Sergeant Alan Richardson: This interview is being conducted with Captain Peter J. Vogel by Gunnery Sergeant Alan B. Richardson at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia. The subject of this interview is Operation Dagger Thrust and is unclassified.

First of all, Captain, what type of aircraft did you fly on Operation Dagger Thrust?

Captain Peter Vogel: UH 34 Deltas.

AR: And what did you think of the capabilities of that aircraft?

PV: Well, the capabilities are limited somewhat by the total weight it could carry in comparison to those that exist in of your more modern helicopters. However, at the time it was quite adequate and got the job done. And I think possibly as far as the UH 34 is concerned, some of the problems that exist with the newer aircraft with regard to landing zones, and size of landing zones, and their ability to get into them, did not exist for the 34. It can get into this type of a landing zone.

AR: I see.

PV: A much more limited landing zone. Let’s clarify that by saying a much more limited landing zone than what the newer aircraft would require.

AR: Captain, would you state your name, grade, and service number?

PV: Peter J. Vogel, Captain, United States Marine Corps, 071964.

AR: What was your duty assignment while you were in Vietnam?
PV: I was Assistant Operations Officer and Training Officer for the Squadron 163, initially, and 161 during the last month that I spent in Vietnam—same job assignments.

AR: What period did you serve in these billets and where were you physically located in Vietnam?

PV: Well, of course, I served in the same billet prior to going overseas and we spent two months in Okinawa prior to going down to Vietnam. We went down to Vietnam as a squadron, as a unit, in January and we left Vietnam as a unit again in June and spent approximately three days in Okinawa, and then went aboard the SLF until about the middle of October and left the SLF and went back up to Okinawa again. And some of the pilots including myself were reassigned to squadrons in Vietnam in October, and then during the latter part of October and early part of November I was in 161. And during the period with 161 I was at Chu Lai. The earlier portion of the tour in Vietnam was spent at Da Nang proper.

AR: How many missions did you fly?

PV: One-hundred ninety.

AR: Can you give a brief description of a normal mission?

PV: Well, essentially there are two types of missions that were flown over there by the helicopter pilots, the squadrons. And of course, these were in support of either the Marines when the MEB got down there, and the ARVN. Initially our support was supplied entirely to the ARVN for the first four months in country. But there are two separate type of missions. One is what we referred to as a strike mission, which was taking troops and into actual assault landing positions within country; and the second type of mission, which was probably the more numerous of the two, was the re-supply and what you might classify as admin missions within country: re-supply, hauling the VIP, etc. Now, you want a description of both?

AR: Yes, if you will.

PV: I’ll start off with strike mission, then. Generally speaking, we received a strike mission from an echelon higher than our squadron. It generally originated from the Vietnamese during the early portion of our tour. And we received the particulars on it and usually there was some type of supporting arms that were included. When we
received this mission—of course, we had responsibility for conducting the mission, conducting the briefings. We did a lot of research on intelligence, etc., the night before the missions. So we would, generally, about 1900 in the evening receive a strike mission for the following day. And at this time we would call a meeting between the supporting arms—when I refer to that, I refer largely to aircraft of two types: Huey, and fixed wing close-air-support aircraft. And we would get together and our intelligence officer would do as much research as possible into the areas with the limited sources they had available to them. We’d get together and plan the mission, brief the mission, generally for the supporting aircraft as well as our own squadron. Generally speaking, the squadron commander was the overall commander of the operation from the air viewpoint. Of course, this was excepting ground troops. And this would be conducted the evening previous to the mission. Generally speaking, an attempt was made by the ground force to land at daylight or as soon thereafter possible for the strike mission. So, the result was that our briefing was usually conducted at four o’clock or four-thirty the following morning. And this was a final overall briefing for all units concerned with the strike itself, usually lasting about a half-hour to forty-five minutes. After that time, of course, we just mounted up our aircraft and loaded up our assault troops or went to where we were loading the assault troops, and proceeded from there at an altitude of approximately two-thousand feet to preclude to becoming hit by the small arms, 30-caliber, this type. Generally, we had supporting arms available to us. However, these aircraft although they were along did not end up firing unless, of course, we obtained fire in the zone, in which case they were available. I think that a couple of comments concerning the supporting arms or supporting aircraft that we had available to us are appropriate at this point. Generally speaking, we had the armed Hueys which were supplied at that time by the Army, who worked closely with our squadron over there. And of course, we had the normal fixed-wing of several types: ADs and A4Ds and F100s by the Air Force. Generally speaking, for the heavy support, of course, the fixed wings were quite adequate but it got to the point that when we did require close support of the aircraft in the landing zone and we were under fire, in my opinion the only adequate means that we had available is another helicopter, and the armed Huey was particularly good for this. And in particular, the Army’s armed Huey because it had the so-called flex guns on it which
permitted a wide angle of firing with the M60s. They had four M60s mounted with the
cflex guns and these could be operated from the cockpit and moved along with the gun
site. They were fixed, attached with the gun site, or moved with the gun site. When the
gun site was moved the weapons were moved. And this provided a means for the aircraft
to fire far beyond the capability what I think the Marine Corps now has in their present
fixed-gun system. Although I’ve heard a lot of opinions concerning the merit of both
systems, in listening to the Army pilots who have flown both types, all of them were in
agreement that the flex-gun system was much superior to the fixed-gun system which the
Marine Corps appears to be using this time. So it boiled to the fact that if we needed
close support, it was much better for a helicopter to provide this support rather than a
fixed-wing. Whereas you are looking out of the same cockpit, so to speak, so he can get
same target acquisition that the helicopter that was making the landing the assault landing
in the zone. And the target acquisition didn’t seem to be the problem that it would be
with the fixed-wing.

AR: Shall we just go into the second type mission?

PV: The second type mission, of course, was the mission where we re-supplied
different outposts within country or conducted VIP ops, or something of this nature. And
of course, it didn’t require the planning that the strike-type mission did. Generally
speaking, we obtained our frag orders from the next highest echelon in the chain of
command, on the morning or the late evening before. Of course, the flight schedule
would be made out as the frag orders were available. It didn’t require pre-briefing the
night before. Our intelligence officers, as a matter of interest, would check out the areas
that we were to re-supply as early as possible the morning that the supply mission was to
be run and then in the afternoon when the supply missions were to be run in the afternoon
to see what the particular status of that particular outpost was at the time, because very
often—I shouldn’t say very often, but occasionally—an outpost would be run overrun
overnight and the intelligence on this would not filter down to us unless we sought it out
ourselves. So this was one of our policies. Each flight leader, whenever we went out on
one of these missions, checked with the intelligence to determine the disposition or the
status of that particular outpost before going out. Generally after that, the same type of
flying was conducted into the outpost. One policy we did have is in Vietnam is we never
conducted any missions without having two aircraft. If we couldn’t muster two aircraft, unless it was an emergency medevac or something of this nature, then we didn’t go. So we needed two aircraft and we generally flew at our two-thousand foot above the terrain again to avoid small arms fire and proceeded on the mission. We had some communication problems when we were conducting these missions into the ARVN outpost. Generally speaking, communications weren’t too bad. Generally we had a Special Forces man or somebody that could speak English on the radio when the radios were up and available. In the event that we didn’t then we have prearranged smoke signals which were used to facilitate communications in the event of problems. Even then some of these smoke signals on occasions created problems because the ARVNs weren’t properly briefed or didn’t throw the right color smoke out. But job had to be done. We usually did it despite the communication problem.

AR: Captain, can you give us a background on the reason for the initiation of our Operation Dagger Thrust?

PV: I believe the original design of it was to create a situation where amphibious landings would be made into what intelligence believed to be supply areas or re-supply areas along the shore line of South Vietnam and into areas where it had been years or a period of time where ARVN forces had not gone in to clear out the VC in places that were known VC, or had known VC concentration. But I think the specific purpose or the more general purpose of it was to try to interrupt supply lines or places that were suspected of landing boats with supplies aboard them, and generally speaking keep the Viet Cong off balance.

AR: Would you discuss Operation Dagger Thrust itself?

PV: Operation Dagger Thrust is an overall name for this penetration that I just described, into the country. Dagger Thrust originated out of SLF. The SLF, of course, was aboard usually two or three ships which included a helicopter type carrier, an LPH type, and of course there is a battalion on board. The battalion was landed over the beach and simultaneously by helicopter through the air against these various positions. To amplify a little bit on this Dagger Thrust I think the proper place to start is probably with the beginning of our tour aboard the SLF, or the special landing force in that area, with the battalion and the squadron. Originally, about the middle of June, while the squadron
was located in Vietnam, we received orders to report to Okinawa for on-loading of the LPH with the battalion at that time in Okinawa. We proceeded to Okinawa and spent about two days there unloading battalion and our squadron aboard an LPH. We proceeded directly from there to the area of South Vietnam, namely in the vicinity of Qui Nhon. En route or perhaps before that—I’m not aware of the exact date that we received secret orders—we were instructed to land the battalion, which was 3/7 at that time, to operate in defense of the perimeter-type defensive, an enclave at Qui Nhon. At that time it was expected that 3/7 would later be relieved by an Army brigade or engineer corps of some type that was to be landed there. This changed somewhat and it was finally determined that the Army unit would not land there, and 3/7 spent approximately three weeks to a month in these positions and were later relieved, of course, after we put them ashore and were later relieved by another battalion, and then we picked up 3/7 and proceeded North again. At this time we received word that there was destroyer on the rocks. On Pratas Reef, to be exact. It was a destroyer that had run aground out there and the squadron and of course the whole task unit there proceeded to that area and operated in support of the rescue operations or getting the destroyer off the rocks for a period of approximately three weeks again. From there we proceeded to Hong Kong for a week’s R-and-R type liberty there and proceeded from our R-and-R liberty there in Hong Kong to the Philippines Islands. We were expecting to conduct practice for Dagger Thrust-type raids and general training in the Philippines while we were there. We arrived and offloaded and the next day after we offloaded we received secret orders again to reload, to onload both the battalion and the squadron and to precede south. En route we were notified that an operation was going on just to the south of Chu Lai, an operation later to be known to us as Operation Starlight. And so we proceeded to the vicinity of Chu Lai, arriving there on the afternoon of the first day of Operation Starlight. That evening one of our battalion’s companies was put ashore over the beach rather than by helicopter and the helicopters were called in to support Operation Starlight. And we did support Operation Starlight throughout its entirety. One of the problems that existed in Operation Starlight from our viewpoint was a lack of coordination in that information concerning the DASC, and who we should be in touch with and overall control. It apparently wasn’t lacking conversation with other people who participate in that. However; information as
to its operation frequencies, control, etc., was never passed on to us. So we did operate in a semi-vacuum during this entire period. For amplification on that problems that existed on this, the command diary for 163 during that period of time can be obtained or looked into. After conducting Operation Starlight and in the final portions of the operation, operating in direct support of 3/7 again, that was the last major Marine unit in the area.

We back-loaded aboard ship again, and proceeded north. I think to backtrack or to digress here just slightly, one of the other areas where problems existed in Operation Starlight—obviously it was under combat conditions and heavy combat conditions at the time—but we did a lot of night re-supply of ammunition, water, etc. And one of the major areas that problems existed then, when we got to the smaller unit size, was that the people requesting the ammunition, water, supplies, etc., seemed to have no idea of what the requirements were for the landing zone of a helicopter. While the landing zones were adequate, very often approaches were made on a single flash light in the middle of a very dusty field during hours of complete darkness without even an existing moon and so forth. And this did create problems, but the job did get done. But my recommendation in this area would be that when training is conducted where a unit has an opportunity to associate itself as we did with 3/7—and these people were properly trained—that the squadrons actually participate in training or the conduct of training with the ground units to advise them of what—and show them in some instances where it's possible—exactly what is expected of a landing zone, what’s required of a landing zone and how they can make the job of landing supplies from a helicopter into their zone much easier on the pilots, etc.

We’ll pick back up again where we started north. We proceeded from there back from the Philippines Islands, Cubi Point, and offloaded the battalion for the purposes of cleaning up their gear and just settling themselves back down again, get their gear repaired and cleaned up. We spent a couple of days there for them to accomplish this and then took 3/7 to Chu Lai where we offloaded to 3/7. We proceeded to back to Okinawa after this and picked up 2/7. I believe it was 2/7. And 2/7 was a unit which we were to later to conduct Operation Dagger Thrust with. We proceeded back to the coast of South Vietnam and a little later began to conduct these operations. The operations were largely in the vicinity of an area south of Chu Lai, largely in vicinity of Qui Nhon, and from
there down. The landings were made largely in the vicinity of Qui Nhon and to the north
of Nha Trang, which is some forty or fifty miles just south of Qui Nhon. As I said
before, these landings consisted of penetrations of suspected VC resupply areas or where
they suspected VC either had supplies located or where they suspected they would be
bringing them in from the sea, in the areas where there had been no Vietnamese troops or
ARVN troops for a considerable period of time. The landings were made with support of
fixed-wing aircraft and although we requested Hueys from in country, the overall
commander at that time determined that the Hueys were not to be utilized and that the
landing would remain completely from amphibious forces afloat. At that time we
considered it to be a mistake. Of course, it was his decision to make. We had fixed-wing
support and previous to each landing we had conduct or requested and obtained aerial
coverage by fixed-wing aircraft and had photos made available to us of the local areas we
were to enter. These photos were beneficial, but in a couple of instances, without having
professional photo interpreters aboard with us, we made the mistake of believing that
certain zones were that were obviously available from a photo aircraft, were adequate to
take the helicopters and later discovered that the zones themselves were not adequate. A
photo interpreter would have been very beneficial in this case.

I think the only other point that would be of interest was the helicopter squadron
in offloading the battalions and reloading or on-loading the battalions back ashore after
the operations were conducted in Operation Dagger Thrust. One of the pertinent points is
that each pilot in the squadron averaged a total of about eight hours per day, with some
flying as many as ten and eleven hours, which seemed to be a little extensive for
complete safety. And this is all I believe I can contribute at this time.

AR: Thank you very much, Captain Vogel, for your interview.