS: Well, as a matter of history, the 9th MEB arrived in Vietnam in March of 1965. With that particular MEB, we had an ISO correspondent whose sole responsibility was to write stories about our exploits and happenings in Vietnam. To return them to me in Okinawa, at that time our home base, where in turn we would edit and release the copy to all outside news media. This did not work out as well as we had hoped, so in the first of May, I arrived at Da Nang. I spent a week going out to the outlying areas, which at
that time included our northernmost outpost of Hue-Phu Bai. Just outside Da Nang, we had Hill 327, which was our outer perimeter for Da Nang down south at Chu Lai where a few days later they began the construction of the new auxiliary runway for the new jets.  

EG: You said—to go back just a minute—you said that before you arrived, they had problems. Was this anything specific?  

WS: Nothing specific insofar as the Marine Corps is concerned. The only specific area of problem area was that prior to May, all the visage from the I Corps area, where the Marine Corps was operating then, had to go from there down to the COMUS-MACV Headquarters in Saigon to be further released and cleared. This, of course, meant a delay of twenty-four to seventy-two hours in some cases before the news was even released from the area of Vietnam itself. If it was a good news story, you can see by the time we further released it from Okinawa, that as much as a week would have passed before it reached the CONUS. This of course meant the news was not news any longer. It had probably already been written by a civilian news correspondent who was perhaps working out of Saigon who knew about the information at the same time we did in the I Corps area and who did not have to clear his releases through any military censorship area. He could’ve easily put his news on a wire machine and have sent it back to the United States as either via Japan and San Francisco to New York for world-wide distribution. So, the time we got the stories out, it made us look rather sick in that we were releasing news as news a week after it happened which lated in fact history.  

EG: Did you ever solve this problem?  

WS: Yes, in May after I arrived and I arrived about the same time the Combat Information Bureau had been formed by CG [?] PAC. Now to digress for just a moment, the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and the 3rd Marine Division both in Da Nang had ISO personnel. At the same time, we had a combat information bureau set up in the city of Da Nang itself.  

EG: This is what month we’re talking about?  

WS: This is May.  

EG: May.  

WS: This is May. Prior to this, we only had elements of our offices for the wing and division in Da Nang; both offices, of course, having to release their information.
through Saigon. In May, however, at the formation of the Combat Information Bureau, COMUS-MACV gave the officer in charge of the CIB the responsibility of releasing directly to all media, all news concerning the Marines—well Marines primarily, that happened within the I Corps Area. This of course was a tremendous acceleration for us in getting news out while it was in fact still news. After arriving in Vietnam myself and spending the week going back to and visiting all of our outposts finding which units were in fact where and how many were there and what they were doing, I knew that myself and the one correspondent, whom I had sent out in March, could certainly not attempt to fulfill our mission due to a lack of personnel, primarily. Whereupon, it was decided that additional members of my office, which at that time were in Okinawa, would be sent out to join me. This was carried out to the extent that in the latter part of July, though I left, I had six men there, six very capable men whom had been with me in Okinawa. We were at that time carrying out, I think, insofar as our, at that time, still limited amount of personnel, a very commendable job. As I recall, we had released in the three months that I was physically in Vietnam, something around 250 or 300 news releases. That by news releases, I mean individual stories about either patrols we had been on, operations which had happened, unusual or humorous incidents which always surrounding war situation. In addition to this, we had, and I cannot recall how many Fleet Hometown News stories. I do know that we had possibly about three, four, or five thousand individuals Fleet Hometown News stories which read in fact that Private Joe Blow is now serving with a certain battalion, a certain regiment in the Republic of Vietnam and it would, of course, be told in static terms what his job happened to be with his particular unit. But it took the entire three months that I was there for me to gain the additional six personnel which, we needed at least that many to get the job done.

EG: How are you employing these six personnel?

WS: I had the six people. I kept the NCOIC of the division ISO staff with me at Da Nang. Now, I say with me at Da Nang, that’s where we were assigned because we were gone most of every day. At least four times a week we were gone. But I had units up, I had people up with the units at Phu Bai. I had people out of the hills around 327 and over near a village called Le My where we undertook and successfully brought about
probably the most outstanding civic action episode, which had been taken to my
knowledge, place so far in Vietnam.

EG: Le My, is that near Da Nang?
WS: Le My is about probably five to ten miles northwest of Da Nang.
EG: Was that the one that, seems to me, Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd
Marines was working?
WS: I think it was probably, I know it was 2nd Battalion.
EG: Le My, is that the way you spell it?
WS: Right, right. It was either 2nd Battalion 3rd or 2nd 9 and I cannot remember
now which regiment they belonged to. 2nd Battalion, Colonel Clemmings, I believe, was
the CO. We’ll go back to Le My area in just a moment, but that’s probably a separate
story within itself.
EG: Yes, no, go ahead.
WS: Then I had been down with both the air wing and the infantry units at Chu
Lai. Each day they would write stories and send them back on the mail helicopter to Da
Nang wherein I picked the copy up, edited it, and sent it out again through the CIB which
was the sole releasing authority for the—
EG: CIB.
WS: Now that’s the Combat Information Bureau.
EG: Which was under joint or—?
WS: It was a joint Marine air and ground releasing authority. The CIB had been
formed in May by Lieutenant General Krulak.
EG: Under which command was it?
WS: Well, it was really the 3rd MAF.
EG: So it was a Marine—
WS: It was a Marine solely all the way.
EG: I see.
WS: How the Air Force released their information, I do not know or how the
Army released their information with their Special Forces, which had a small camp at the
airstrip of Da Nang, I really do not know. I imagine they were sending their copy down
to Saigon as we had been doing prior to the formation of the Combat Information Bureau,
But once I had the men in my office deployed strategically—if you can use that word in
the ISO field—to the units which were outlying, copy thusly started flowing in at a very
rapid pace, both copy, news pictures, and also Fleet Hometown. We had tremendous
support from the photographic laboratory of the 3rd Marine Division. They brought down
their mobile photo lab and set it up directly behind or adjacent to, rather, the 3rd Division
Headquarters in the Da Nang complex at that time. This mobile laboratory is constructed
in such a manner that it has its own cooling unit which (technical difficulties,
unintelligible). The mobile laboratory, which the 3rd Marine Division walked with, and
it’s so constructed that it has its own cooling unit, which as a result allows you to produce
pictures of a much better quality that you normally would have had if you were working
under adverse conditions, which we were to begin with, incidentally. The intense heat
allows the chemicals not to contradict correct (technical difficulties, unintelligible). So all
together, our job in Vietnam enhanced greatly by the arrival of the mobile laboratory, the
photographic efforts. The six people, which I eventually wound up with had by July, had
a steady good flow of copy coming in at all times. The Combat Information Bureau was
working at full capacity, doing a tremendous job because they were cutting down the
time involved in getting these stories out (technical difficulties, unintelligible) … they’re
going out the same day that we turned them into the CIB. So, all in all, our job was doing
quite well and working very smoothly, when I left there in July to come back to CONUS.

EG: The, I won’t call it censoring, let me call it screening. What degree of
screening was going on with the material that your men were preparing and submitting to
you? Was any screening accomplished before it reached you or was all screening, the
majority of the ones that were coming in, military screening, accomplished after it left
you?

WS: The only censorship or screening which was involved probably occurred at
my office in Da Nang prior to me going to the combat Information Bureau with the
information itself. Now, when I say censorship, I don’t mean censorship in the vein of I
did not identify men or did I identify units. Censorship in this area probably could be
better summarized if I said or if I used the phrase, “good taste.” We were always, as we
always are, cognizant of the fact that the pictures we released, the information which we
released with the pictures, should always present necessarily the Marine Corps in a very
good light. Now, on occasions we had pictures which we thought would turn out better than they did. But once we had developed them and then I saw them prior to releasing them, it was obvious the picture would have been accepted probably, in the wrong vein or in the wrong line, so we killed the picture. Now, insofar as a story is concerned, we always identified PFC Joe Blow as belonging to a certain regiment and in most cases to a certain a battalion. Now, we didn’t go any further insofar as a unit designation in this because I felt that if we went below a battalion, and in some cases a regiment, that it would probably serve to more confuse the people than it would to enlighten them because once you start talking or trying to identify a platoon or a company, you’ve lost the normal civilian’s scope of his information insofar as the military line or organization is concerned. The fact that the 3rd Marine Division was physically in Vietnam was no secret; this was well played up. So we were not in any way hampered with censorship insofar as that’s concerned. As I say, we identified the man as being PFC Joe Blow, a member of the 9th Regiment of the 3rd Marine Division and usually let it go at that. What we also did to probably help the civilian and to make it more appealing to a civilian media was that we identified the man as coming from Podunk, Alaska. This gave it a hometown touch rather than a Southeast Asian touch as we felt perhaps it would if we released it without identifying the man as coming from a certain specific geographic area and we always tried to put the name of the town in there. Censorship, so I can say, was non-existent. The only time I can think of any censorship was, of course, when the 9th MEB originally left Okinawa sailing for the Southeast Asian waters. We denied the fact, of course, we did not admit it that they were going to Vietnam necessarily. I think it’s understandable. Also, when the 3rd LAAM Battalion arrived in Okinawa along the West Coast, it was supposed to be under a veil of secrecy, but it did leak out. We never admitted that they were in fact on Okinawa proper. Nor did we admit that they were in Vietnam. (telephone interruption) Nor did we admit they were in Vietnam until after they had landed and had set up ready to do their assigned task or mission. After that, the mission had been accomplished insofar as their traveling and arriving and going to an area was concerned. It no longer was a secret then. We never exploited the fact that we had X number of people there. It’s a pretty well known fact that the number of personnel that are attached to a division or to a wing, so rather than exploit the information, we just
This interview is part of the United States Marine Corps History and Museums Division Oral History Project.

identified the certain unit as being in Vietnam, when it had been released by the
Department of Defense prior. That really just about summarizes the censorship aspect of
our ISO capabilities and workings in Vietnam. As I understand it, it was greatly
improved over the Second World War or even Korea wherein censorship, not censorship
per say, but a ceasing of identification of certain units were in fact more or less
predominant most of the time.

EG: You mentioned earlier, to switch subjects a little bit, about the highly
successful civic action program, which you observed and covered with a village, I believe
it was near Da Nang.

WS: Yes, as a matter of fact, there was two such villages that I remember. The
most striking memory wise was that a little place called Le My. I think it was about five
or ten miles northwest of Da Nang. This was a village which had for years been a
tremendous and successful agricultural center. The Viet Cong, however, moved in, took
over the area, and were in fact controlling it and by virtue of their controlling the
agricultural market and center which Le My was, they controlled the tremendous amount
of economy for the entire I Corps area. Well, of course, to supplement their economy, we
had to drive the VC out of Le My. This we did; went through with a clean-and-clear-and
sweep operation. We cleared them out. Prior to us clearing them out, however, they blew
up all transportable and navigable bridges, roads, and exits to the area. Well, we went in
and after we had successfully cleared the Viet Cong out, as a matter not primarily civic
action-wise, but as a matter of expediency on our part, to make it more accessible to us,
we constructed bridges, roads, cleared out the dykes. We just reconstructed the entire
village, including huts and houses as such. This turned out to be such a tremendous
success, civic action-wise, and public relations-wise really, the village chief and all the
district chiefs around basically were so impressed that they in turn gave us, I say us, they
gave the unit which went in to clear it out, a token of friendship for their appreciation.
We all of a sudden realized what we had done had been accepted so amiably by the local
villagers that we knew we had not in fact stumbled, but we had reformed the most single
important civic action program up to that very time. Now, the second one, which
occurred fifty miles south of Da Nang at the Chu Lai area occurred in a roundabout way
in that we had to (technical difficulties, unintelligible) The villagers at the area that we
bought up were moved across US Highway Number One and we (technical difficulties, unintelligible)...entire village for them to live in almost a duplication of what they had been living in except this time was newer and, of course, better. However, their crops, which they had been farming and which was in the area which we purchased from them could not necessarily be transplanted across the highway. So during the period I was down there, our civic action included allowing them to come into our area, harvest their crops on a daily basis and also we gave them access to the canals and rivers and out to the ocean where they do their daily fishing, which they would not have been able to except by very arduous means of taking a roundabout way of getting to (technical difficulties, unintelligible)...these were really the two most remarkable civic action programs as a individual incident is concerned. However, we were constantly visiting orphanages, schools, base schools; all areas where school children were concerned. Giving out books, giving out supplies to assist them, we had people from our command, our Marines, teaching English, which of course was amazing. We also had a tremendous Medical Civic Action Program in that it we would set up huts or sickbays, if you want, in these particular areas that we would go into when a village was clear and swept. The populace were invited to bring to us their sick, their wounded, their old, their diseased and our doctors and corpsmen did a most outstanding job in treating on a daily basis what we know as sick call in the Marine Corps. They would line up outside every morning. Kids would come in, we’d pull teeth, for small abrasions we would give first aid, for broken arms we would set for old decrepit men and women who were not as old as they looked, we would give them aid and comfort to. This, I think, was the most tremendous important way of winning over the populace because from a personnel observation, I think to win adequately in Vietnam, it will not be by military might alone. The people themselves must be made to realize that we are not there just to fight, we are not the cruel, sadistic Westerner that the Hanoi powers have led them to believe we are. We must not by just words alone, but by deed, primarily, convince them that we are there as their friend. And, two, we are not only to help them drive their enemies out, to put them on a more sound economic platform and a way of life, but we are their friends because we are doing things for them out of the goodness of our heart because that’s the American way of life. I think it’s going to be very difficult to convince the older people of this because
they have been suppressed for such a long time. By older people, I mean fifteen or twenty years and up. I think our basic area of concentration in addition to what we are doing now should be in the schools, start the kid when he’s three, four, five years old. Once he becomes your friend and he’s convinced that you are his friend, then you’ve won the country. And as I say, this is a personnel observation. I think that in addition to our military strategy, that civic action carried out adequately and purposefully is the other prong of the big two-prong attack in the eventual winning in Vietnam.

EG: Let’s steer back to ISO. First of all, as division ISO in the area did you, or rather, did the civilian writers come through to you or were they operating pretty much independently?

WS: Yes. Once the civilian writers—by that you mean people representing wire services and newspapers from—

EG: And magazines, things of this nature.

WS: Right. Once they came into the area, they came to us. I say us. To the Combat Information Bureau first. From there, if they wanted to see something about the 3rd Marine Division, then they came out to me. I made arrangements to take them out to the unit, which they wanted to see. Now if they did not really care which unit they went to, I tried to select for them the unit which I thought would probably give them a better insight as to what they were looking for and we escorted them out, stayed with them while they were all on the operation which they interested in and then we escorted them back.

EG: I would imagine some of the articles that were in the—I’m not even sure now if it was Time or Newsweek—but there were several articles shortly after the Marine Corps first got into dealing with our Civic Action Program. I would imagine then that these articles probably were by writers who were directed by you then.

WS: That’s right. Those on the division were with me when they were writing the story. I say when they were writing, it’s when they were gathering the information and taking the pictures for the story. And by the same token, we had many, many wire service news writers: AP, UPI, and several smaller, more independent services of all the copies they wrote and there were many, many words on it while I was there. If it were about the 3rd Marine Division, I was with them in the operation itself.
EG: Is there anything else that you’d add to this, sir?
WS: Well, nothing really. I was by virtue of being in the field with the reporters from time to time, not involved in any significant military operations as such which were spectacular in their unusual occurrence or of any unusual incidents, which may have happened. Our job primarily was to go with the reporter, try to cooperate with him insofar as what he wanted as much as possible. Sometimes this was impossible and I think they realized it. They, I felt from time to time, would purposely ask things which they knew were impossible, hoping to get something a little better than they would have had they not asked for it, at least in that degree. They were on the whole very cooperative. Some were good veterans of Second World War and Korean vintage. They knew what they were looking for which, of course, did very, very good in as far as the ISO is concerned. It’s very difficult for an ISO to try to plan or write a story for a reporter. If the reporter doesn’t know what he wants, then I could only sit there and discuss things with him, hoping that he will soon make his mind up. On the whole, they were very cooperative, very informative, very knowledgeable, and I thought represented a good cross section of the pressed in the United States.
EG: I thank you very much, Lieutenant Stuckey. Appreciate the interview.