E.J Godfrey: This is a Vietnam interview tape of Sgt. Richard A. VanDeusen, serial number 1997722. The interviewer is Maj. E.J Godfrey, US Marine Corps, location is Parris Island, South Carolina, Marine Corps Recruit Depot. The date is 4 February 1966. The subject of this interview is Sergeant VanDeusen’s experience as a squad leader and fire team leader with the 3rd Recon Battalion between May and November 1965 in the Da Nang sector. The classification is unclassified. Sergeant VanDeusen, how did you come to get into Vietnam? Did you go in with the 3rd Recon Battalion?

Richard VanDeusen: No, sir. About thirty men from the old 2/9 Battalion on Okinawa, we had never landed in Vietnam, we just floated off the coast for several months, extended six months overseas to go to Vietnam. Twenty-three of us out of thirty went to the same company which is Delta Company, 3rd Recon Battalion, and that’s how I came there. We landed by airplane the 18th of May 1965.

EG: Did you come from Okinawa or—?
RV: Yes, we flew from Okinawa straight down there.
EG: What did you do, did they just split you up?
RV: Well, when we got down there certain men had orders for some of the line outfits around the Da Nang area and the rest of us already had orders to stay in recon and then there was several like myself that didn’t have orders saying anything, just 3rd Marine Headquarters. So, because all of our friends and so on were going to recon, we decided we’d like to go also. We also heard that they were, at the time, I was real anxious to see
some things, and at that time, they were the ones getting into most of the contacts with
the enemy, so we decided—

EG: Did you join right in and start right off with recon?
RV: Yes, we did.
EG: Was the outfit you joined pretty well chopped up or—?
RV: Well, they were the under-strength. I think they only had about thirty-five or
dirty men in the whole company. A recon company isn’t very large anyway, but it was
very small; only had about forty men, I believe. So most of us were corporals and lance
corporals and we beefed them up to almost the TO.
EG: What billet did you fill?
RV: I was a squad leader when I first got there, after almost two months, and
then as the things started getting in motion, then E-5s started coming to replace corporals
as squad leaders.
EG: How many men did you have in your recon squad?
RV: Oh, when I was a squad leader, I had eight men counting myself and
normally we carried one Vietnamese ARVN with us. He wasn’t used as a translator, but
he was, I suppose, was just to get the effect of coordination between the Vietnamese and
Americans, something of that nature. He spoke very little English, but we grew to like
him real well.
EG: What was his function?
RV: He was just sort of along, I think. I really couldn’t say.
EG: Was he under your command?
RV: Yes, he was.
EG: What rank was he?
RV: He was a private when we got there. We had several at first, different ones,
and then the last one, we kept for almost five months, I believe. He was a real good little
guy.
EG: What type operations did your squad find itself in?
RV: Well, we ran squad-sized patrols, also platoon-sized patrol and the platoon
size was more the average. That’s what we usually ran. Then many times though, we did
run full company-strength patrols.
EG: How deep were you patrolling?

RV: Well, I’d say we went in a perimeter around the Da Nang sector probably out almost twenty miles. Now, this is from the Da Nang sector in a radius of about twenty miles was about the farthest. Most of the patrols, you see, around the Da Nang area, sometimes we got contacts not even three or four miles from Da Nang itself and then sometimes you were farther out. It all depended on what the mission called for. We didn’t use helicopters too much. We didn’t go in by choppers too often, we usually went by truck as far as we could go. Like, Highway One for instance, was a real good highway running south and north of Da Nang. We’d go by truck as far as we could and then we’d dismount and carry on the patrol and I usually waited till it was dark and then left the —

EG: What type mission did you have?

RV: In recon, there’s two types of patrols. There’s the recon and the combat and normally when we’d go in platoon- or company-size strength, if it wasn’t just observation posts like setting up on a hill or something and surveying the area, they usually wound up as combat patrols because you’re constantly on the move and you’re bound to run into them out there. I’d say most of them, we had, I think I ran over 100 patrols in the seven months that I was down there. I guess just about everybody was on over 100 patrols. I can’t remember what the company contact board was showing, I think it was about sixty or seventy contacts, something like that. It was pretty high. These patrols, when you were briefed on them, you were told where you were going, coordinates and so on, you knew everything about the patrol and what you were supposed to accomplish which was usually to go out and find any scene of the enemy activity, for instance. Well, it got to where you knew what the sector was like. Da Nang after certain area, you have different areas. To the south you’ve got mostly sandy along the beach, along the shores, mostly sandy, spaced-out villages. As you get west a little bit, you’d have rice paddies and villages that are built out of the rice paddies with tree lines surrounding them. Okay, well, these tree lines are just like fortifications. They have where they can cut the bamboo trees and they grow cactus and they make their own walls out of vegetation and they don’t even have to put up any man-made-type obstacles because you can’t get through this stuff. They have little entrances that they use, but when you’re coming, those are usually booby-trapped. I know they have, I don’t know where they get it, but a lot of
their areas were fenced in with barbed wire, brand new barbed wire. The gates. They’d have gates, barbed-wire gates and these were usually booby-trapped so the only way you could open them was to attach a rope, for instance, and back off about fifty yards and give it a yank to open it. Then as you got to the north and far west, it was all mountains. Around the Da Nang area, the mountains is where the jungle grows and this is where you start getting into your fifty-, sixty-, seventy-foot canopies over your head and that makes helicopter support or anything else impossible practically. I never liked that area too much at all because it makes you feel that you’re farther away than what you are. When we were working down south with the 9th Marines—we used to work the 9th Marines down south quite often—and down there, you knew that you were going to make more contact, but the chances of getting out safely, like say you got hit, the chances of a helicopter evacuation are much more excellent rather than in the mountain where you couldn’t even see the sky. There was one place that we used to call and sort of R&R and it was a pass, as you come out of the north into Da Nang, there’s a large pass, very high, I forget the altitude. It’s a one-way highway from both bonds of both bottoms (technical difficulties, unintelligible) and it comes up and the cars have to stop. The traffic all has to stop on the top while the rest come up the other side and we used to call this R&R because we could sit up there and we used to watch, oh maybe we’d this for two or three days where we would watch cars going though and trucks and so on, trying to determine any VC activity of any kind, but then they started making us run patrols through the jungle around there, like I said, up in the mountain and then the R&R ceased.

EG: How deep were the infantry patrols going?

RV: Well, as far as I know, now your infantry patrols and your infantry sweeps were two different things. We tried as much as possible to keep away from the infantry we were working for. If we working for the infantry, we’d try and get far enough out from them that we wouldn’t wind up getting shot by them. Now, on their sweeps, they’d go through an area sometimes, we used to filter in and back of them and try and pick off VC that might be moving away from them as they’re going through.

EG: Was this a part of your mission to do this?

RV: Yes, we used to do that quite often. The infantry patrols at night, for instance, was when they mostly went out, and as far as their ambushes and so on, I don’t
know anything about them, but their patrols at night all needs to go out and maybe 1500, 16 maybe 2000 meters in front of their lines and they’d go straight out and take a right or a 17 left and maybe go the length of their perimeter and come back in the other end or 18 something along of that nature. So, we tried to keep away from the infantry as much as 19 possible.

EG: I have a feeling from what you say that your deployment, your recon 20 deployment was a little bit more of a combat or aggressive nature than it normally 21 thought of or found out to.

RV: Yes, sir. Well, the thing of it is, it’s very hard for you in an alien country of 22 that kind to hide yourself. I mean, you’re going along and people are all over the place 23 and they know you’re out there, so this right away compromises any chance of recon, 24 really. Like I said, this all depends on the area you’re in. Now, we used to get up in the 25 mountains and we’d be up there for days before they even realized we were up there. 26 Sometimes they never knew we were up there. But to the south and so on, there were so 27 many villages and each tree line has a village on it, only so many villages. The only good 28 chances you had were moving at night. Now, the average person is afraid of the dark to 29 start off with, but we grew accustomed to night patrolling because we knew we were 30 safer. They could hear us, but they didn’t know where we were, they couldn’t see you to 31 shoot you. So, you’re a lot safer and the only thing that was bad was wondering what 32 you might step into or step on or something of that nature. That was the only problem 33 with night patrols. I think what I liked the best was the rubber boat patrol.

EG: Did you run many of those?

RV: Yes, sir. We used to go along with the infantry and they’d be on each side of 34 the river in support of us and then we’d be in the rubber boats on say, a river, for 35 instance, searching out these big caves they used to find on riverbanks. We found one 36 cave and I believe we could’ve put twenty men it. It went up the side—it was 37 underneath the water.

EG: Where was this?

RV: This was south of Da Nang, sir; southwest of it maybe eight miles southwest 38 of it. I can’t remember the name of the river, sir. Anyways, and we go along and I have 39 this smoke machine that they pump smoke in the holes, seeing where the entrances were.
This one that we found was underneath the water level. The only way you could get into it was to submerge yourself. We’d go along poking with the sticks on the side of the riverbanks. They were very overgrown so you had to poke to see if you can, if the stick will go into the bank. That’s how we found it. Those were a lot of fun. The reason they were fun was because we didn’t have to worry too much about getting hit because the infantry was usually on each side of us along the river, but the ones that we ran by ourselves on riverboat patrols, those were kind of hairy because you’re sitting out there on a rubber raft and there’s no place to jump, nothing to jump behind so they could pick you off from the riverbanks.

EG: What kind of equipment were you carrying?

RV: We all carried automatic M-14s.

EG: All of you did?

RV: Yes, sir. Now, sometimes they’d check out some of the people. Usually the corpsman or maybe the lieutenant could check out an AR-15 if he wanted to. When I first got down there, you were allowed to carry a personal weapon like .357-magnum or anything you could get your hands on. We used to trade K-bars with the Army Special Forces for .38s and stuff of this nature, but that ceased because too many people were playing quick-draw and so on. Besides, it was too heavy to carry all this other stuff out there because each man carried eight or nine magazines at least, about four frag grenades.

EG: What kind of equipment were you carrying?

RV: Sir, I didn’t—

EG: Well, not arms, but equipment other than arms?

RV: Well, we usually wound up with a pack and a poncho. The poncho was a necessity and the pack was usually to carry how many days’ rations you were taking with you. Now, we only ate one meal a day because that’s about all you could carry. Say you were going out for four days, you’d take four heavy cans of C-rations and then if you felt you could carry more you’d take the little cans. That’s what you lived on, four days out in the field.

EG: (Technical difficulties, unintelligible) squad leaders say that when their squads were out on an all-day patrol they’d usually go ahead and take the fruit, if anything.
RV: Well, sir. When you’re out there for four days or so and there’s nothing else to eat—

EG: Well, I realize for four days—I was thinking of a short one-day patrol.

RV: The way we had it set up we’d go out for maybe—well, like when we worked to the south, sir, we’d only be out maybe two days at a time, come back for two days, go out for two days. All right, when you’re back in the area at the recon camp, you have three hot meals a day, but then we started working the mountains and places like this and we were going out for five, six days at a time and then you come back for only two or three days, but you still had your three hot meals. You might see in a picture in Leatherneck we had a waterfall that we used for a shower. We used to call it Victoria Falls, but it was just a little thing, but it served its purpose.

EG: Did the individual equipment stand up pretty well?

RV: Well, sir, most of it that we got hold of at first was probably Korean War vintage because the United States, I would imagine, keeps certain amount of gear that is old just so they can use it real fast, and that’s what we had. Then, pretty soon, plastic canteens started showing up and new cartridge belts and so on, but we didn’t get issued this stuff. We bought it on the black market in Da Nang from the Vietnamese or we traded with the Special Forces or we traded with the Vietnamese.

EG: Was this the whole time you were doing this?

RV: Yes, sir. The only thing that we got issued, finally, were the boots, jungle boots.

EG: The new ones?

RV: Yes, sir.

EG: How’d they hold up?

RV: They’re fine. I like them a lot, sir. And the jungle utilities, we finally got issued those, but they don’t have a lot of them. They didn’t have a lot of them, so we had to buy those off of the black market in town also. The black market in Da Nang was one of the most fantastic things I’ve ever seen. Little kids had jungle boots to sell and jungle utilities all over the place. Most of our cartridge belts and our belt suspenders, the Marine belt suspenders were so narrow that they cut and bind the shoulder. The Army ones, like the Army gives the Vietnamese Army, like our Army gives the Vietnamese
Army, well, they’re very wide and they’re real good and more comfortable. These weren’t in stock for us, so we would buy them from the Vietnamese Army. There’s this place out there, south of Da Nang called Marble Mountain and there’s an old French fort out there that the Vietnamese used to have control of and we used to run patrols from there, south, and also up around this one Sea Bee base because they were in a lot of trouble with snipers. This was where we bought a lot of our stuff was right down there because Vietnamese Army post at this old French fort.

EG: In any of your recon patrolling—to switch the subject here—your combat patrols, did you ever set up any ambushes and if so, how deep were they away from friendly lines?

RV: Yes, sir. We used to set up some, like most—I imagine most American ambushes they don’t come off too effectively most of the time.

EG: Why?

RV: Because we don’t have the patience, and we can’t sit still and we can’t go two hours without a cigarette and so on. But we used to stay, we’d set up a few, quite far south and they’d be all night ambushes. We’d walk in at night and set up and wait until morning for anything. We managed to pull off a couple of ambushes real well and these were company-sized, not a company in a whole ambush on-line, but where the company would go down, make an all-night march and then in the early morning hours, we’d split up into different areas. This way we could cover a large area with only seventy-some men. These different ambushes, he just sort of took off and you had a general idea of where your ambush was going to be set up because you’d already checked it out on the map with the rest of the squad leaders before—

EG: What prevented you from ambushing one another?

RV: Well, sir, you were all headed in different directions. You had your compass and you had your grid coordinates of where—

EG: How many man ambushes were these?

RV: Well, sometimes, sire, they’d be a platoon, which is about twenty men, or sometimes we’d have eight men. The ones that used to work were the platoon-sized. Now, we never killed eight and ten VC at one ambush. We used to get one or two. Most of the time they didn’t know we were down there because we’d come in at night.
EG: How did you know they were VC?

RV: When they’re carrying weapons, sir, and you’re in a VC area—well, I know it’s sort of a gamble; they could be Popular Forces, but then again, Popular Forces are usually VC anyway. That’s what we came to find out. Well, there’s a difference between Popular Forces and Vietnamese army. The Popular Forces are paid by a village chief and given arms by whoever they can get them to guard a certain village. Now, they could go either way and who’s ever paying them the most money is who they’re fighting for. That’s Popular Forces. So, some of these ambushes worked out quite well. Most of them were down south of Da Nang in the sandy-village-type areas where there was a lot of open country and the VC in the morning—we used pull them out usually just before light. What would happen, the VC are moving about and they’re just casually sauntering along with their rifles slung over their shoulder and they don’t even know you’re down there. Maybe they’d have the idea that an American group went through somewhere, but because it’s nighttime, they don’t know where you are. Now, when you split out in different degrees of the compass, they’d just be walking along trail and you got them.

EG: Did they ever use you as bait?

RV: Yes, sir. Well, that’s what we thought it was. I’m not sure if this is the natural plan or not, sir, but when it first started out down there, they had—

EG: When was this? Say, May, June?

RV: Sir, this would be July. May and June, we never got into too many contacts. Well, in May we did, but June was fairly quiet. Mostly just sniper fire, the little farmer with his carbine, he had a couple of rounds and he wanted to shoot an American. He’d shoot and hide the rifle. Well, around July we started running into some hard-core and the little guy with his rifle, there’s just too many Marines there after that, so the little guy with his rifle, he threw it away or gave it to somebody else and he went back to plowing his fields. So, we didn’t have too much trouble with snipers after that. It was basically big groups and on July the 12th, we got hit south of Da Nang, southwest and I believe the name of the village was Cam My 1 or 2 or something like that; Dong Song. We started out early in the morning; all night long the 9th Marines had been in a firefight with these VC in some of these villages and we were supposed to run patrol from the 9th Marines lines along these railroad tracks. These old bombed-out railroad tracks or blown-up
railroad tracks and they sit very high out of the rice paddies and it’s built up, oh, about,
I’d say, twenty maybe thirty feet high. It’s not a trestle but it’s where they brought fill
and put it through a rice paddy and we were on those. We started out that morning early
and we’d gone about 1000 meters in front of the 9th Marines’ lines and we got ambushed
from four different sides. Some people say there was about seventy-five, others about
eighty-five, but our whole company was trying out and the platoon I was in, 2nd Platoon,
we were in the point. So we had to go all the way up the railroad tracks and then where
the heaviest fire was coming from, we were receiving machinegun fire from two front
villages and heavy rifle fire from the one on our rear right and then sniper fire from the
one on the rear left. So, we headed for the one with the most firefight coming out of it,
went over the tracks, and in the village. We about three wounded just getting from tracks
to the village and when we got in the village and we burned it to the ground after we
cleared it. After that, we moved out on the tracks again, this took the better part of the
morning. They have all their villages over there are full of trenches and so on. There’s
trench lines running all over the place and they’re so small that their trenches don’t have
to be very deep and you can’t see them, they just run along them. So, after we cleared
that one, we came back through it and started down the tracks again heading south and
we started getting sniper fire from, oh, maybe, must’ve been 1500 yards away. They
couldn’t even hit you that distance, of course, so we decided, “Well, we’ll see what this
is” and so we headed out across this large sandy area and we got to another village. This
time the 1st Platoon of Delta Company went in there and they got chopped up real bad
and so they brought 2nd Platoon—and 3rd Platoon was being used as a sort of a weapons
section. We were just trying out the 60-millimeter mortars, we were carrying out with us
that day.

EG: With your recon patrol?
RV: Yes, sir. And we also had two machineguns.
EG: Who was manning them? Infantrymen or—?
RV: Well, sir, like I said, a lot of us came down from an old battalion and some
of the guys were 81-millimeter mortar men, other ones were machinegunners, and I was a
rocket man and so—
EG: But, on this bait idea, did the infantry—?
RV: Oh, yes, sir. The infantry would say, “All right, you can go out past the tactical area of responsibility” which they could not cross. You have the tactical area of responsibility and you have a recon area responsibility. That recon area was as far as our mission was prescribed and we could go anywhere out there. So, we’d go across. If we got into trouble, then the infantry was on call with a company or two companies to come in by helicopter to help us.

EG: Did this frequently happen?

RV: What would happen was we’d go out and then something would happen that the infantry couldn’t get anybody there or they’d land too far away or something like that.

EG: So actually, it never did work out?

RV: It worked out maybe twice, sir.

EG: Did you have any unusual operations that you can recall?

RV: I thought that was pretty unusual.

EG: What was that?

RV: It reminded me that this was a rubber boat raid on coastal village about eighteen miles south of Da Nang. It was just like the movies you always see where they come in very silently in the rubber boats, come ashore, and make contact. I think we killed two VC that night and then returned to the boats before light in the next morning and took off. We were picked up by an LST.

EG: What was the object of the raid?

RV: I think it was just to show that we could hit them when they least expect it.

EG: Where and when you wanted to, and get away with it. I see.

RV: Yes, sir. We didn’t have any casualties at all.

EG: Well, Sergeant VanDeusen, is there anything else you’d like to throw into this very interesting interview?

RV: No, sir. That about covers it.

EG: Well, thank you very much, Sergeant VanDeusen.