Sergeant Robert Oliva: This interview is being conducted with Captain William T. Warren by Master Sergeant Robert H. Oliva at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia. The subject of this interview is land acquisition, and is unclassified. Captain Warren, would you state your name, grade, and service number?

Captain William Warren: I'm William T. Warren, III, Captain, United States Marines Corps Reserve. Service number is 080587.

RO: What were your duty assignments while you were in Vietnam?

WW: My duty assignment in the Republic of Vietnam was land or real estate officer assigned to the G4 Section, 3rd Marine Amphibious Force.

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

WW: I was stationed in RVN from June to November 1965, and I was physically located at Da Nang.

RO: Discuss the major problems concerning land acquisition.

WW: When I first arrived in the Republic of Vietnam, I was assigned as real estate officer under the base development board, which at that time was headed by Lieutenant Colonel Sartor. My problems, my job at that time was chiefly concerned with acquisition of various small pieces of real estate, which were used as motor pools, as ammo dumps, and for various other operational purposes. Shortly after I arrived in Vietnam, the Viet Cong had a successful raid on the airfield at Da Nang. This brought to
light a rather serious security problem which had existed for some time and was in the process of being solved, but had not at that time been completed. This was the fact that the Vietnamese indigenous personnel were living in very close proximity with the security fence surrounding the Da Nang air base. Prior to that time, in approximately March of 1965, the commanding general of I Corps, General Thi, had been contacted concerning this problem. And he had agreed to furnish the Marine Corps, or the United States forces operating in this area, with a cleared zone around this perimeter fence at Da Nang Air Base for security purposes. This zone was to be an area three- to five-hundred meters in width surrounding the fence of the entire base. And it was to be cleared of all civilian personnel and buildings to provide fields of observation and fire around the security fence. As I said, nothing had been done to implement this plan at the time I arrived in Vietnam, as far as the Marine Corps was concerned. The mayor of Da Nang had been entrusted with the task of ascertaining how many people were occupying this area and whose property rights would be concerned when the people were moved. But prior to the July 1 raid on the Da Nang Air Base, no one had actually had been moved from this area. After the raid on the base it became apparent that clearing this area was of paramount importance. Consequently, pressure was put upon the I Corps personnel to speed up this move as much as possible. And on the 17th of July this move actually began. The G4 section of the MAF was entrusted or charged with the responsibility of providing logistic support for the Vietnamese who were conducting these operations. The mayor of Da Nang requested that he be supplied with twenty trucks, five-ton six-by-sixes, each day for a period of seventy to ninety days to carry out this moving operation and this was agreed to initially. Major C. P. Clark, who was at that time the G4A of the MAF, was initially in charge of this operation. However, since this seemed to fall into the category of real estate, I was assigned to the operation in his place. I took over on the 20th of July.

The problem was roughly this: The perimeter fence at Da Nang Air Base some ten-thousand meters in length, and in the area set aside for clearance there were approximately 826 civilian houses and roughly 5,000 civilians. In addition, there were approximately 6,000 graves in this area. The graves were of some importance because the Vietnamese customs pertaining to the dead and to burial dictated that the families of
the deceased visit the graves at certain intervals. Of course, this was contrary to the
Marine Corps’s interests because we wished to deny access to this land completely and
we didn’t want to have indigenous people in this area for the purposes of visiting the
graves. So the graves had to be moved. Also, we wanted to feel free to use earth-moving
equipment and alter the landscape in any way we saw fit to provide for the security of the
base. The moving commenced on the northeast side of the field and progressed there to
the southeast side of the field, then the final portion of the southwest and then finally the
northwest portions were cleared. The entire operation lasted from the 17th of July until
the 1st of November. The major problems connected with this operation was, first,
vehicle availability. The demand for twenty six-bys per day put a tremendous strain on
the motor transport facilities of the 3rd Division. Motor transport did an outstanding job
of furnishing vehicles, but even so there were days when only eight or ten trucks were
available, and the movement was hampered to some extent by this. Also, there was a
definite lack of good communication between the Marine Corps and the Vietnamese
officials, especially on the local level. As far as I was concerned, there were never
enough interpreters. I had one interpreter assigned to me who sometimes appeared and
sometimes didn’t. And when he was available he was generally available only half a day
and there were a tremendous number of problems that arose in connection with the
inability to communicate. The liaison between the Marine Corps and the mayor of Da
Nang was inadequate. At certain points, moving was held up for as much as a week
because of inadequate area to relocate the families who were being displaced from the
cleared area. The Marine Corps, in addition to furnishing transportation, also agreed to
furnish engineer equipment to use in developing relocation areas for the people who had
been displaced from their homes. This it did when requested. However, in at least two
instances the request for assistance came so late that although the Marine engineers
reacted promptly they were unable to complete the relocation areas in time for their
immediate use. And consequently, the move was held up. Also, on other occasions the
move was held up because the mayor’s surveying team had not gone out into the area and
marked off the plots for the various Vietnamese families to occupy. On one occasion this
held up the move entirely for a period of some five days. At best, as many as twenty
houses or some 120 people were moved in a day. As far as the houses were concerned,
all the houses were completely dismantled and all component parts were loaded onto trucks and moved away. This included not only dwelling houses but small stores on some occasions, also shrines, temples, the above-the-earth portion of graves, and anything else including all of the heavier vegetation such as bamboo and trees. In most cases all of the bamboo roots were actually dug up and carried away by the Vietnamese. The area was completely denuded by the time the operation was ended. Each Vietnamese house of the thatched variety represented approximately four to six truckloads. And the larger houses, some of them constructed of cement block and tile, required as many as twelve to fourteen truckloads to completely remove. It can readily be seen that this is a tremendous amount of vehicle commitment for such a thing as moving a house. In the future, it seems to me that it might be better to consider very seriously completely demolishing the houses and merely paying off the inhabitants in full to compensate them, not only for their losses of land but for the loss of their houses, rather than to attempt such a painstaking type of effort as was performed in the Da Nang area.

The actual moving of the people was not particularly difficult. The attitude of the people toward being moved was in no way hostile, although they were concerned about being paid for their land, and they were finally paid, I understand. This payment did not come directly from the Marine Corps but came down through Vietnamese channels and was handled by the mayor of Da Nang. I had no personal knowledge of how this was conducted. But I was told by the mayor’s advisor, Lieutenant Colonel McCord, US Army, that he carried this out himself personally. I do know that some sixty-four million piasters were allocated by the government of Vietnam for this purpose and it was my understanding that each family was to receive thirty-thousand piasters as a dislocation allowance.

RO: Thank you, Captain Warren, for this interview.