Floyd Jordan: This interview is being conducted with Maj. Keith A. Smith by Gunnery Sgt. Floyd N. Jordan at Marine Corps Schools, Quantico, Virginia, on 25 January 1967. The subject of this interview is the move into MAG-16 in Da Nang area by VMFA, and is unclassified. Would you state your name, grade, and service number please, sir?

Keith Smith: Keith A. Smith, Major, 057909.

FJ: What were your duty assignments while you were in Vietnam, sir?

KS: Operations officer of VMFA 531.

FJ: What period did you serve in these billets and where were you physically located within Vietnam during this period, sir?

KS: For the purposes of this interview, I was in this capacity from 10 April to 14 June 1965, the period the squadron was in Da Nang.

FJ: Would you comment on a move in with the VMFA, sir?

KS: The move itself was extremely smooth. We got in our initial notification verbally from the wing at 1000 India on 10 April 1965. The airplanes, the first echelon of F-4 Bs departed within three hours en route direct utilizing in-flight refueling. Remaining eleven F-4 aircraft were airborne less than one hour later then proceeded via Naha Naval Air Facility in Okinawa, NAS Cubi Point in the Philippines. All fifteen aircraft were in place and being uploaded with conventional ordnance to Da Nang, by 1600 Hotel on 11 April. The initial elements of the troop lift arrived simultaneous with the fighter, with the tactical aircraft. The main body of personnel upon arrival
commenced to construct the tent camp for living conditions, mess, shower, and so forth. It’s located on the southeast perimeter of the airbase. Tent erection and the utilities construction commenced immediately, simultaneous with an all-out maintenance effort to prepare a shop areas, equipment, and aircraft for the initial combat effort. This organizational effort was accomplished well ahead of what we had expected in spite of some limitations in transportation facilities. In this line, we took our initial messing facilities on the opposite side of the field which accomplished a twelve-mile round trip for meals. This could’ve been alleviated with the appropriate field rations been available, but the decision was made to eat out of the MAG-16 mess. The first combat missions by the Chieftain Phantoms were at 1220 Hotel on the 13th of April; just sixty-nine hours after departure from Japan. It’s interesting to note here that much of the prior liaison that made this move, particularly easy was accomplished by a liaison visit during the last week in March in ’65. I was a member of this advanced party representing a group that the 1st Wing sent down there. During a period there, we selected the hangar spaces, the sight for the TASDEF the ramp spaces for the area, tactical airplanes, the campsite, and made an estimate of transportation and support that we’d need prior to the arrival of our surface lift. The camp construction in the initial part of our move presented the biggest problem. It was a max workload and, of course, the object of our being there was support to ground forces, so if simultaneous with getting the airplanes ready for operations we were building a place to live. In summary, the move-in under the piecemeal phasing that our tactical forces were being put into Vietnam at that time, this was extremely smooth.

FJ: Your unit did not operate in a TOAR as such, but you had a comment you wished to make in regard to the use of a base platoon?

KS: Yes. I think possibly the effectiveness of such an organization is underestimated. We organized a regular defense platoon with platoon commanders and squad leaders and the whole spectrum of a ground organization. We organized the terrain around our campsite which was in the field perimeter; built-in automatic weapons sites and individual fighting positions, trench lines, command and communications trenches, ammunition storage bunkers were dug and sandbagged. This type of defense platoon, not employed full time, can be a very effective defense measure in penetrations that we’ve experienced in the airbase areas such as the ones on Monkey Mountain.
FJ: During our preliminary interview, we talked in regard to pilot training and you indicated there was a rather unique experience here for the specialized training or a training which isn’t presently being given to pilots. Would you make a comment here, sir?

KS: I believe that the air crew should be prepared for the type of operations that we’re running over or that we are conducting in Vietnam a little more extensively than what the present training program permits. I would recommend possibly a five-hour instruction period from an intelligence representative to cover the type of ops, strictly conventional, no nuclear or clandestine operations as such. The average target that we’re up against which is a small group of personnel, extremely light weapons, rapid moving, and not a fixed defined situation. The rules of engagement that we are required to operate under and the restrictions that they incur and once again, the need to emphasize that this is strictly a conventional operation situation. The impact that this has on the young pilot especially in his first tour in a tactical squadron—his first tour overseas—must be psychologically prepared for the limited role that he’s going to be expected to play in adverse weather conditions and what seems to him like might not really be needed for. A few words on this in the States to prepare him mentally before he gets in the cockpit in poor weather, what he will find out later is a difficult target to justify would be a big asset to him.

FJ: Would you comment in the case of a helo escort missions participated in by your unit, sir?

KS: We found shortly after we arrived there that the helo escort was going to occupy a greater portion of our time. The problems associated with this helo escort are three-fold: target acquisition, support aircraft delivery capability, and the swift, accurate delivery of the ordnance required. To cover these in parts, the landing zone preparation; the flight by the helicopters in the intended zone of landing is usually of sufficient height to preclude accurate ground fire. During this phase, the flight is recommended that the landing zone be neutralized by concentrated saturation bombing, napalm, rocket, or 20-millimeter cannon fire. The F-4B is presently without the capability of delivering any cannon fire and is limited to rockets, bombs, and napalms. I will note here that the addition of some aircraft cannon to the F-4B weapons system and specifically, not of the
high peg rapid-fire type would be a tremendous asset for the weapons system. In landing
zone preparation it is important to have the support fire cease just prior to the first wave
of helicopters touching down. This prevents or delays enemy regrouping for
concentrated fire on the choppers. The normal pattern is described is follows: The
movement during the briefing, the helo commander describes the tactics that he’ll use in
the zone. Then the cover airplanes determine the pattern they’ll fly and generally it is a
tilted pattern can be either left or right hand depending on the terrain over which they
have to fly. The main object of the pattern being to provide anti-aircraft or, depending
upon the size of the zone, two or three airplanes in a firing position, no more than fifteen
seconds apart. Preparation of strikes by the support aircraft will commence some time
prior to the chopper touchdown and generally two to eight minutes depending upon the
intelligence information on the zone. The helicopter commander generally times this and
calls for the landing zone preparation. Each fifteen seconds thereafter until the helicopter
commander calls for lift a fire, firing passes will be made on suspected or likely areas of
enemy resistance. This will allow roughly, if a two-hour time is used, seven passes by
the supporting aircraft prior to the helicopters arriving in the landing zone. Needless to
say, timing is of the utmost important as the helicopter is most vulnerable just prior to
landing and while they’re engaged in landing troops. Escort from initial point to the
landing zone: Using photographs and available intelligence, probable areas of enemy
infestation and resistance can usually be determined. The escort aircraft, usually a flight
of three in the operations we were conducting, will take up a left-hand orbit over the
helo flights at the initial point at an airspeed of 350 knots. This is for the F-4. A
tight pattern over the flights of helicopters and landing zone is required for ease of target
acquisition. For this reason, three aircraft are considered the maximum number over the
helicopters at any one time, presuming that the helicopter lift does not exceed twelve
airplanes, each aircraft, 120 degrees apart. Experience has shown that this is roughly
fifteen seconds. Due to the possible necessity of providing support fire in close
proximity to the helicopters, ordnance loads will consist of rockets, 2.75s or Zunis,
apalm, and 20-millimeter cannon. The use of GP bombs for this type of work is
precluded to prevent inadvertent damage to helicopters. The aircraft will be orbiting or at
roll-in altitude. Selection of ordnance for fire suppression will be at the discretion of the
flight leader who must at all times be aware of the inherent dangers to friendlies. This
requires extremely close coordination between the escort aircraft flight leader and the
helicopter or helo lift commander. Upon call of the proper controlling agency or the
helicopter being fired on, the aircraft in most advantageous positions for roll in will be
prepared to return fire. The chopper will mark the enemy position with smoke, execute a
ninety-degree, turn away from the direction of incoming fire, if it can be determined and
provide amplifying instructions. The aircraft having the most advantageous position will
call target in sight or call rolling in hot. The importance of immediate accurate reaction
cannot be over emphasized. Quick silencing of enemy fire instills confidence in the
helicopter pilots, crews, and delays the flight the minimum time possible. Target
acquisition is difficult at best. So by eyeing potential trouble spots such as groves of
trees, ditches, trenches, or huts, and houses in close proximity to the landing zone.
Experience has shown that the enemy is reluctant to place himself in the open when
dealing with fighter attack-type cover aircraft. Tactics in the landing zone: As the
helicopter arrives in the landing zone, the flight leader will commence low run-ins,
commencing with the right side of the lead helicopter or the side offering the greater
enemy threat. In the same direction as the helicopter flight is flying, the aircraft will then
alternate sides with the pull-out direction, being dictated by the train. In instances where
a choice is available, all pullouts will be to the left unless otherwise dictated by the flight
leader. Run-ins will be flown at 350 knots, downwind leg being flown at 280 knots. The
leader will pass to the right on the first run, wing the left, alternating thereafter. The Viet
Cong are known to have a maniacal fear of napalm and the demoralizing effect of low
passes in the landing zone are usually sufficient to keep their heads down. Interesting to
note here that a large percentage of our escort missions, no ordnance was required strictly
from the suppression factor of the support of the escort airplanes being in the air. Also,
the effect of seeing F-4s flying as low or lower than they are is a confidence builder in the
chopper pilots. In any event, at least one aircraft should be in a position for attack at all
times and both sides of the zone should be effectively covered. The first fighter to spot
the next-to-last helicopter on it lifting the landing zone calls reverse. The object of this
maneuver is to alert the escort airplanes that the helos are lifting out of the zone and the
direction of support will change 180 degrees. A great deal of discretion is required here
to give the helicopters room to work. Passes that are made closer than the 100 meters are really not required in this. However, the supporting aircraft must be alert and ready at all times to resume or assume the attack or cockpit ordnance switches gunsights set for the ordnance we intend to use and ready to deliver it as required. Weapons delivery and ordnance conservation: Quick, accurate fire as mentioned previously is an absolute necessity. Once the fire has been suppressed, keep the area under surveillance and continue the mission unless otherwise directed. Mission responsibility: The requirement laid down by the helicopter escort is provide safe operations for the chopper. If this can be accomplished by the mere presence of the fighter aircraft, so be it.

FJ: Would you make a comment in regard to communications? Any difficulties or general comments you have to make any form of communications, sir?

KS: Right. In this category, I’ll cover the general communications and also the coordination effected for our utilization when we first arrived. I believe that the capacity of communications system existing by the brigade, later on by the MAF, by MAG-16 were incapable of handling the traffic required. In this situation where the supply lines and communication lines are so long, and electronic communications are mandatory, the volume of traffic must be handled. It was possible during the latter part of March, to depart Da Nang and arrive in at Su Gi physically prior to an op-immediate message which I had sent prior to my time, prior to departing the area down there. Now then for the coordination: Upon our arrival there, we established liaison with 1-ASOC which is in I Corps Headquarters. This is the Vietnamese facility, staff also by liaison officers of the US forces. When we first arrived, our line of communications for operational purposes went from our squadron ready room to 1-ASOC Headquarters, to 2nd Air Division in Saigon, and to the TOC down there. As the days passed, MAG-16 became more and more integrated and interested of our problems and the usage of our assets. So, we then wired in MAG-16 as strictly on a liaison basis to this net. Any of our assignments for operational use were sent to 1-ASOC and then to us and to Saigon for the issuance of the frag orders, which we operated off of. These frag orders were issued under the authority of the 2nd Air Division. About three weeks later—I’ll correct that, about four weeks later, the initial elements of the wing started to arrive and the first steps in proper coordination and control were initiated. To accomplish this, a wire was laid for positive
communications with the wing. At this time, we had a net to land wire net to the wing to
MAG-16 S-3 and to 1-ASOC. However, our authority still came from 1-ASOC for all of
our support work. We had, at this time, aircraft on different status of deck alert or
conventional weapons loaded. We did not have an air defense role as a primary area
defense roll; all of our airplanes had an air defense capability, but were not tasked as
such. The next step then involved the integration of a modified DASC, which the
communications was supported by the LAAM battalion. This then involved another
landline, which ran us, gave us communications with the DASC as such in the LAAM
battalion. So, now we had communications with 1-ASOC, with 1st Wing/Three, with
MAG-16/Three, and with the DASC. Our authority still remained with 1-ASOC. About
the 15th of May or roughly two weeks later, the 1st Wing assumed operational control and
authority of 531. Now, I speak of this authority here as launch authority and frag
authority for the operations that we conducted. Up until this time, we operated strictly
from the 2nd Air Division frag orders. This caused considerable consternation, this being
our being fragged by 2nd Air Division caused considerable confusion and consternation
on the part of the Marines who we were there to support. In essence, it meant that all of
our assets or all of our capabilities were in support of 2nd Air Division. When the wing
entered the picture about the middle of May, I believe it was, this changed and got into its
proper perspective. From that time on, the wing gathered and assimilated and put into a
wing frag order the requirements for support that the Marine ground forces were asking
for for the next twenty-four-hour period. This happened along about 2000 of the day
preceding. By 2400, we generally had a frag order from the wing that told us what we
were expected to provide in support of the MAF for the following twenty-four-hour
period. Any assets that were available above and beyond the requirements laid on at this
point were turned over to 1-ASOC and forwarded to 2nd Air Division in Saigon where
once again, we appeared on the 2nd Air Division frag order for some missions. It’s
interesting to note here that the volume of missions in our total effort over there in the
total effort for the time we were in Da Nang, ran something like this. These are our
missions, not sorties now. USMC close air support was fourteen; helo escort, sixty-one;
TPQ radar bombing night, nineteen; 3rd MAF alert scrambles, these were the deck alert
airplanes we had on standby, fifteen; interdiction, 195, these were 2nd Air Division
missions solely; US forces alert scrambles were twelve, these were deck alert airplanes utilized whenever any US force personnel were in trouble; RESCAP, three; convoy escort, six, these were all of the convoy escorts were in support of the Marine forces; in-country strikes, three, these were 2nd Air Division controlled; search and attack, five, and these were 2nd Air Division controlled; so that the total operational sorties completed 959 total missions; total missions, 333; so that you can see a large percentage of them were 2nd Air Division controlled. This balance has changed considerably since 531 has departed there. Now more on the control. After the wing assumed the control and wrote frag orders for Marine support, we were still having considerable confusion as to who we were working for on what priority and at what times. So within a two-day period of time, we resolved with the wing that they would write the entire frag order for all of our efforts. This solved a lot of problems and the step that should’ve taken place the first week we were in Da Nang. We realized here, of course, that the piecemeal integration of forces to Vietnam was the limiting factor on the assets that the wing can put in place. The mere presence of a single officer from the G-3 section of the wing with command responsibility could’ve solved this problem for us early in the game. More on the coordination: The landline communications that we had with the agencies then after the wing decided that they would frag us for all operations were removed. Then we had direct line only to 1st MAW G-3 and to the improvised DASC that was provided by the LAAM battalion. This facilitated operations a great deal and things ran very smoothly after that. Now in response to the volume of mission requests that were demanded in support or asked for in support of Marine forces, we resolved that the capability of the squadron far exceeded the operation tempo and about fifty percent of our daily efforts we could provide in support of the 2nd Air Division. They readily accepted these and we continued to operate with the coordination that should’ve been implemented much before. In summary, coordination and our move-in could’ve been facilitated by one, an officer from the G-3 section of the 1st MAW with command capability and responsibility to function as our link and the controlling link between the squadron and the helicopter squadrons included here, VMO squadrons, the LAAM battalions with all other agencies to which we had to work. This would’ve been a tremendous workload for the one officer, I admit. However, he could’ve trained or used duty officers from the squadrons that were
on hand. Second, the communications should be established, and communications for
control purpose should be established to a single agency. Whether that agency is the
squadron commander, the group commander, a staff commander on the MEB or the MAF
staff is inconsequential at this point. The channel must go through one agency. The
theory of having four command channels to one squadron just does not work. The
squadron is incapable of responding to four different people telling them to do four
different things with the same assets at the same time. Third, that the physical move of
the airplanes, the personnel was extremely smooth due in large part to the prior liaison
visit by the task force sent down by the wing during the last week in March.

FJ: Would you have any general comment or advice to offer, since this now
places you in a category of being the men with the experience. If you encountered an
individual now who had orders to the same billet which you occupied, would you have
any general sage words of advice to pass to him to make his lot a little easier, sir?

KS: Yes, I would. First, whether he’s going to the squadron group, wing, or
MAF; go first to the gent that he works for and find out what the command channels are
and who is in line next. When you find out who’s next in line, pay a social visit with the
guy, identify himself and tell him what his job is and complete this step all the way up to
the ladder ‘til he winds up with the one gent that has final authority over what he does or
what the forces that he commands do in support of our efforts in Vietnam. There is no
substitute for the personal individual liaison effort that it only takes a few hours to
expend to find out who you’re going to be working with, when, where, and why.
Secondly, I would strongly recommend that right after he does this that he become
thoroughly familiar with other supporting arms in Vietnam. Air Force, first, tactical
squadrons and there are generally representatives if not the large number of Air Force
forces at Da Nang, talk to them, talk to their officers, his like number. If it’s an ops
officer, talk to their ops officer and to their squadron commander and learn from them
what they’re doing, how they are doing it, and why they are doing it, and what they’re
doing it with. We found a tremendous ally in the Air Force squadron, in the F-100
squadron that occupied the same ramp we did and when it came around to some of our
experiences in night close-air support under the flares, which we’d not been trained for,
this was a valuable source of information for us. After he’s done this, to visit the I Corps
Headquarters and find out who is who out there, what radio they talk on, what telephone they talk on, and what their job is in relation to what he’ll be doing. Once again, there’s no substitute for knowing who, when, where, why, and how. It just facilitates everything that he does.

FJ: Thank you very much, sir.