Bob Vandewalker: From the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station this Marine Staff Sergeant Bob Vandewalker. Today we are going to be talking to a Marine that just returned recently from Vietnam and was assigned to squadron VMA121 here at El Toro. We’re going to be talking to Corporal Tim Wanke. Tim, to start things off would you please tell me what squad were you assigned to and what’s your job is this squadron?

Tim Wanke: I’m assigned to VMFA122, which is a Phantom Squadron over in MAAG 33.

BV: What’s your job at the time in the squadron?

TW: I’m in ordnance.

BV: Tim, you just returned from Vietnam. Can you sort of fill me in on when you were there and when your tour was how long it was and so forth?

TW: Well, we left El Toro a year long to go to Japan with VMFA513. We were deployed several times during the year and our last deployment was in Vietnam. We left right around the middle of June and just recently returned.

BV: What town were you located at in Vietnam?

TW: We were at Da Nang Airfield.

BV: What was your job there in Vietnam?

TW: Again, ordnance.

BV: You worked on what type of aircraft?

TW: F4B, same type of aircraft I’m with now.
BV: Tim, can you sort of explain to me a day’s, what a day’s work consisted of for you in Vietnam?

TW: Our shop was under-staffed, so we had to work long hours. We had three divisions within our shop: two day-crews and one night-crew. On an average day we’d be getting up at three in the morning and being at work at four. We’d worked from four until six or seven o’clock that night and then return back to the tent area.

BV: You had additional jobs besides working on a helicopter, I mean on an aircraft?

TW: Yes, we had duty NCO we had to stand, two people a night had to stand it, and then there was walking guard on the aircraft.

BV: This is like setting up machine guns or anything like this? Did you do this? When you walk guard on an aircraft, what did this consist of?

TW: Carrying a loaded shotgun.

BV: At any time when you were out there did you ever have an opportunity to run into the Viet Cong? Maybe this is not an opportunity, but you run into them?

TW: Well, I never ran into them. We were one night under fire, and were given ammunition and hand grenades and told to stand by if they were coming. This was the night when they blew up the aircraft, the Air Force aircraft down at the end of the field. It was five months ago. Perhaps you remember.

BV: You were there when this happened?

TW: Yes, I was.

BV: They overran the field.

TW: Right.

BV: Can you sort of explain what that night?

TW: Well, I had duty NCO that night, and I had an assistant who was standing guard down by the tent. I went back up to get some sleep. I had been working since three that morning. I just climbed under the mosquito net. I had my clothes on. About two o’clock in the morning I woke up and there was a tremendous explosion. I didn’t know exactly what it was. I was kind of stunned for a second. About four or five seconds later I heard a machinegun fire, so I rolled out of the rack and grabbed my rifle and helmet.

We had trenches dug right behind our tent, and we could see the planes exploding down
the way, and well, not too much longer… This was about two hundred yards from our
tent area. We saw them going back out through the fence, and at that time we started
receiving fire in our position. We had a company of infantry in front of us staggered
along the wire and, of course, we weren’t allowed to fire until they drew back, and they
never drew back so we didn’t have an opportunity to shoot at them.

BV: So the infantry sort of cleared out the Viet Cong from the area?
TW: Yes, they did. They more or less clear themselves out. They took off as
soon as they hit us.

BV: Is this a kind of thing that you have to worry about from night to night that
they are going to come into your position?
TW: It’s a real funny feeling. You never feel very secure especially when you’re
right on the perimeter of the base as we were. See the base doesn’t have wire completely
around it. So each encampment has three or four concertina strands around it with trip
flares and land mines out in front of it. And you really don’t know what to expect from
day to day. It’s a real funny feeling.

BV: How about going into villages? Do you have this feeling too? Is there
always a problem that people are concerned—Marines—that Viet Cong are in these
villages?
TW: Well, to beginning with, it’s very difficult to tell one from the other. They
don’t wear, usually, a uniform. They wear the silk pants and shirt and the coolie hat. So
it’s very difficult and it’s virtually impossible to tell the difference between the two. You
never know what to expect.

BV: I understand, also, that for the Viet Cong, there’s no age limit, either. You
don’t know what the age you’re going to be running into, or male or female, either one. Is
this true?
TW: Well, several times I had an opportunity to see Viet Cong prisoners that
were being sent out from the Da Nang Air Base by the Air Force up to a concentration
camp, or an encampment. And these people ranged from… Well, the youngest one I saw
was ten. This is what the sentry told me that his age was. He was ten and then there was
a man that appeared to be seventy or seventy-five. It’s not restricted just male, there are
female there, too.
BV: Corporal Wanke, how does this come about getting these young kids in?

How do the Viet Cong operate to do this?

TW: Well, I really couldn’t say. I’ve never gone into it that much. But as far as I can tell, they really don’t know what’s happening. They have two corps of Viet Cong. They have the hard-core, and then they have just the guys that go around for terror. Terrorists they call them. These people go to the villages and sell them on the idea that the only way they’re going eat is to go along with the communist theory. They don’t explain it to them.

BV: Is this a fear program in some cases?

TW: Yes, most of the time it is.

BV: Where they take the mother and father and say “I’ll kill you if your son don’t go,” and so forth?

TW: Well, yes it is, primarily.

BV: Tim, you’ve talked to me before. Besides working on a jet aircraft and your guard duty, you told me you flew in helicopters. Can you explain this to me?

TW: Well, down from our area they had, we called them Hueys, the Army did, and they were more or less under-manned, and I’m a qualified M-60 machine gunner. So I go down there just to see more of what was going on. I didn’t have much of an opportunity at Da Nang. So on one occasion I flew as a machine gunner on a helicopter.

BV: How many flights did you do? Can you remember any of this?

TW: Pardon me?

BV: How many times did you go out on this?

TW: Just once.

BV: How old are you Tim?

TW: I’m 22.

BV: What’s the average age of the young Marine over there, the people you dealt with? Do you find that they’re pretty young?

TW: Well, I’d say they were pretty close to my age, between 20 and 22. There aren’t that many young people.

BV: You feel they’re good soldiers or good mechanics in the aviation line?

TW: I’d say they were pretty close to my age, between 20 and 22. There aren’t that many young people.
TW: Well, they have a lot pride, and of course, with pride you have morale.

BV: They are in real good shape? What’s their feeling on these demonstrations that happened back here in the United States?

TW: Overseas we have *Stars and Stripes* newspaper, and it always shocked us, the headlines that we got while we were down Da Nang, of the students rioting. And we’d sit in the tent at night, and hypothetically go through a situation, which might occur. Somebody asking us why we were down there, and telling us we had no business being down there. We got a lot of laughs out of it sometimes.

BV: Would you like to have some of these people over there, just show them?

TW: We certainly would. It would be a tremendous experience.

BV: If there was any one particular thing you could have had while you were in Vietnam, what would it have been?

TW: I think milk first of all, and then ice. There was neither down there.

BV: Tim, can you sort of tell me about the team effort by all branches of the service in Vietnam? What’s your feeling on this?

TW: There’s a tremendous team effort down there. The different shops at different times within a squadron need help, and regardless of how long you’ve been working or what your job is, you always go out and give them a hand if they need it. It’s the way it always has been down there.

BV: Tim, what is your feeling about going back to Vietnam?

TW: Well, since I’ve been down there, and know the problems that they are facing. I feel almost guilty having as much liberty as I do now that I’m back. Being able to go to a movie in town, being able to go to a snack bar and have a hamburger or a milkshake anytime I want it. It’s entirely different. I feel very sorry for the people that are down there now and they can’t enjoy these liberties.

BV: Well let’s turn this around. How did you feel when you got your orders to come back to the States?

TW: It was the greatest day of my life, I think.

BV: You feel all Marines…Was this because of what you were missing?
TW: Well, everybody gets homesick. We’ve been over there a year, and we were definitely ready to come back. We had a lot tremendous experiences, had a lot of fun together, and learned a lot of things, but we were ready to come back.

BV: Have you learned, being the young man you are, to appreciate a lot of things that you took for granted before?

TW: I am convinced now—I wasn’t before I left—but I am convinced now that the United States is the greatest place in the world.

BV: What are your feelings on the young boy or girl here in the United States that have taken up a program to write the young Marine or soldier in Vietnam? Do you feel this is good morale builder over there?

TW: I think it’s a tremendous effort by the people here in the States. While we were down there, there was a feeling, quite a lot of the time, that people weren’t behind us and this isn’t a really a very good feeling. But I think this will help the men down there. I would have been very happy to receive letters down there. That’s all you really live for.

BV: How was mail down there?

TW: It’s pretty regular. It’s slow, but it’s pretty regular.

BV: How are you situated as far as PX and so forth? Did you have a PX in your area, or how does this work?

TW: No, there was one main PX to serve all of the Da Nang area, and if got down there after the ships had just come in you were set, and you could get anything you wanted. But if you went in there three or four days after payday, when everybody else had been there, there was nothing.

BV: Is it true that some of the men have to march probably or walk four and five miles just to get to the PX?

TW: Oh, yes. The infantrymen up in the hills, if they can’t catch a ride, they have to walk it down there.

BV: How did the infantrymen and the aviation people get along down there?

TW: I had an opportunity a couple of times to go on liberty in Da Nang and meet a couple of these men. And to begin with, they were kind of negative towards the air wing until they asked me my job. I’d tell them “I was in ordnance. I loaded bombs, fuse
bombs, loaded rockets.” And they’d relate to me, right away, an experience where one of
our planes had come in and saved their lives. Now this has happen many times. Not just
once or twice.

BV: So before the evening was over, you really became close friends and
everything else, right?

TW: Very good friends. I’m still writing a couple of them now.

BV: Tim, could you sort of sum up your tour in Vietnam as far as your personal
feelings of many things that might have happened, or going back and so forth?

TW: Well, on my tour in Vietnam I learned quite a lot about myself. I went
down there with the idea that I was probably as brave and as good an American as the
next guy. But after I got down there, I found that I really didn’t appreciate the things that
we have, and found out that I’m not the John Wayne type individual I thought, perhaps, I
might have been. But I was very happy to at least have my opportunity to defend what I
believe in.

BV: Do you feel this is a pretty general all around feeling of the young Marines
over there?

TW: Yes I do. I never talked to anyone down there that didn’t like being down
there. Now there were a lot of hardships, of course, and that was the subject of talk all
the time. But there was no one down there that didn’t believe that he was down there for
a good reason.

BV: I know back, myself being in other wars, did a lot of the younger fellows
turn to the older fellows in many cases when you had a problem and talked to them?

TW: As soon as I got down there, I found a sergeant that had been around a little
bit and had been in Korea. We’d have long talks with hypothetical questions about what
would happen if this happened. Because I wasn’t really prepared for going down there.

BV: You sort of got together and told each other your troubles then, right?

TW: Right, he held kind of classes for several other people.

BV: Tim, where do you call your hometown?

TW: Well, I call it San Francisco, but my family has moved back to Wayne, New
Jersey, now.

BV: Where do they live back there?
TW: Lake Pakinac, wherever that is?

BV: They were always living in California originally?

TW: Yes, I was born in California. We lived for several years in the Palace Verdes area and then Dad was transferred through his company up to San Francisco.

BV: One other question, Tim. Did ever you run into any Marines over there that you met in boot camp or anything like this?

TW: Well, not only Marines that I had met in boot camp, I ran into people that I had gone through fourth grade with, ninth grade with, high school, then lots of people that I went to boot camp with.

BV: Can you explain some of these reunions?

TW: Oh, yes. One happened down at the PX down there that was kind of funny. I walked into the PX and I saw this boy that I thought I knew from the side. I walked up to him and I said, “Excuse me. Is your name Bostick?” He turned around and right away he recognized me, and I recognized him, and we spent the rest of the day just walking around talking and catching up on things that had happened.

BV: Was he in the aviation or was he in the infantry?

TW: Oh, he was in Force Recon.

BV: How far away was he from you at this particular time?

TW: He was up in Happy Valley about five miles, five or six miles.

BV: Did you see him again before you left?

TW: No, I didn’t.

BV: So this was one of those half-day friendships, reunions, that’s it?

TW: Right. You just don’t expect ever to seen him, and there he is.

BV: Well, Tim, I want to thank you very much for talking to me today, and I want to wish you an awful a lot of luck.

TW: Well, thank you very much.

BV: From the El Toro Marine Corps Air Station we’ve been talking to Corporal Tim Wanke who just returned from Vietnam.