E.J. Godfrey: This is a Vietnam interview tape of Corporal Franklin L. Hill, 20434970311, US Marine Corps. He’s being interviewed by Major E.J. Godfrey, US Marine Corps, at Parris Island, Marine Corps Recruit Depot; Parris Island, South Carolina, on 31 January 1966. The subject of the interview will be the duties that Corporal Hill had between 9 April of ’65 and 1 July ’65 with Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 3rd Marines, specifically his duties and experiences as a fire team leader and a squad leader. Corporal Hill, you started out, as I recall, as a fire team leader didn’t you?

Franklin Hill: Yes, sir.

EG: When did your unit first get to Vietnam?

FH: Sir, we landed the first part of April in Vietnam; in Da Nang, South Vietnam.

EG: Where did you actually go in?

FH: We went in Red Beach, as I recall, sir, in Da Nang.

EG: You took over part of the perimeter immediately or did you—?

FH: We went to a staging area, sir, and from there we went into the perimeter around Da Nang, near a small village by the name of Le My.

EG: How do you spell that?

FH: Le My, sir.

EG: Le My. Well, go ahead. What did you do from there and your unit?
FH: Our unit took up positions on the perimeter around Da Nang near this small village. After we were in our positions, we began to run patrols, search-and-clear operations into the village of Le My.

EG: What size of patrols did you run?

FH: They consisted of everything, sir, from the company-sized movement to squad-sized.

EG: Did you work over more than just the village of Le My or did you keep moving or did you just keep sweeping this one same area?

FH: First period about of four weeks, we continued operations in the Le My area, moving into the village itself and clearing it out of all resistance. After this period of time, we moved into a stationary position and from this position ran patrols, recon patrols, and set in ambushes.

EG: During this time, were you a squad leader or a fire team leader?

FH: During this time, sir, I was a fire team leader for three weeks or four weeks that I was in Vietnam

EG: When did you become a squad leader?

FH: Approximately the first part of May, sir.

EG: How did you come to become a squad leader?

FH: We were in the village of Le My itself, sir. The squad leader, second and third fire team leaders and the second automatic rifleman were wounded by a booby-trapped mine. They were moving along a path when one of the men tripped the trip wire—

EG: How could a mine hit that many, I’ll call them high-ranking people, that were within a squad all at one time. What were you, bunched in or what?

FH: The squad leader, sir, had received the order from the platoon commander who was calling for his fire team leaders up so he could pass the word on to them. As the fire team leaders were moving towards their squad leader to get the word they had to pass to them, the mine was set off. Consequently, in this general area of a few meters myself, I was the first team leader and I had the point. I was coming back in the opposite direction of these other team leaders and it took me longer to get back to the area where the squad leader was at.
EG: What type operations did you run?

FH: This was a sweep-and-clear operation, sir. We were moving into the area, moving out all enemy resistance.

EG: Had you worked this area before?

FH: Yes, sir, many times.

EG: So, you actually, you constantly had to go over and sweep this area?

FH: Yes, sir. We’d move into the village one day, pull out that night. The Viet Cong would possibly come down to the village that same evening. We would move in the following day, move into the area and once again remove the enemy resistance.

EG: What kind of success were you getting from the support of the people there as far as them giving you the word on what was in there?

FH: We had absolutely no support for the first, possibly, four or five days we went into the village. From here on out, the Vietnamese people understood that what we were doing and they understood a little better what we were doing there. They helped us with the panzi traps, the stakes, removing them. They would show us various places where the Viet Cong had stored their rice when they’d come down out of the hills with their rice.

EG: Where they would store their rice?

FH: Well, sir, they had various means of storing or hiding their rice. Most of it was buried right in the ground in bamboo containers; buried in the ground and then put the top on it and cover it with dirt or sand. It was very easily accessible to the enemy troops moving into the area. It was not marked in any way except for the troopers who actually buried it there who knew where it was at.

EG: How much rice would they bury in it? I realize that there is no way you would really know, but were you finding good quantities of rice buried like this?

FH: We would find, sir, occasionally thirty-five to forty pounds of rice buried in a small area and then move outward to a different area, I’d say, sixty or seventy feet from the original point where we found the rice and then we’d find the same amount again.

EG: I see. Moving on to when you actually took over as a squad leader, what type operations did you lead your squad on?
FH: The operations, sir, were varied. It was from actual guarding of bridges to
reconnaissance patrols in our general area.
EG: Did you ever take any special equipment with you on the recon patrols or
were you going strictly with a TO rifle squad?
FH: We were going, sir, with a TO rifle squad.
EG: How did you find your M-14?
FH: I thought it was a very dependable weapon, sir, no matter what the weather
conditions or the conditions of rain we kept this rifle in.
EG: Did you find a need for regular or automatic fire in the encounters that you
did run into it?
FH: No, sir, I didn’t because the enemy wasn’t that concentrated. They weren’t in
a group when they fired upon us. It was more or less dispersed and sniper fire.
EG: You found that accurate fire was more valuable to you than volume?
FH: Yes, sir. A great deal.
EG: Did you run into any ambushes at all with your squad?
FH: No, sir. My squad didn’t.
EG: I see. Did you set up any ambushes?
FH: We set up numerous ambushes, sir, without any contact with the enemy.
EG: I see. What contact did you run into other than mines and snipers?
FH: It stayed mostly along the line of snipers, sir. There was very little actual
aggressiveness toward the enemy side for us.
EG: I see.
FH: In other words, they wouldn’t address us—if they addressed us it was up to
us to go and actually flush them out.
EG: Did you ever actually clear and—feel that your outfit had cleared any areas
or did you find that you kept having to come back and back and back?
FH: Well, sir, I felt it was a necessity to come back into the area that we’d
cleared previously because we didn’t actually know who we were fighting or who was
the enemy. So I felt necessary that we should come back into the areas. I believe that we
did an exceptional amount of work in winning over the people of the village of Le My
both through medical aid from the Marines and through the friendship of the Marines—
EG: Did the average Marine himself actually get into this area?

FH: Yes, sir, he did. The average Marine, for instance, would be on a search-and-clear operation. You’d move into a village, perhaps you would have to search a person’s house, go along with his primary duty of searching the house and then he would make friends or be considerate of the Vietnamese civilian and this won a great deal of respect for the Marines in that area.

EG: Did you have any trouble with your squad along these lines?

FH: No, sir, I had no trouble.

EG: I see. How did you find your individual equipment held up?

FH: I felt certain the 782 gear and our packs and our cartridge belts and magazine pouches were in very poor condition after a few weeks of actual duty.

EG: It didn’t stand up to the climate too well?

FH: No, sir.

EG: Anything specific or just your individual equipment in general?

FH: The equipment in general, sir.

EG: Your packs—I’ve been talking to other squad leaders. They had specific things that they found that their squad should carry with them in this type of operation. What did you have your squad carry, or was this set up to you?

FH: Most of the time, sir, it was set up to the individual as to what he was to carry depending upon the mission, depending upon the terrain, just as long as he was covered. For instance, if you were going to be in a low, marshy land with a lot of water, you would always want an extra pair of socks, or two or three extra pairs. Or if you were going to be in the hills, possibly you’d want something else, some other type of gear to take with you.

EG: Did you carry your packs on every operation?

FH: No, sir, we didn’t.

EG: Why not?

FH: We found that, sir, it wasn’t necessary to do this because the packs were only something else to carry.

EG: How long were you usually out on your search-and-clear?
This interview is part of the United States Marine Corps History and Museums Division Oral History Project.

FH: Sir, you’d go out during the day itself on the actual clearing operation and during the night, you’d pull back into a perimeter near the area that you had cleared and then we’d set up our listening posts and so forth and you probably want to move back into the area that you cleared the day before and continue to clear it again.

EG: Did you ever leave ambushes out there?

FH: There were a few left, sir, but I don’t have any details—.

EG: You didn’t. Did your squad ever set up any roadblocks?

FH: We set up a variation of roadblock, sir. We had two bridges to guard and we actually set in a perimeter around these small bridges.

EG: I see. Would you actually stop and check people coming through, or were you just planning to prevent other than military here?

FH: We stopped everything and everyone, sir, during the hours of darkness. During the day, we would spot check, for instance, the Vietnamese civilians who were issued small I.D. cards coming into the area. We’d check their I.D. cards and make sure that they were supposed to be in the area.

EG: Did you have any—in this roadblock, did you have positions other than right at the block itself? In other words, to get people who were trying to cut around you?

FH: Well, sir, we set up in a perimeter around the bridge and when we first set in this perimeter, we were out in the open; we had nothing to protect us and it was the flatland and it would have been very easy to attack us from any side. After we were there for possibly two or three weeks, we had sandbags, we had bunkers fortified with logs, bamboo, or whatever was available

EG: Was all the traffic pretty well channelized through this?

FH: Yes, sir.

EG: I see. So actually, it would have been difficult for them to go around you then?

FH: Yes, sir.

EG: Did you start to get any of the new equipment, jungle equipment?

FH: At the period of time when I was leaving Vietnam, we started to receive, for instance, jungle utilities and jungle boots. When we first landed at the period of the time up until we left, we didn’t see too much of this special equipment to be used in Vietnam.
EG: Did your squad actually get any of it?
FH: My squad at a later date got some special gear.
EG: How did this hold up?
FH: The boots held up exceptionally well, sir. The jungle boots and the jungle utilities were really good. They were ideal for the climate, ideal for the terrain and for the type of operations that we were involved in.

EG: I see. Did you ever, in your area, come into any really well-developed VC installations either above or underground such as you read about closer into Saigon?
FH: No, sir, we didn’t.
EG: Are there any other personal observations that you could add to that relative to existing in this particular area in your day-to-day life?
FH: Well, sir, we found that it is a lot better the more liquid we had. The more, for instance, water or juices of some type that we were given or the fruit that we received in our C-rations. This was a lot better than eating the heavy can of food we received in C-rations. We could survive and work a lot better on some, for instance, a can of fruit instead of a can of lima beans, for instance.

EG: Did you find that your men were eating the ham and limas and the sausage patties and whatever else they may have had here?
FH: Yes, sir. They were eating it, but it was a lot easier when, for instance, on an operation of two or three days’ length just to take four or five cans of fruit with you and put them in your pockets and live on this. It’s so much easier, so much better for you, or we felt it was.

EG: I see. Before your outfit had actually hit Vietnam, had you had any training in Okinawa?
FH: Yes, sir. We had numerous occasions dating all the way back to Pendleton when I was with A Company.
EG: Did you find this useful?
FH: Oh, yes, sir. Very useful. We held problems in Okinawa, all concerning jungle problems and jungle tactics.
EG: So you were fairly well prepared by the time you actually got there?
FH: Yes, sir. We were.
EG: Did you find any techniques that you would expect it would work did not work or you did not use? Did you discover any that you hadn’t considered before?

FH: There were several occasions, sir, where we actually learned from the Viet Cong their special tactics, you might say. They’re special way of doing something.

EG: Such as?

FH: Such as setting the traps for the Marines moving into the area, the variations panzi trap. They would have them not only dug holes in the ground, they would also have them hanging from trees with the tripwire running down the tree and across the path. You had the stakes sticking out of the bottom of an object that looked something—

EG: Hanging from a tree? Let’s go back to that. That sounds interesting.

FH: Well, sir, a tree limb would be across the path going into the Le My, hanging from the top of the end of the tree would be an object shaped like a bucket and out of this bottom of the sides of this of this bucket would be sticks two to three feet long, sharpened on the end. There would be a tripwire running down to the base of the tree and lead across the path—

EG: This thing would drop on you like a—

FH: Yes, sir.

EG: A spiked ball, huh?

FH: Yes, sir. If you had your helmet on, it would glance off of your helmet and go into your shoulder. Or if you were wearing soft covers at the time, it would just go right through your head and fracture your skull, sir.

EG: Now, is it weighted?

FH: Yes, sir. It was packed with river clay and it weighed about ten to fifteen pounds.

EG: Like a mace then, huh?

FH: Yes, sir.

EG: Go ahead, now, on these other types of—I’ve heard that you soon learn where these stakes are, where you find them. This oftentimes takes a while for a unit to learn where not to fall and where to look for them.

FH: Yes.

EG: Did you find this to be true on the spot?
FH: Yes, sir. We found this very much true. Moving into an area, we could tell approximately—when we first landed you could not tell where the stakes were or what they even looked like. After we’d been in the areas a while and you understood how the Viet Cong were actually thinking when they were laying out these traps, these panzi sticks for us. Therefore we could compensate for their tactics. In other words, we would know where the sticks were at and we could go to the approximate area of the path or something where we felt that they would be at and remove them without taking any casualties.

EG: Did you initially take any casualties?

FH: Yes, sir. The first casualty in our company was by one of these stakes. It was on the first day that we saw the village of Le My. He was one of the first squads, in one of the first squads to move into the area and he stepped on a stake. It went through the bottom of his boot, the bottom of his foot and came out the top.

EG: Stepped on it and went on through the boot?

FH: Yes, sir. He was running (?) at the time and he just went down into the hole and the stakes were there.

EG: How deep was the hole?

FH: The hole was about three to three-and-a-half feet deep. Of course, at that time, we had all of our gear and we had packs. He had all the weight of the man plus going down into this hole and he forced the stake through the bottom of his boot, through the sole of his boot up through his foot and came out the top.

EG: Did you find your troops after that trying to do anything to line the bottom of the soles or did you ever get—?

FH: No, sir. We actually didn’t have the time to do anything of this sort.

EG: You just learned to avoid the stakes.

FH: Yes, sir. We learned real fast to avoid them, sir.

EG: What other tricks of the trade did you find that you picked up once you got there?

FH: Some of the tricks of trade, sir, we learned a lot of these there. For instance, preserving our person, preserving our feet, for instance which was a very important factor of keeping them dry or as dry as possible with changing socks as many times as possible...
and drying out what we wear. Also, your field sanitation, we used this to a great extent. We found it very important to conserve our water. It took a few people a long time to learn how to do this and it is very important.

EG: You found that the lessons were learned, absorbed, then?
FH: Yes, sir. They were.
EG: Essentially, though, getting back to what we were talking about what you had was trained for did stand you in good stead when you got there?
FH: Yes, sir. It did.
EG: Is there anything else you’d like to add, then, corporal?
FH: No, sir.
EG: Well, I thank you very much then.