Sergeant Robert Oliva: This interview is being conducted with Staff Sergeant Ralph R. Thomas by Master Sergeant Robert H. Oliva at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia, on 21 December 1965. The subject of this interview is USMC tactics involved in patrols. The subject is unclassified. Sergeant Thomas, state your name, grade and service number. What your duty assignments were while you were in Vietnam?

Sergeant Ralph Thomas: Staff Sergeant Ralph R. Thomas, 1312501, I was a platoon sergeant in 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion.

RO: What period did you serve in these billets, and were you physically located within Vietnam during the period covered?

RT: I was in from April through May 1965, and I was stationed in the Da Nang area of Vietnam.

RO: Discuss US Marine Corps tactics involved in day patrols, Sergeant Thomas.

RT: In my unit, being a reconnaissance unit, we participated in quite a few day patrols. Now, these patrols started out being company-sized patrols, mostly ran during the day, and we participated in search and clear operations in the Da Nang area.

RO: How deep did your patrols penetrate?

RT: Normally about ten miles, which was approximately the length of the TAOR.

RO: Did your unit operate in a tactical area of responsibility?

RT: Yes.
RO: What specific measures were employed to control this tactical area of responsibility?

RT: Mostly patrols, constant surveillance over the Viet Cong. In my unit at night we’d set up LPs. During the day we would run constant patrols throughout the TAOR.

RO: How much patrolling or other operations was conducted during the nighttime?

RT: Very little patrolling was conducted at this time. However, we had other operations. We would move in at night to set up for blocking positions, say, for a mission that was going to be conducted the following day. Naturally, we would move in at night to set up. Also, we would set up LPs, but very little patrolling was conducted at night.

RO: Did you receive any type of reconnaissance briefings prior to going out on patrols?

RT: Yes. Prior to going out on patrols, as soon as the word was passed that we were going to be on a patrol, and patrol leaders were notified who they were, the platoon commander, the platoon sergeant, of my company, normally they were the patrol leaders—the platoon sergeants and platoon commanders—they would go out on a helicopter recon and reconnoiter the area, look at the terrain, the type of terrain the troops would be going through, and try to spot any enemy activity that were in the area they were going to be working in. And they would return to the area and give this information out during the patrol order.

RO: From your particular point of view, what would the influence of the Vietnam weather and terrain have on these patrols?

RT: It was very hot and you had to be very careful of the type clothing that you wore. You wouldn’t carry too much equipment, only the equipment that was needed on that particular type of patrol. Carry as much water as possible. Ammunition…you wouldn’t overload yourself because of the heat.

RO: Did the South Vietnamese Army in any way participate with you on any of the patrols?

RT: Yes, they did. Most of the time during our patrols we would have to go through villages and, of course, we had to check these villages out. And we were
assigned South Vietnamese Army units to accompany us on the patrols and also we
would have interpreters along that would talk to the civilian population and inquire about
the Viet Cong. Sometimes the civilian population would answer that the Viet Cong had
been in the village and moved out or they wouldn’t answer at all. At other times, I can
say they were very helpful to us concerning the Viet Cong. A lot of times we’d go in the
villages and we would find grenades and trenches and punji stakes, booby traps, around
the villages. And the interpreters, they helped quite a bit to talk to the people and find out
if the Viet Cong had been there and try actually to find out how many they were, and
where they went.

RO: Thank you for talking with us, Sergeant Thomas.