Sergeant Robert Oliva: This interview is being conducted with Corporal Robert L. Curry by Master Sergeant Robert H. Oliva at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia, on 21 December 1965. The subject of this interview is combat patrols and is unclassified. Corporal Curry, state your name, grade, and service number. What were your duties while in Vietnam, and what period did you serve in the billets that you’re going to tell us about?

Corporal Robert Curry: My name is Corporal Robert L. Curry, service number 2027414. I was a squad leader with Delta Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines, and I served in Vietnam from January to September 1965.

RO: Discuss Marine Corps tactics involved in both night and day patrols.

RC: While patrolling in Vietnam… When we first got to Vietnam we did most of patrolling in the daytime. But later on, especially in the summer time in June, July, and August, General Walt, commander of the 3rd Marine Division, had us patrolling at night. We did about 85% of our patrolling at night, and night patrol was pretty scary actually in Vietnam. It was a lot different than in the daytime because we had no real concern of being brought under heavy fire by the Viet Cong in the daytime. They mostly struck at night. But while on patrols we operated as a company when we first got to Vietnam in the months of April and May. But then as the months went on we started operating in platoons and squads. The company was too big, and they could see us coming as a company. They’d know we were in the area.
RO: Discuss Marine Corps tactics involved in search and clear operations.

RC: In the search and clear operations, when we first started operating in Vietnam, we’d operate as a company and we’d set in a platoon on one end of a small village, maybe using it as a blocking force, and we’d send two other platoons through the village. Searching and clearing the houses you might find VC in the caves or weapons in caves. And most of the time when we took any prisoners of war, we’d take these people that were suspects, actually, we would take them back to the Vietnamese Regional Headquarters and the interpreters back there would take over from there. So we didn’t have too much to do. We really never found out whether they were Viet Cong. In most cases they were just military age and they weren’t with the regional or popular forces where they should have been. And we found quite a few weapons in these villages and we received quite a bit of sniper fire in these search and clear operations.

RO: Can you go into detail concerning ambushes and layout patrols for us, please?

RC: In ambushes, now, of course, which would all be at night, we’d set up in the valleys maybe ten or fifteen miles south, southwest of Da Nang. And we’d move out maybe sometime after 2200 at night, and sometime maybe after 2400 we’d be near the ambush site and we’d usually be in a platoon size and we’d split up into squad sizes, and set up ambushes maybe a mile to two miles apart each squad. And most of the time with automatic weapons we’d set up in an L-type ambush on well-used trails coming out of the mountains.

RO: What affiliation did you have with helicopter operations?

RC: With helicopter operations about 80% of the time we were in the field on either search and clear operations, or day and night patrols, or even ambushes. We were taken to the fields by the helicopters and usually picked up by helicopters. And usually in a platoon size, sometimes in a company size, and we’d leave a platoon back to secure the helicopter landing zone so we would use the same landing zone when we returned from the operation. The operations were conducted at different times of the day. Time didn’t really matter, except at night. The only time we’d use helicopters at night was if someone was wounded, just for medical evacuation. But different times during the morning hours, the early dusk hours, at night, were probably the better times to go to the
field to catch them unaware. Then we’d move most of the night, then we would set in and
move again before daybreak, in this way catching the Viet Cong a little off guard.

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

RC: Yes, we operated in a tactical area of responsibility.

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

RC: To control the tactical area of responsibility was mostly consistent patrolling
in squad sizes or at least eight-men sized patrol. And this was mostly just in front of our
positions. When we weren’t field patrolling, we had certain positions around Da Nang for
the security of the base. And these patrols wouldn’t move out maybe any more two
thousand meters at night. All this patrolling was done at night. And that was about the
biggest thing that we used for the control of tactical area of responsibility.

RO: How far did your patrol penetrate into the area of responsibility?

RC: At certain times we didn’t patrol too far. Most of our night operations we
tried to stay within ten to fifteen miles of the Da Nang air strip. But some of our day
operations we moved out even farther across some of the higher mountains, probably
closer to Laos than the Pacific Ocean.

RO: Going back to the ambushes and Lao patrols, can you tell us in detail how
you set up a night ambush, how you placed your automatic weapons and such?

RC: Well, on a certain patrol in August of 1965, we moved out as a platoon, out
of the TAOR, and we were moving about 2200 when we split up the platoon. The platoon
split up into squads to try and reach their ambush sites sooner and with making less noise.
We moved about eight to ten miles where the ambush sites was located. At one time my
squad ran into one of the other squads. But we were very fortunate with some of the
people we had over there. They were pretty careful, they weren’t jumpy. Then we get out
to these ambush sites we had set up for the night and at this certain time we had set up in
a L, but we could never be sure which way to set up the L up because we weren’t sure if
the enemy had already moved out of the mountains down into the villages, or whether
they were coming back from the villages into the mountains, and then we’d catch them in
the morning, so we had to be very flexible. We were never sure which side of
the…Some of the trails might be twenty to thirty foot apart, and there might be six or
eight trails going up one valley. So sometimes we could even... In the dark at night they could be fifteen hundred meters away from us in the same valley and we’d never know they were there.

RO: Can you discuss from your particular point of view the influence of Vietnam weather and terrain on personnel to include such close factors as physical condition, morale, and the like?

RC: Well, I’m not sure if the influence of the weather and terrain had much to do with the morale of the troops. They were over there doing something they knew had to be done. It wasn’t a situation where morale would be low as in a field problem. Morale was on a pretty high peak at all times, I think. Troops were tired, of course, because of the mountains, and the jungles were real dense compared to the Philippines or Okinawa or any of the other countries I’ve ever been to in the far East. The physical condition of the troops is very important. We had a lot of troops in the battalion I was in, and some in the company I was in, that were not capable of taking the heat. Sometimes the temperature would be up to 125° degree Fahrenheit. And a lot of these troops were passing out of heat prostation, and this is something to be considered, I think, of these other battalions that are over there that are coming from maybe a cold climate and going right into this heat. It’s pretty hot in Vietnam year round. I was in right up near North Vietnam—about eighty-five miles from North Vietnam, Da Nang is—and it was about 90° degrees there in January when I arrived.

RO: Thank you, Corporal Curry, for participating in this interview.