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The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with James Housel
Conducted by Frank Candilario
January 18, 1966
Transcribed by Laura Darden

1 Frank Candilario: This is Staff Sergeant Frank R. Candilario interviewing Major
2 James F. Housel at Marine Corps Base, Twentynine Palms, California. This interview is
3 being recorded on 18 January 1966. The subject concerns Major Housel's tour in
4 Vietnam and there is no classification on it. Major Housel, how long were you in
5 Vietnam?

6 James Housel: I served in Vietnam from 12 February to 24 June of 1965 and I
7 also spent 2 ½ weeks there in November and December of 1964.

8 FC: And what specifically was your job while there?

9 JH: My assignment was the S-4 Officer of the 1st Light Anti-Aircraft Missile
10 Battalion. And that, of course, is a logistics officer to provide support to all the batteries
11 within the battalion.

12 FC: And where in Vietnam were you stationed, Sir?

13 JH: I spent my entire tour in Vietnam in the Da Nang area.

14 FC: What are some of the lessons learned from your experience while stationed
15 in Da Nang or before?

16 JH: The foremost lesson learned that sticks in my mind is the one related to good
17 prior planning. I go back and think of the airlift of one of our batteries—a reinforced
18 battery from Okinawa to Da Nang—and the reason that this lift came off so smoothly is
19 because of prior liaison and meetings between the staff officers of our battalion and US

1 Air Force officers from the lifting agency. As a result of these meetings, a complete air-
2 loading plan had been drawn out and was in effect at the time the mount out was
3 executed. For this reason, everything went very smoothly on the lift of the reinforced
4 battery.

5 FC: What conditions were created by, first of all, the weather in Vietnam?

6 JH: Well, the first thing that comes to my mind on the weather was, of course,
7 that it is extremely hot and also extremely humid. The main problem, I believe, is the
8 acclimation of personnel. It's extremely harsh conditions to inject a Marine into—a
9 rifleman, for example—off a ship, possibly an air-conditioned ship, put him ashore and
10 expect him to perform a hundred percent of performance if he came ashore during the hot
11 months in the summer, and it's a problem in any billet in Vietnam. You can't work at
12 peak efficiency when you're operating under these extreme conditions of weather.

13 FC: In your observations, Major Housel, was there one particular type of Marine
14 that could withstand this weather better than another?

15 JH: I made no particular observation on this point. However, those of slighter
16 build rather than the heavy or muscular-type people and particularly those who are
17 overweight have a little bit harder than the man of slighter build.

18 FC: Were there any particular problems involved in maintenance of equipment in
19 Vietnam?

20 JH: Yes, there were some problems involved. The main thing, again, is the
21 extremes of weather where you have a lot of moisture. This can effect particularly com-
22 elect equipment, radios, radars, things of this nature. It's necessary to keep anything that
23 can be affected under cover or waterproof it. Equipment in general requires a great deal
24 more attention to preventive maintenance and this is not only due to the moisture, but
25 because of the fact in some areas you have fine, powdery, white sand blowing around
26 which can wear out equipment and also some areas have an extreme amount of dust in
27 the air.

28 FC: Major Housel, what are some of the damages suffered by the equipment
29 there?

30 JH: Well, the main problem you have are things such as bearings, wherein this
31 dust or sand gets in. If you're not taking proper care of the equipment, it actually wears

1 the bearings out. Same thing applies with certain degree to any moving parts on
2 equipment and anything that is sensitive to moisture, of course, can be damaged if you
3 leave it outside or uncovered or un-waterproofed during these heavy rainstorms,
4 particularly in the monsoon season. Tentage is a very good example of how quickly
5 things wear out in Vietnam. I noticed this prior to my departure that tentage in our
6 battalion seemed to be deteriorating rapidly and recommended a net time that they start a
7 *pro rata* replacement program on the tents of replacing so many per month in order to
8 keep everyone's living quarters in good shape. This effects also, similarly, the canvas on
9 trucks; the caps or the tarps over the rear of the trucks. It's the hot sun and then the rain
10 comes down and rots out the canvas. It's either bleached out by the sun or rotted out by
11 the moisture.

12 FC: Is the weather in Vietnam comparable to that of Okinawa?

13 JH: Well, it is comparable in a way. For instance, here at Twentynine Palms,
14 you're familiar with the heat of the desert. In the summer months in Vietnam, if you
15 were to take the heat of the desert here, 110, 112, 115 degrees, and combine with that the
16 humidity on Okinawa, particularly in certain periods of the year from 95 percent
17 humidity to 100 percent humidity, this is what it's like in Vietnam in the summer months.
18 It isn't the temperature necessarily that gets you, it's the combination of the high
19 temperature and high humidity.

20 FC: So far as the men and their equipment go, the individual marine himself,
21 what was the rate of damage to uniforms, things of this nature?

22 JH: Well, in the type unit which I was assigned, a missile battalion, we had no
23 particular problems. The uniforms, they were worn out mainly through work, things of
24 this nature. But I do know from experience that it is extremely hard on uniforms for the
25 infantry-types over there. They wear them out quickly, particularly their foot gear,
26 slogging through the paddies and rarely having a chance to dry out their feet. Boots go
27 first. The newer-type boot introduced should some helpful over there, that's the one with
28 the cloth uppers and drain holes, etc. Our heavy utilities, I thought, were unsatisfactory. I
29 wore those and they were too heavy. Even the newer-type, lighter weight Army utilities
30 with which marines were provided, I did not feel were entirely satisfactory. I felt that we
31 should have a light-weight material without the long sleeves, without all the big, baggy

1 pockets to weight you down, and something that dries quickly, such as drip-dry clothes
2 and civilian life. Something that dries very quickly once it is wet.

3 FC: Do you feel that we need any pockets at all, more than one?

4 JH: Well, it doesn't hurt to have the similar-type pockets on these uniforms such
5 as we have on our present utilities. The ones I'm referring to, the new Army type, they
6 have an extremely large number of pockets and they're quite large. Actually, it's extra
7 material covering your body with all these large pockets. If we stuck to pockets of the
8 size which are on our current utilities, we'd be further ahead.

9 FC: Did you encounter any problems as far as the welfare of the men go in meals
10 or mail delivery or anything of this nature?

11 JH: No, we did not. This is probably to someone's good prior planning, again.
12 During the entire stay over there, our mail delivery was excellent. Once in a while, it
13 would fall a day or two behind, but this is understandable. I was getting air mail letters
14 in three to four days from California and I thought this was fine. As far as the food as in
15 most cases such as this, the variety often becomes monotonous, but the quality wasn't
16 that bad and certainly you'd have no great complaints about it. Although, I do know that
17 many of the people who are out slogging around in the boondocks headed a lot rougher
18 on the chow than we did. As far as morale, most of our people were busy either working
19 or standing watches all the time, so really, there was little chance to dwell on outside
20 things to lower the morale. And the R&R program had been instituted to a certain extent
21 while I was there and the troops were able to get out to Hong Kong or Bangkok and this
22 helped considerably. The biggest problem I could foresee would not be with units which
23 were committed or very busy, it would be with units, say, whose job varied from time to
24 time and it would be during this slack period when you were over there and the troops
25 would be sitting around where you might have any particular morale problem.

26 FC: In your observation while over there, Major Housel, did you notice any
27 particular relation between the attitude of the men and the weather? Does it affect the
28 troops?

29 JH: It does to a certain extent. I can think back and realize my own performance
30 when the weather is extremely hot, I don't believe you are able to concentrate as much as
31 you are in, say, much more comfortable weather. To do a job, which perhaps wouldn't be

1 hard under normal circumstances is considerably more difficult over there because of this
2 extreme type of weather.

3 FC: Major Housel, when you first arrived in Vietnam, did you have any problems
4 with the unloading of men and equipment?

5 JH: Yes, we did to a certain extent, and this was due to the fact that adequate port
6 facilities were not available at that time in the Da Nang area. It was necessary for us to
7 unload in the bay and use small craft, bring our supplies and equipment up the river and
8 unload actually in the city along the main streets. The difficulty there, besides moving it
9 this distance is the fact that there was little room in which to stage equipment and
10 between unloading and actually moving it out. It was obvious to us at the time, we were
11 practically the first unit to land in Da Nang. It was obvious at that time that extensive
12 improvements would be needed in that area to support any increase in operations.

13 FC: Thank you very much, Major Housel. This is Staff Sergeant Frank R.
14 Candilario. We have just interviewed Major James F. Housel. He is the assistant G-4 for
15 Force Troops, FMF-PAC at Twentynine Palms, California. This interview has been
16 recorded on 18 January, 1966. The subject concerns Major House's views on his tour in
17 Vietnam. There is no classification on this interview.