Sergeant Arnie Holkins: This is staff sergeant Arnie Holkins at the San Diego Marine Corps Recruit Depot interviewing First Lieutenant Roy G. Snyder on this 20th day of December, 1965. The subject matter is unclassified. Lieutenant Snyder describes his participation in the Cam Ni Village operation involving the burning of huts, houses, and haystacks, and other combat actions during his tour in Vietnam. Lieutenant Snyder, in what capacity did you serve while you were in Vietnam?

Lieutenant Roy Snyder: I was a rifle platoon commander of Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

AH: Is that the duties you performed during your entire tour over there?
RS: Yes, that’s right.
AH: Now, you were involved in the operation perhaps, or maybe it was passing through, but you had a job to do concerning a village called Cam Ni and this is the village that was burned by Marines and received considerable publicity. Would you describe that operation for us as you recall it?
RS: Yes, this village had been giving 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, a lot of trouble. They had been trying to send patrols into that area and had taken a number of small arms fire and M-79 rounds fired at their patrol from this village complex. So, as a consequence, they decided to execute an operation there using a company to see if they couldn’t clear that village of resistance. We were assigned, that is Delta Company, was
assigned that mission and we went aboard Amtracs along the river to the village and then deployed to make a company sweep into the village complex.

AH: Did you run into much difficulty in your initial stages of that move?

RS: Yes. For one, the Amtracs were not able to go clear up into the village itself. They were stopped short of the village approximately one-hundred meters in the rice paddies because of mud and impassible paddy between them and the village and so as a result, we had to get out of the Amtracs in the open rice paddy and deploy there.

AH: Were you under fire at this time?

RS: No, not upon arriving. We arrived and got out of the Amtracs and had deployed pretty much on line, the whole company, and were awaiting a signal that everybody was ready to move out and try to get in the village when the firing started. The right flank platoon received a heavy volume of fire from the woodline to their immediate front and returned the fire with M-79 rounds and 3.5 because we couldn’t see where the firing was coming from, so they used an area weapon on it and it was pretty effective. It slowed their fire down quite a bit. I think it had them ducking.

AH: Did you have any support on this, as you were moving towards the village?

RS: No, we didn’t fire any mortars or artillery at the time. The village itself had civilians in it and the firing was restricted in those areas as to whether the artillery can fire or not. So, we just used our own organic weapons because we figured it was enough to overcome the resistance and it was.

AH: And your objective was to drive the Viet Cong out of that village or that area?

RS: Yes, I believe it was more just the guerilla type than the hard core, but there was a number of them. I would say at least a squad, perhaps two squads at the time that the first firing commenced there to receive us and to try to inflict some casualties.

AH: How long did it take you to finally move into that village?

RS: It took approximately, I would say, ten minutes to cross that one-hundred meters of rice paddy, first by pinning them down with the organic weapons we had, and then moving out in firing maneuver-type movements.

AH: Well, what happened when you started to enter the village then? They weren’t all out of there. They were still firing at you I imagine?
RS: Yes, the firing decreased once we got out of the open rice paddy and up to where we had some cover also, which indicated to me that perhaps they were pulling back and had tried, by surprising us, to inflict some initial casualties and then to what we call “make their bird,” out of the area before we could trap them. After the initial burst of fire, which is very heavy, the heaviest I had seen up to that date, they pulled back and we were just taking sporadic sniper fire and harassment fire as we moved into the houses themselves.

AH: How were they concealed? Were they in the houses, the huts?

RS: Yes. We were taking some firing from the huts themselves, from the windows, and also immediately upon entering the village area, well, in fact before we got there, our organic weapons exploded a number of mines along the tree line itself, which appeared; some were sympathetic detonation. So, it would appear that they were perhaps attached to one trip line and anybody coming through the initial tree line would trip it. The VC or the guerillas themselves seemed to pull back through the villages we came through it and would fight from the houses, the grass huts and things, and they also had an extremely elaborate tunnel network. I hadn’t seen anything like it before or since actually; that operation. The tunnels were interconnected between houses so they could run down in them. We checked one tunnel that left one house and went down there, there was a room underground about twelve feet in diameter and about four feet underneath the ground surface; had another tunnel leading out of it and into another house so that they could, at their discretion, run from house to house.

AH: Without being seen.

RS: Yes, without being seen and they did so and we took a casualty because one of them popped up behind us and shot the man in the back out of a little spider trap that they had there, it was a tunnel.

AH: Were there any civilians in the village when you attacked it or were you aware of it?

RS: Yes. There were civilians we found out after we got in there. We did use at that time, the helicopter business of telling civilians to leave immediately before we entered the village. Normally, we didn’t have that type of opportunity, but this was the operation that we did have the chance to and did use it. But, there were civilians there as
it turned out; mostly women and children and old men much like we found anywhere there when we went on operations. They had either been afraid to leave or were not allowed to leave. In one case that I know of, we were taking fire from a hut window and we took about three rounds from it quickly and then we fired a 3.5 rocket round into it. Then we found out that there were women and children inside and fortunately none were seriously hurt; there were a few scratches from the shrapnel. Our interpreter, who was along with the platoon, found out that the people in that particular hut had not been allowed to leave; they were there to protect the guerilla until he could leave, he assuming that we wouldn’t fire while they were in there and we wouldn’t of had we known it, but they were down behind the bow work itself. So we didn’t see them.

AH: And in most cases you found they were probably forced to stay there in the village when they knew they were being attacked.

RS: That would seem to make sense to me. This one instance, I know, according to the interpreter, they were made to stay there. The others, I would think, would’ve left as soon as the firing started had they been able to or had they had some place to go. At any rate, they hadn’t left and mostly were just hiding in their houses trying to stay out of the way.

AH: What was the casualty rate regarding the civilians? Were there many injured, wounded?

RS: No, fortunately and for the heavy volume of firing on both sides, it surprised me. There was to my knowledge, one civilian killed; a young boy about twelve years old and he was killed by 3.5 round, it was fired into another area. There was one woman that suffered a fairly heavy laceration on her leg from shrapnel and they were about five or six other miscellaneous and I assumed minor wounds that required only corpsman’s treatment.

AH: Were any of the civilians killed?

RS: Yes, this one young man I was talking about. He was about twelve and he was killed.

AH: So, what problems did you run into once in the village other than this network of tunneling and so on? How did you finally manage to drive them out?
RS: Well, we resorted to fire because they were hiding in the huts and we found a lot of the tunnel entrances were covered with little straw mats that they tried to camouflage the entrance with. They were difficult to see and they were a number of them for each tunnel. It seemed very effective that as soon as the guerilla saw the fire starting, then they wouldn’t stay. They’d leave because the fire would burn the entrances or their cover. Some were using haystacks. They had a just a little fighting hole dug underneath the haystack to use and you could probe it with your bayonet and not hit anything and then he could pop up afterwards and shoot as you went by. When they found that we were burning haystacks and things like that, then the firing decreased noticeably and so we continued to use it as an effective weapon.

AH: And the village was burned. Were the civilians all evacuated before you started burning?

RS: We made sure that there were no civilians in the particular house itself that was burned. There were many houses left. We didn’t burn them all. We burned the ones that we had good reason to believe the firing was coming from or they had been used for something like that or had an extremely complicated tunnel network connected with it. There were many houses left, but those that were burned, the civilians, they were inspected before they were burned or at least we called to the people and the interpreters called to the people.

AH: Then there was no danger to the civilians from fire. You had at least got them out or you knew that there were no civilians in these huts?

RS: Yes, there were no civilians that suffered any burns at all throughout the operation.

AH: What did the enemy do then finally after these fires? How did you cope with that?

RS: We got into the village complex and it turned out there was much more extensive than we had first anticipated; much more housing, it was more developed. Also, it was extremely difficult to have control between units because of the very thick bamboo hedges; the hedge rows and thick vegetation in that village itself. Very few trails went all the way through in either direction; most were barbed-wired or blocked in some other manner. Many had gates that were locked and booby-trapped. We had a couple of
gates explode as we pushed through the area. However, it was the Amtracs that exploded them. It wasn’t our troops fortunately. When you start running into a number of booby traps in a built-up area, it’s necessarily going to slow you down and that’s what happened to us. It started bogging us down and by approximately 1500, they had decided we were about halfway through the village complex and they decided that rather than try to go on and be caught there at night, they would have us pull back and they would try to come up with some other idea to reduce that village or to clear it.

AH: Then how many days were you in there clearing the village? Was it just the one day or did you come back the next day again?
RS: No, it was just that one-day for us and then later, they sent another company into the area, which had no resistance at all. They went through the village and there was no problems at all. I would assume that they felt that that village was going to get our attention again and just left it.

AH: Well then, contrary to some reports, the entire village was not burned?
RS: Well, no, not anywhere near the entire village. There was probably another 400 houses in that village that we didn’t even get to and there were a number that we got to that were not burned because there was no necessity to.

AH: You only burned the huts or houses where you felt or knew that there was enemy opposition?
RS: Yes. I felt that personally, in giving orders of that type, that our Marines were our first worry, it was my first responsibility, and if a straw hut was going to be a danger to our Marines, then that straw hut should go. Those that seemed to me to present a danger did go as such.

AH: Well, we’re getting into something here which I wanted to ask you about anyway, was observations and you mentioned one there yourself. Can you recall any observations you made including miscalculations and/or failures that you may have had during this day in that village?
RS: Yes, there were a number that we had counted on that didn’t work out the way we had planned. Our radio communications were not as good as we hoped because I assume with the dense vegetation and other things, it had blocked the communications. So that made a problem of control from the company commander to the platoons. The
Amtracs were not able to get up into the village the way we had planned, so necessarily a
number of troops had to cross the open. Also, we had planned to use the Amtracs to
knock down gates and hedge rows and things we thought might be booby-trapped, but it
was so thick in there that the Amtracs could hardly help every platoon. Each platoon had
two Amtracs, but I know in my case, they were only able to just follow a straight path
and at many times, they were stopped even by the dense undergrowth that they couldn’t
penetrate either and they’d have to go around. So, we couldn’t use them to open up as
many as the gates and things that we like to have. We had to use just our own infantry,
people, and just watch what we were doing.

AH: You’ve already mentioned several of the booby-traps the Viet Cong used
and that you ran up against. How much of a variety of their booby-trapping did you run
into throughout the village? How many of the other types did they use?
RS: I thought this village had a number of the more elementary booby-traps; not
explosive type, but rather the bamboo stakes and things of that sort. One of my squad
leaders, as we got out in the open rice paddy, out of the Amtracs, he stepped into a punji
pit, but it had been softened by the rain and the bamboo rather than holding and piercing
was knocked over by his leg as he went down. Luckily, the ground was soft from the
rains, so he was not a casualty and it was just near a grave in the rice paddy. Some solid
ground there that they might’ve assumed somebody might want to get on rather than be
in the open rice paddy and it was correct and he stepped in it. There were punji pits all
along the trails; however, very few of them crossed the entire trail. Of course, they don’t
want to aggravate villagers and we found that almost exclusively in the village areas, that
punji pits would only cover the side of the trail and only stick out into the trail itself
approximately a quarter of the way across the trail from either side. So, as long as you
stayed in the middle of the trail, your danger of stepping into a punji pit was greatly
reduced, so most of our troopers just from an observance of that, did so and we didn’t
suffer any punji stake casualties. We found two deadfalls, which is a heavy log overhead
that is pierced by bamboo spikes on all sides and camouflaged and as you pull open a
gate, the deadfall falls down into the gate itself, falling on top of whoever is coming into
the village. Also, we found one type of trap; they called it a Malayan whip, which is
nothing more than a springy tree tied back and with stakes tied to it so that when released, it swings across a trail horizontally and the stakes pierce whoever tripped it.

AH: Did you have the misfortune for any of your men to trip one of these types of booby-traps?

RS: Not accidentally. By that time we’d gone through a number of villages and we spotted the booby-traps before we tripped them just by people being observant at what they were doing and the camouflage wasn’t as expert as one might be led to believe; you can see it.

AH: They were easy to spot.

RS: You can see it if you’re keeping your eyes open and not just blindly walking along. At night, however, it would’ve been a very dangerous place to be because at night, you of course, you can’t see things like that and if they knew that very extensively and you go in there at night, then you’re liable to be in trouble.

AH: They used these extensively there and you had no casualties through inadvertent walking into a booby-trap?

RS: No.

AH: Had you had training for this prior so that your men knew what to look for? Had you had this type of booby-trap training at all either there or before you got to Vietnam?

RS: Yes we did as a matter of fact. I’m sure many of the men are thankful that they went through the Northern Training Area and the Jungle Warfare School up in Okinawa. They had one particular exercise there where the instructors booby-trapped a village with punji pits, pull devices, everything they could think of and then they sent us in to clear it just to show us the types of traps and how they’re set up and how you can avoid them and did in fact, I think, greatly aid the fact that we had no casualties. Their training there was outstanding, I thought. Once we got down there, we saw that it all applied very well.

AH: Now, Lieutenant Snyder, if you would, can you recall some of your own individual experiences that were connected with this particular operation in the Village of Cam Ni? Maybe some close calls you had?
RS: Yes, I think probably in that particular instance, the closest call I had was from one of our own weapons. A gate was blocking a trail that we needed to go up. We had tried other things although we didn’t carry explosives ourselves. So, we had tried to grenade and an M-79 on these gates before and not with too much success, but I decided to try another M-79 round to try to blow the gate or to sympathetically set off anything that might be around there. I was about fifty meters back and caught a small fragment of M-79 round in the arm, not enough; it just pierced the skin and dug a gouge out, but I thought I was well far enough away from it to be safe and I wasn’t. It’s just easy to underestimate the power of our own weapons and that sort of thing. The jungle is fairly thick; you just assume that you’re pretty well covered when actually there isn’t anything that it will stop a high velocity fragment.

AH: And you were only wounded that once?

RS: Well, that I never turned in or reported. No, I was wounded a second time later.

AH: How did that happen?

RS: This was in September, late September, and I was on a patrol and we were going down a trail; it was about three o’clock in the morning, very dark and the trail was tree lined. So, visibility was almost a minimum. We were going almost entirely on sound and we were searching for snipers that had been firing at patrols we had sent down there at first light. Our intention was to get behind the area, bring the patrol in at first light, and if they were sniped at, to pull in behind the snipers. In the process, we ran into a group of at least six—and I don’t know how many more were there—of another patrol, a VC patrol coming down the trail. I happened to be on the point and we walked into each other around a bend in the trail. The first thing I knew was I thought I heard something and I heard his safety go off. When his safety went off, I fired and he got off one round, which struck me at the base of the throat and went through a lung. I hit him three times. I had an automatic rifle M-14, which I think is an outstanding weapon over there because there’s a lot of power. It knocked him clear off the dike and into the rice paddy and he was done for. His carbine didn’t even knock me down, although it did manage to collapse a lung.

AH: Was it serious enough where you evacuated then?
RS: Yes, I was brought to Da Nang and then to the Philippines and subsequently back to the United States.

AH: Getting back to the village of Cam Ni, the casualties of your group, did you have many casualties?

RS: We had four casualties, which at first, when we first got there and took all that initial fire, I thought this was going to be a real tough one; this crossed my mind. Then, the resistance lightened and it was only harassment fire and we took several more casualties inside the village, but just from snipers and then as we were pulling back, as I say around 1500, we again got a very heavy volume of fire once we got out into the open and they had the cover in the tree line. So, it would assume that they were retreating just staying out ahead of our advanced elements and when they saw us pulling back, decided to follow us along and see if they couldn’t just snipe at the rear end of the columns and at the platoons moving out, which they did. We suffered another casualty at that time. Extremely heavy firing at both the start and the end of the operation and not too much in between, so it would lead me to believe that we weren’t too effective in knocking out the VC at that time, although the next company that went there didn’t have any trouble at all; they had left.

AH: How large was the unit you led in there?

RS: I had a platoon of approximately forty men at that time.

AH: You only had for casualties of that?

RS: Yes.

AH: Any killed?

RS: No, no KIAs.

AH: No one killed, just four casualties.

RS: Yes.

AH: Now, on your casualties, were they serious enough to be evacuated and if so, how was that accomplished?

RS: Yes, there were two men seriously wounded and two men with rifle rounds in the extremity, one in the leg and one in the arm. One man was shot in the stomach, seriously wounded. All men were evacuated and it was accomplished by a radio net with helicopters standing by for helicopter evac. We radioed that we had a man hit and going
through the normal recognition signals and things; brought the helicopter in. We also had
an air control party with us, a team. They handled the radio for us, brought the helicopter
in, picked the man up. Security for helicopters is a problem because if they see
helicopters in the area, they immediately try to knock them down and especially when
they’re going to land; so we had to allow for that. We had to pull some men back off the
advanced elements, which were searching the village to guard the landing zone for the
helicopter. And also bringing the man out of the village complex itself across the rice
paddies proved to be very difficult because the mud at times was up to the waist. It was
all four men could do to carry one wounded in that type of rice paddy.

AH: During the evacuation, were you under fire then or were they under fire
trying to evacuate the casualties?

RS: Not to my knowledge. I wasn’t back with the casualties themselves. One of
our corpsmen went back until he could be delivered to a company corpsman and he
rejoined our platoon. But, I don’t believe they were under fire at the time the helicopters
landed.

AH: Now, on civic action, were you involved in any type of civic action
regarding the Cam Ni Village Operation?

RS: No, not in connection with Cam Ni itself. To my knowledge, there was very
little done there because once we went through and the guerillas left, the other company
came in, and this is from 2nd Battalion, 9th Marines, and I don’t know what their activities
were in that area. We were there for quite awhile.

AH: Now, on your tour of duty in Vietnam, was your platoon… You had a
platoon at all times, is that correct?

RS: Yes.

AH: Was it involved in any civic action of any other type, or were you more or
less a hit-and-run unit?

RS: I don’t know whether it was planned that way, but that’s about what we
amounted to, our battalion was moved approximately five times in the four months I was
there. So as a result, we never were able to set up any large-scale, far-reaching people-to-
people programs in any one area. We did have some policies in a battalion that when we
were in an area and there was not too much resistance, the danger from hostilities was not
too great. We would send out patrols with our corpsmen and each of the patrol members
would take soap and food and things like that, some clothing possibly, and go to an area,
a village, and set up a little aid station and such and find the village leader and have him
gather people that were sick or children, people that were needy and give out these things
we had. We did that as much as possible and the people seemed to appreciate it. At first,
they were very wary of us and later they didn’t seem to worry too much about us being
around. It was noticeable particularly in the western section of the perimeter there at Da
Nang where the Marines had been for quite a while around Hill 327. Going through that
perimeter out in the villages where the villagers were not protected constantly from the
VC, it was like walking… you could see the fear on the people’s faces. They were just
scared to death of both sides. When you come back in through the pass there, you see the
people that suddenly have been guarded by the Marines and are living their normal lives
and plowing in the fields. It’s just a completely different type of people. Whenever we
can stay in areas long enough to guard them, I think it’s going to be very effective; the
whole program is. But just to go out and look in a village and come back is going to have
little effect on the villagers themselves.

AH: Lieutenant Snyder, during your tour in Vietnam, in what other actions were
you involved? Were they any others?

RS: Mostly patrolling actions as such. We secured the area around Marble
Mountain. A reconnaissance unit was working there and then they decided to send our
battalion over and our company was an advanced company for that battalion movement
where we patrolled and secured the area where the new helicopter pad is now at Marble
Mountain. Then worked on south of there where all of our companies ran into quite a bit
of resistance. The casualty rate really started picking up when we moved south of Marble
Mountain and it turned into quite an extensive combat patrol situation and that was our
job really.

AH: How did you personally feel—and perhaps some of your men have made
comments regarding it too—of having to fight an enemy which ninety-percent of the time
or more you can’t even see?

RS: That’s something that it takes some getting used to and I don’t know that I
ever got used to it and I don’t whether they did or not. You always had the feeling that
you’re giving them the first punch and that you hope that it’s not a good one and you can
get in a permanent second punch for yourself. They’ll always have the advantage of
surprise as long as it’s just the guerilla units. Now, we ambushed a number of the hard-
core people who had helmets and rifles and they were operating as a military unit. They
really did not give us much of a problem militarily. Once we can engage units that we
could recognize as enemy, if we could engage them, it was not much problem because we
had so much superior firepower.

AH: This is a little unusual for our forces to use this type of tactic, that is an
ambush. Just how did you go about setting up an ambush against the enemy?
RS: We would send out patrols when we moved into a new area and just
generally scouted out marking the main trails on the map, particularly trail junctions,
crossings at streams, things that would be used or would have to be used to get into the
area, to get access to it. Then, we would come back and plan for night ambushes to go
out and sneak into those areas and lay in the ambush for say anywhere from two hours to
six hours.
AH: In other words, your ambush patrol wouldn’t leave until after dark to go into
that ambush area?
RS: Yes, normally, in fact, it wouldn’t leave until around 2200 because the
villagers are just settling down around dusk and then after dark, they don’t move around
too much. If you leave much before then, the dogs bark and warn people that you’re
moving around or some villagers that are up late at night will see you moving around.
The word just seems to get out. Leaving late at night and getting into position and
staying there; you’re there by the time the guerillas start moving which we generally
found to be somewhere after midnight anyway. We had, I think, reasonable success at
those ambushes. They’re difficult and you have to sit in a lot of them to ever get a
chance to find some guerillas using your trail.
AH: How did you fair on your ambushes that you set up? Did you have that
much success with it?
RS: Yes, I thought we had a reasonable amount of success with the ones we set
up. We caused some casualties and we never took any of our own. None of our units
were ever ambushed there, none of my platoon while I was there. They have since. I’ve
gotten letters from them saying that right after I left they went on an operation and were
specifically assigned to ambushes. They counted for about twenty VC dead. A company
sweep flushed the guerillas and flushed them into our ambushes that were set up. It
sounded like a very good operation to me; they were quite successful at it. Our ambushes
are as good, in fact, I think better than theirs, because we have more firepower and people
are trained to use those weapons. We have good shots. They don’t miss nearly so often,
and the guerillas, the farmers, are terrible shots to be honest. That’s the only thing that
probably saved a lot of us. We had had a number of rounds hit around us, but nobody hit.
So, our marksmanship is important there, too.

AH: Now, in conclusion, Lieutenant Snyder, can you recall any of your personal
experiences during the entire tour in Vietnam that might prove interesting here other than
the booby-traps we’ve run into and your personal feelings and observations about the
various… What about a little observation on the Cam Ni Village burning again? In
conclusion, what would your observations be in general?

RS: Just generally that the things that were reported about it were true, that were
on television. The facts were there. The film was filmed in the operation. The reporter
was with my platoon, in fact. However, he took many more shots of casualties being
evacuated, of the firing that we were taking at the start where you could see water
splashing up from a bullet strike. All of that was not included in the film. I think it was
just edited to support his opinion, which was not necessarily against the Marines, but
rather the thing is hard on villagers. In fact, it is hard on villagers. It’s almost impossible
to fight through an area like that without including some villagers in it.

AH: Apparently the story has been misinterpreted in many circles because the
news came out that a village was burned, but this is contrary to what you explained to us
about four-hundred houses and huts still remained standing after you had burned certain
huts in order to rob the enemy. So, actually, you burned a total of how many probably?

RS: Oh, I would estimate that there were probably between fifty and one-
hundred.

AH: Between fifty and one-hundred with four-hundred remaining standing, so
that doesn’t sound like a village was entirely burned.
RS: No, we tried to avoid it as much as possible, but I can’t help but think that
the safety of our Marines came first.

AH: Right, as you explained earlier in the whole operation of the Cam Ni Village
burning. Lieutenant Snyder, thank you very much for talking to us this afternoon.

RS: You’re sure welcome.