Sergeant Bob Vandewalker: From the El Toro Marine Air Station, this is Marine
Staff Sergeant Bob Vandewalker interviewing Sergeant Stephen Salisbury. Steve, what is
your job here at El Toro?
Sergeant Steve Salisbury: At the present time I’m instructing the Vietnamese
language for the 3rd Marine Air Wing Language School.
BV: You have spent time in Vietnam?
SS: Yes, I have.
BV: When did you go to Vietnam and what was the reason? Can you explain this
to me?
SS: I went to Vietnam back in August and the purpose for my trip was as a
Vietnamese language trainee. In other words, I had been to language school but I had not
yet had a chance to utilize the language with the natives.
BV: Using this language, what was your job over there?
SS: Originally, as I said, I was supposed to be a trainee and as it turned out, I was
dropped in with the Civic Action Program as an interpreter.
BV: How did this work?
SS: They had four squads. They were just starting this and trying it out because it
was new. They had four squads, one in each of four villages. And we stayed out there all
the time and went to the base camp about every seven days. And then we’d spend one
day in base camp and go back to the village. And in the village during the day we’d help
the villagers build toilets for the town and various other items like that.

BV: Were you involved at all in delivering any of this civic action stuff that was
picked up back in the United States?

SS: Yes. We gave soap out to the families and we had a corpsman that held sick
call every day in the village. Then two or three days a week we would make more or less
reconnaissance patrols out in the surrounding hamlets. At this time the corpsman would
also hold sick call for these hamlets.

BV: With the ability to speak to the Vietnamese people and understand them, do
you feel that we were helping them quite a bit, or that they felt we were helping them?

SS: Yes, I do, especially if someone were able to see some of the children and
some of their problems that they brought to the corpsman. He was not able to handle all
of their problems but about every two weeks we had a medical team with a doctor to
come out to the village.

BV: What were some of the problems these young kids had? For example, any
type of disease or things, sick, colds, or anything like this? How was it?

SS: The biggest thing was cleanliness. There was none.

BV: Just their own personal hygiene.

SS: Right.

BV: Did we get into an extensive program on this?

SS: Yes, we did. A couple of the squads had it set up in their villages to where
they gave baths to the children. They just had an assembly line set up of Marines and the
people would bring the children to the bathing spot and the men would just hand the child
from one to the other and one would wash and one would rinse it. One would wipe it and
so forth.

BV: Are these the children that couldn’t walk or are we talking about children
that could walk?

SS: These were mostly babies.

BV: How about the children, let’s say five, six, seven, eight, something like this?
The people were instructed in the use of the soap that we gave them, if they did not know already. Later we would see them down at the river and they would be using it as they were told to do so.

BV: Do you feel that once we had shown the people how to take of themselves or their hygiene that they went back and did it on their own after that?

SS: Most of them did, yes.

BV: What other supplies did we hand out over there? Things that they could use?

SS: I didn’t stay there that long to get that familiar, but some of the things we had were soap, and then of course, the medicines that are sent over there are utilized by the doctors. And then also they had a Vietnamese holiday and there were toys and things of this nature.

BV: In the short time you were there, could you see a change of where there was an improvement through our civil contact program?

SS: Definitely. In the villages that we had the four squads there was a definite favorable reaction to the United States.

BV: Were these squads made up Marines or different branches of service?

SS: It was just Marines only. It was in the experimental stage and there were fourteen men to a squad, plus an interpreter. My squad was the only one that had an American interpreter. The other squads had Vietnamese soldiers that spoke English.

BV: We also had a Navy medical corps there, is that right?

SS: Yes. Well, the corpsman made up one of the members of the squad. The interpreter was the only so-called extra.

BV: Did you get a chance to use your Vietnamese quite a bit over there in speaking? Do you feel that you have a lot more to learn?

SS: Yes. Anytime we wanted to do anything in the village, I had to intercede for the squad leader. And then I had to make sick call with the corpsman so that we could find out exactly what were the ailments of the patients.

BV: What personal contact did you have with the person there? Would you go to the head man of the village? How did this work?

SS: When we first went into the village, I was introduced to the village chief by the platoon leader in charge of these four squads and he spoke Vietnamese, also. It was a
Lieutenant Eck who is now back in the United States. And I was introduced to him and he was naturally going to give us any help that he could, which he did. Another one of our jobs was to train the Popular Forces and utilize them with us and any problems we might run into. The Popular Forces are just like our National Guard: people left behind to guard the village.

BV: Sergeant Salisbury, with your ability to speak Vietnamese did you get the opportunity to talk to the people to explain to them what we are trying to do over in Vietnam? Do you think that they understand what we’re trying to do?

SS: Some of the people do but, then again, in the area I was operating in once you get out of the larger cities most of the people have a very, very basic education. Like the village I was working in, the majority of the population had been to a maximum of two years of school, which was nothing more than maybe learning how to write and possibly a little reading.

BV: Who ran these schools?

SS: These schools were run by qualified teachers brought into the area by the Vietnamese government.

BV: Since our involvement over in Vietnam, have we started teaching a little bit more?

SS: Yes. The schools are getting better with our aid and they’re getting more schools. They’re going to have two brand new schools just in the village I was in. And this money is gotten, I believe, from United States aid.

BV: You mentioned going out in the hamlets. What is your description of a hamlet compared to your village?

SS: A village, the one like I worked in, consisted of a village headquarters and a marketplace and scattered houses in and around and the school. A hamlet is nothing more than people that have put two or three houses together or around, say, maybe a dam on the river or around a good rice field or something of this nature, in order for protection and better living.

BV: In miles, how far were some hamlets from these villages?

SS: They were anywhere from two to three miles.

BV: They were in dense jungle in many cases, is that right?
SS: In the area I was in, the jungle wasn’t as dense as it is in the more southern part of the country.

BV: Where were you geographically located in Vietnam?

SS: I was about twenty miles from the 17th parallel, twenty-five miles.

BV: You were up north, then?

SS: Right. I was just below the city of Hue.

BV: What type of stores and conveniences did these people have in these villages?

SS: Roughly none. They had a marketplace. It was open from eight in the morning until noon, seven days a week. And the people would bring their wares, their items made out of bamboo and their pots and pans and lamps and silk and things of this nature, into the marketplace and set up shop for half a day. At twelve o’clock they would shut down. Outside of that, all they had were four stores right there in the village and they sold cookies, maybe, and soda pop, and things of this nature.

BV: These cookies were homemade Vietnamese-type cookies?

SS: Yes, they were.

BV: Where did the soda pops come from? Are we talking about name brands here in the United States?

SS: No. We’re talking about Vietnamese brands. The only American brand they sold was Coca-Cola and it was bottled in “Shaigon.” I said “Shaigon” because most of the S’s in Vietnamese are pronounced S-H and I forget. But they didn’t sell as many of these, naturally, until the Marines moved into the neighborhood, and then they started selling ice and Cokes.

BV: Was the average Vietnamese surprised when they found out you could speak and other Americans were trying to speak Vietnamese?

SS: Most definitely.

BV: Being an instructor in the Vietnamese language, do you feel we have a lot of Marines that are trying to speak Vietnamese or are going to school?

SS: Yes, you’ll find that the majority of the Marines that know that they’re going to Vietnam for one reason or another would like to know and are really trying to pick up some Vietnamese.
BV: Turning this around: Did you have the opportunity to teach any of the young children a few words of English?

SS: Yes, quite frequently.

BV: Do you feel they wanted to pick it up?

SS: Yes, they did. And quite a few of the older people that I worked with, especially the village chief. I used to hold English classes about an hour every day.

BV: Was there any particular name that they had for you over there as far as in Vietnamese? What would they call you?

SS: I was given a Vietnamese name when I went to Vietnamese language school by my instructor, who was a Vietnamese lady. I was given the name of Xuan, which is a Vietnamese name. So I used this in Vietnam.

BV: Is this true all the way along the line, that any Marine interpreter would use a Vietnamese name?

SS: I don’t know because I am not acquainted with any other Marine interpreters in the country.

BV: You went to another school, after you left the States, in Vietnam, then?

SS: No, I did not.

BV: Do you go to any previous schools, say, in Okinawa, or any other place?

SS: No, all I went to was the six-month Army language school at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii.

BV: Was there quite a few people going at the time?

SS: Yes. We had five Marines and then there were fifteen Army personnel in the school, in my class.

BV: Is this like a joint school, all branches of service going to this?

SS: No, but I believe the Army and Marine Corps have some type of trade worked out.

BV: Did they teach you the history of Vietnam along with the language? Do you feel that a lot of Marines going over, a lot of servicemen, do not know the history of Vietnam?

SS: They gave us a brief history and then some geography and things of this nature. But then they recommended books for us to read, which I did, one.
BV: How was the Vietnamese government set up as compared to the United States? They don’t have states there, they have provinces.

SS: Right. They have provinces and districts, and things of this type.

BV: But is there a problem as far as communication from a distance, knowing what the head man of a province would say to the villagers and so forth?

SS: Every so often you’ll have your province chief come to the various villages and talk to the family heads, and these are the oldest man of the family that runs all the family affairs.

BV: In this Civic Action Program did we deal with the head of the family or the village chief, or how did this work?

SS: We dealt with the village chief and then he told the people of the village what we were doing and whatever materials or whatnot that we needed in order to do this.

BV: You yourself lived in the village. What type of conditions did you live in?

SS: No, they had a house beside the village headquarters that belonged to the family of the village chief. The Popular Forces utilize this sort of makeshift mess hall on one side. They cooked their meals there during the day and we stored our supplies in and around this, and then we also had an abandoned French bunker that we stored supplies in. And then we just more or less laid our heads where we could find a spot. But usually at night we were busy.

BV: As an interpreter, did you usually carry a weapon of some kind when you went into one of these villages?

SS: Yes, most definitely.

BV: They did not seem to downgrade you because of this, did they?

SS: No, they did not. I believe they all understood.

BV: While you were over there in Vietnam, did you get the chance to see any Viet Cong?

SS: Yes, we ran into them occasionally.

BV: Through being friendly with the Vietnamese people, did they want to turn in the Viet Cong, if there were any in the villages, to you, or let you know if any were around?
SS: As I said, we were just getting that under way. It hadn’t been going very long and you have to get the people used to you first. But there was a big fear there that if they did that, they would be harmed by the Viet Cong. But we were slowly but surely winning our battle in this.

BV: We had a program going from the United States over there. What type of program did the Viet Cong have?

SS: I believe that the Viet Cong’s program is based mostly on fear, because the Viet Cong don’t seem to have anything to give. They’re the ones that need what the Vietnamese people have. They need the rice and the shelter and a place to hide during the day.

BV: Would the Viet Cong go into these villages and actually take children, people, out of the village?

SS: Not in the village I was in. I really can’t speak with any great validity on that.

BV: You were way out…let’s say not in the jungle but away from everything. How did you get all this gear out into this area?

SS: We were re-supplied every other day by truck.

BV: There were roads, in other words?

SS: We were right on the only main road in the country. They call it Route 1, but sometimes it’s paved and sometimes it’s broken up. And originally I believe it was supposed to run from north to south, but there’s quite few areas of it that had been destroyed by the VC.

BV: There was a problem as far as the dangers of traveling this thing day or night, weren’t there?

SS: Yes, there was. We didn’t usually like to bring out a supply truck at night, which we did not do.

BV: And how about the monsoon season? Was it kind of rough to get over these roads? Were they washed out or anything?

SS: I left just before this started. This road did not wash out, no. But the rains were heavy and getting around was rather difficult, especially out in the villages. We always relied on the good old-fashioned method by going in on foot.
BV: Living with the Vietnamese in their village and everything, were they sort of surprised how you as a serviceman would adjust in their particular environment?

SS: I believe so. We had quite a few invitations out for dinner to various houses and this type of thing.

BV: You had to be careful about the kind of food you ate over there?

SS: We tried to be careful of who we accepted but you can’t turn down everyone and the only thing to do is to try to accept the right ones and then be careful of what you eat when you do go.

BV: What did their diet mainly consist of?

SS: The biggest thing, naturally, was rice. But then they had some birds. One night we ate with these people that killed these birds. I don’t know what type they were. But it tasted similar to chicken and they had done them in some kind of barbeque sauce. Like, I guess, soya sauce. But it was very good.

BV: You didn’t get sick or anything like that?

SS: No, I didn’t.

BV: Is there a problem in these villages of us giving food to them and it affecting their diet or affecting these people because they do have only one diet.

SS: I believe in the food department they get along quite well.

BV: Did you have the opportunity to give them any food at all?

SS: No. Usually when we would go to a house for dinner, while we would take our C-rations that we were going to eat for that meal, we would give them that and then eat their meal.

BV: They enjoyed our C-rations?

SS: Yes, they did.

BV: How about other living conditions in this village as far as snakes or diseases, mosquitoes, malaria or so forth? Did this exist?

SS: It existed but we took malaria pills once a week, which did not prevent you from contracting malaria but it did keep you from actually coming down with a disease until such time as you left the country and would quit taking the pill. And then at this time, if you had contracted it you would come down with it but it would be much milder than it would, had you not taken the pill.
BV: In your particular situation did we have any program where you were inoculating these people against any of this?

SS: I believe they have inoculations set up, but I’m not sure to what extent it is. I do know that if the doctors would come out to the village and they would have a patient that would have various things wrong such as where they needed antibiotics, that they were getting these.

BV: Did you run into any snakes or any type of reptiles there in your living conditions that were harmful?

SS: We ran into a few snakes and we shared our house, so to speak, with the bats and rats. But as far as snakes, there weren’t as many up there as there is in the more dense jungle.

BV: Were there a lot of bats and rats around these villages?

SS: In this particular one there was.

BV: Are they pretty large rats?

SS: The rats we had in ours were about the size of a full-grown cat.

BV: They carry quite a bit of disease, too, don’t they?

SS: Yes, they do.

BV: Do we have any type of program where were trying to get rid of these in the villages and so forth?

SS: I don’t know. I’m unaware of this, if it is being done.

BV: Getting back to the ability to speak Vietnamese: How does this start? Is there a set program of verbs, adverbs, and nouns, and so forth? How does this work, Sergeant Salisbury?

SS: They have nouns and pronouns and verbs and adverbs and adjectives and this type thing, but the sentences are constructed differently from ours.

BV: Can some of these Vietnamese people understand French? The French people were stationed there a long while. Can they also understand French or just strictly Vietnamese?

SS: The more-educated Vietnamese can understand French, most of them, because French was taught in their schools when the French were there. And the ones that went to school can speak and understand French.
BV: Are we going to teach them English or are we still teaching them Vietnamese, as far as the school setup goes?

SS: We aren’t teaching them anything. They run their own schools according to the way they want to run them. And I understand that some of the high schools and the colleges are now offering English as a foreign language.

BV: Do you feel by having Americans go over or foreigners go over there to work in their schools that it would be an advantage to the Vietnamese people?

SS: No, I don’t believe so because it comes to the point of where you would say do you believe that if we had someone from another country come here work in our schools. Now, if you mean as far as instructing language, I believe it would be helpful because I don’t think that there’s anyone that can instruct the language better than the native speaker himself.

BV: Sergeant Salisbury, what is your opinion of our role in Vietnam?

SS: I’m glad you said my opinion, because this is my personal opinion: that the United States has to do what is doing in Vietnam, exactly like it’s going about it. Because they cannot go in and just take over the country and run it and then build it up. Because this is the kind of propaganda that the communist countries are looking for. And then they say that the United States is taking over another country, so to speak. But if we go in and give them aid and win them over to our way of life, so to speak, or to better themselves, and we do this not forcibly but in the manner in which we are doing now, why, then we’ll accomplish our mission but it will take a longer time.

BV: How do you feel about your own personal involvement? In other words, would you go back to Vietnam? Would you like to go back to Vietnam if you had a job to do over there?

SS: Yes, I feel I have a job to do over there. But then again, it becomes conflicting with my own personal family and so forth. But I feel there is a job I could do over there and I do believe that the Civic Action Program is the job.

BV: Steve, do you feel you have gained a different set of values or new set of values since you were in Vietnam?

SS: I most definitely do.
BV: What are they, for example?

SS: I believe the biggest thing is that I have a higher value of cleanliness. I had a high value of cleanliness before I went over but nowhere near the one that I do now. Because to have to live like some of those people—not necessarily have to live but the way they have learned to live—I’m just thankful for what I have.

BV: How about your sense of values to your people and things you took for granted before?

SS: Well, this could go on and on, mostly in the government and in the right of freedom and the soft life we have here in the United States. You take everything every day for granted—most people do, as well as myself—and then you go to a place like that where the people have exactly nothing. And then you begin to realize how well off you are.

BV: Sergeant Steve Salisbury, I want to thank you very much for coming down to talk to me today and I want to wish you a lot of luck.

SS: Okay, well, thanks very much, Bob.