

[Tom McCracken, Vietnam Oral History]

Thompson: Today is November 9, 2018. I am Will Thompson and I am a Gettysburg College student. We are currently in room 311 in Glatfelter Hall and I am here to talk to Tom McCracken about his experiences involving the Vietnam War. Mr. McCracken where were you born?

McCracken: In Gettysburg Pennsylvania.

Thompson: Gettysburg Pennsylvania, alright. Did you grow up on a farm?

McCracken: No, my grandmother had farms in Biglerville.

Thompson: North of here?

McCracken: Yes, north of here about 7 miles. My father was in the South Pacific in the Navy.

Thompson: When did he enlist in the Navy?

McCracken: He enlisted in the Navy in 42'.

Thompson: So he was serving in World War II?

McCracken: World War II, yes. His ship was torpedoed, but because it was Japanese made it was of very poor quality and it never went off.

Thompson: Fascinating, lucky for your family.

Thompson: Do you have any siblings?

McCracken: Yes I have two sisters. An older sister, five years older, and a younger sister five years younger.

Thompson: So no brothers only sisters?

McCracken: No brothers, One is a teacher she is just retiring, she has been teaching at Brandeis.

Thompson: How would you describe your family life?

McCracken: Family life was good, mother taught, father was a football coach and athletic director at Lebanon Valley.

Thompson: Close to here.

McCracken: Yeah, then he went into insurance while I was in college. My mother lived to 95 and my father lived to 90. So I have good genes.

Thompson: Yeah certainly they were long lived. Where did you attend school?

McCracken: I went to Annville Cleona high school, in Lebanon county and then to Gettysburg College.

Thompson: Naturally on to Gettysburg College. [Both Laugh]

McCracken: Class of 66' and I was third generation.

Thompson: Really third generation? So father and grandfather went to Gettysburg?

McCracken: Yes, my father went to Gettysburg and grandfather went to Gettysburg.

Thompson: Wow.

McCracken: Father might have been all American Football player, because things were iffy back then. He got to play on a college all-star game against the Philadelphia Eagles.

Thompson: What was the year for that?

McCracken: 1937, I will give you one interesting tidbit, his roommate was the other guard in that game, the guy from Fordham, his name was Vince Lombardi.

Thompson: We can jump back into that later. So you have talked a lot about football, I imagine that you played football growing up.

McCracken: I was an oddball, my high school didn't have football.

Thompson: Really?

McCracken: The first time I played was at Gettysburg.

Thompson: That is surprising.

McCracken: And I was lucky to be with a very good quarterback. I was a receiver and I got the opportunity to play professionally for three years after Gettysburg.

Thompson: Wow, did you do any other sports in high school?

McCracken: Yes, I actually lettered in five sports in high school, but I only played baseball and football here.

Thompson: Wow ok, what five sports did you letter in, in high school.

McCracken: Football, basketball, baseball, track, and volleyball. Volleyball was a joke. We had two practices and went to one tournament and showed up at the wrong place, but they gave us a letter.

Thompson: Did you have a favorite subject in school?

McCracken: Probably History or Math, what I was good at. Like most guys History.

Thompson: Seems to be the case even nowadays.

McCracken: I was a History and Philosophy Major. The Philosophy Major was... Norm Richardson was head of the department, he was legendary. He wanted a footballer, fraternity guy to be a Philosophy Major. So he steered me into a couple of courses and in other words I was in the borderline of having enough hours for Philosophy or not, but he made it a Philosophy Major. I can say what they taught, but don't remember what they said.

Thompson: Yeah that was a long time ago.

McCracken: Yes.

Thompson: So you didn't initially jump into Philosophy that just kind of happened?

McCracken: Yeah it just happened.

Thompson: But you came with the intention of doing History?

McCracken: I kind of came with the intention, then fell into History. Another Professor named Bruce Bugby who was actually a World War II Navy intelligence officer. He was very very well thought of, very good lecturer, and I took one of his courses and the first history course 101 or whatever it was, enjoyed it. So I said why don't I do this and at the time, lets see none of these professors are around anymore, but the economics department here was mediocre.

Thompson: Still is.

McCracken: History was national ranking almost. So I was really a History Major but on paper I was also a Philosophy Major.

Thompson: So less officially but still a double major?

McCracken: Yes. I had the numbers there, but he "uxed" them over as we used to say.

Thompson: "Uxed" them over, I like that.

Thompson: What was an average day at Gettysburg like when you were a student?

McCracken: It was a little different from you guys. Fraternity life was virtually everywhere, 90% of the men were in Fraternities, I think there were 14 then. And so you were basically attached and you lived in a Fraternity; sophomore, junior, and senior year. Pretty much. We had the fraternity and it was good news bad news. You knew 60 guys great, but you did not know a whole lot of other people. Except the guys who played football and baseball. But it probably was not much different from what you are doing. We were closer here, the football field was right here. The gym of course was in the same place, but you really didn't have to go much farther for anything. And the fraternities provided pretty much most of the entertainment. I think I was in

one bar in this town once and I didn't drink until my senior year. And I made up for it later. [both laugh] So it was the fraternities that provided all the social life, and that is why they were so... You pretty much had to be in one. The guys that weren't in them were the cases where the guys were on full scholarship, and had dorms that were being paired for. Or pure students or they didn't want to be. Most cases they ended up being a social brother.

Thompson: Which fraternity were you in?

McCracken: Phi Gamma, Phi Gamma Delta, which is still around.

Thompson: Yeah they are. How would you describe your experiences in the fraternity.

McCracken: They were very good. The first until March was very strong hazing, much stronger than it really needed to be. It was just a carryover. Now playing football, it was easy through football. But afterwards it got to be a lot of the ridiculous stuff. And I guess you had three years of guys who had done this before so nobody was going to be the one to stop it.

Thompson: A cycle of violence.

McCracken: Now, let me say the good thing about fraternities. Was we had a required study hall, Monday through Thursday from 7 to 10:30. So you had to be there, so in other words there were positives. And the one thing it did our fraternity was very strong on getting you out of high school. So for an athlete like me that went from being top-dog to being nothing as a freshmen here we were six to one guys. So as a freshmen guy you didn't have much of a chance. So the fraternity didn't want you to go home. They said hey you are in college and grow up, so that was another plus.

Thompson: So they helped you grow up?

McCracken: Yes.

Thompson: Helped you get your second foot out of the door. Any interesting stories you want to share about your fraternity life?

McCracken: Oh probably a lot of them were interesting, I as soon as I walked in the door it said PG 13. [Speaking metaphorically here] Just, I was very lucky in that our football team was very good and we were playing division 1, you probably didn't know that.

Thompson: No I didn't.

McCracken: Our conference was; Bucknell, Lafayette, Lehigh, Rutgers, Temple, Delaware, Hofstra.

Thompson: Pretty much the Patriot League now.

McCracken: Yes, pretty much the Patriot League and we won it my Junior year. So we were very good. We had five guys on it my Junior year that went to football professional camps, some of them made it some of them didn't but that was a fair amount. And football was kind of king, basketball had just been really good. And the basketball conference was the same it was; Penn State and then you added all the Philly schools; Villanova, La Salle, etc. So Gettysburg sports was a level above what you would think it would be. So between fraternities and sports that was kind of it. And we had spring football and baseball, so my only gap was those three months in the winter or two months in the winter.

Thompson: So football was really for-most on your mind out here?

McCracken: Yes, first of all I hadn't played in high school and I was getting a chance to play. I always say...you know people look and say jeez you got to play for the Cowboys, but I was absolutely the least recruited Gettysburg football player ever. Because I didn't play in high school. So I came out and luckily some guys dropped out, and I got a chance to play. I don't

know how much you know about football, but we started a pro-offense pass, and up till then everybody ran the ball all the time. And so I fit in to that, because I could learn to be a wide receiver. Much easier then learning to be a running back or something else. So it fit in with me.

Thompson: I am sure that a lot of guys who didn't play football in high school nowadays are not going directly into D1 schools to play ball.

McCracken: No I don't think so.

Thompson: Yeah a very unique experience there.

McCracken: Well I had decent size, same size I am now, and I could run. If you have those two people think that they might use this guy somewhere.

Thompson: Were you involved in any clubs out here? Or was it mostly just sports?

McCracken: It was mostly sports. See the fraternity was so strong and in the off season you played fraternity sports. And as far as other things I did I was on the inter-fraternity council, freshman and sophomore year I think. And varsity g club which was really nothing. The football team had what we called an executive committee which was the two captains and three other guys and was basically there to air grievances. So I was on that for two years, but other activities, I wish... I didn't see a play when I was here or go to a musical, the fraternity just kind of took between it and football. And we were traveling, we would go to Buffalo, so you know it was a much more major situation.

Thompson: Do you regret not doing any of that? Or were you happy with how your time was spent?

McCracken: I wish now... What's very interesting is this Vietnam memorial that we're doing, having the presentation tomorrow, I've been in it from the beginning. Two of the reasons I am in

it is to be honest for almost 50 years I had nothing to do with the scholarship due to a couple of situations... I do not need to get into those. But so I got involved back and we are going to have a reunion for our football team conference championship, which was the only Gettysburg team to win a division one conference, we gotta pat ourselves on the back. And so I got involved with that and President Janet Riggs got behind it and so she sort of did what we considered normally the Gettysburg President to be was young with it, in other words she said 'yeah we have schism with these people who graduated before 1975 and we need to close it.' And doing the football thing, our team was the first team to be put in that hall of athletic honor. And I helped put that reunion together. Then we got talking about having that monument to honor our classmates who were killed during the Vietnam War, I got the forefront of that because two of the fellas, one was my best friend in high school and I went through four years of college with him. And then one of the others was a fratruety brother of mine and he rushed me and was very close to me. He went through flight training two months before me. So I basically followed him from my freshman year, through college and then through three years of flight school and he was killed in a Navy airplane.

Thompson: You mentioned briefly fraternity sports, what did that entail?

McCracken: They played virtually everything. They played ping-pong, I think they even had a dart table. But it was football, it was touch football, basketball, soccer, track, and it was a big thing. The inter-fraternity track team had five times the attendance of what a college track meet had. Because the only people who came to college track meets were girlfriends and a parent or two. Is that right or wrong I don't know. I thing up threw my time and you could go back 30 or 40 years things were that way. Then kind of the early period of the 70s were young people went

against structure, changed that. And of course it is a lot different now. And I would love to have fraternities stay strong, because they meant a lot to me. But I don't sit there and say you guys are doing it wrong.

Thompson: I have never heard of that, the inter-fraternity sports. So it was location that drew you to Gettysburg College?

McCracken: My father was, well I lived basically next to Hershey, I was 2 hours away, an hour and 45 minutes away. And my father gone there and one of my closest friends in high school, I played since I was nine, I played third base and he played shortstop. He was going to Gettysburg, very good basketball player, very good baseball player. I was an average basketball player and a good baseball player. And football we didn't know anything about, because we didn't play. So he was coming here and I looked at other schools, I wanted to go to Amherst and got waitlisted and actually never got in. And the other schools Lehigh I considered, I got waitlisted at Penn and did not get in, and so basically Gettysburg was, I don't wasn't to say fall back, but it fit everything I needed. At that time the Lafayettes', the Lehighs', the Gettysburgs', were academically about at the same place with Lehigh being better in engineering and Bucknell also thrown in to the mix. So it kind of fit in, if you were going to go to one of those schools why not go to the one closest.

Thompson: So you were happy to be at Gettysburg?

McCracken: Yes, you know freshman year, pledge training was a bummer. Being a nobody freshman year was crummy, but I think the end of my sophomore year in baseball and in football I came into my own. Now I am on a team, starting as a junior in two sports, and there is a big difference in being a player and being on a team. It was enough that crutch ego that I was ok with

things. I had of all things, a partial academic scholarship and I think the only reason my Dad kept it was that it meant I couldn't have a car. It was 300 dollars, but I think tuition was 900 dollars.

Thompson: Wow a third of your tuition.

McCracken: And back then, this is odd, living in a fraternity was cheaper than living in dorms and eating in the cafeteria. See the fraternity house was paid for then you had these alumni, that had done well and they were giving to the fraternity and not to the college. That was one of the reasons the college basically did not want fraternities, because they were taking away money from the college.

Thompson: I didn't realize that people donated directly to the fraternities over the college. You mentioned that freshman year pledging was rough, do you remember any traditions freshmen year when you first came?

McCracken: When we came, we still did the traditions of wearing the dink.

Thompson: Yes, I am familiar with that.

McCracken: We also wore the tie and you had to have wear your name and where you were from. And I knew 20 people from sports, I played against them. There were three people from my class [High School], so I knew them. And Bucknell was our rival and so when you went to the first football practice, freshmen couldn't play varsity sports, the way you would greet a football player varsity or freshmen was not by saying their name, but you would say beat Bucknell. And they would say beat Bucknell and that's how you greeted everybody on campus. And so if you'd see a cheerleader you'd say beat Bucknell, and she would say beat Bucknell. That was a huge thing for us, a tradition for our first game. Now that's gone, I've got a friend she

is probably ten years younger than me and I was telling her how, she was from Bucknell, we were rivals, and she said no we weren't. She didn't even know where Gettysburg was.

Thompson: A one way rivalry.

McCracken: Yes, but Bucknell felt the same way back then, back when we were roughly even teams. I will give you an example on the '68 Baltimore Colts that played in the third Super Bowl, one guy from Gettysburg and two guys from Bucknell were on that Super Bowl team. Which you would not see today.

Thompson: No. Certainly Not. Was there an ROTC program at Gettysburg?

McCracken: There was ROTC Air Force and Army.

Thompson: No Navy?

McCracken: No Navy, Navy ROTC is only in a couple of places, probably only one fifth of where Army was. Penn State had it and Penn had it and Princeton had it I know. I look if I should do ROTC or not do ROTC and it was kind of a deal where I went to the meetings and I had no real desire to be a pilot or anything so I didn't do it. What I did was after I graduated I went to Navy officer candidate school. Which is well Navy and Navy also has a aviation officer candidate school, but I didn't go there. I went to Navy officer candidate school and when I was there, the quick story is. The base had a football team and if you were an officer candidate you weren't supposed to play on it, but the coach who was a commander wanted the best team. So there were two of us, a quarterback from Harvard and I was a receiver, well in flag football if you have one quarterback and one receiver, you know you are playing against guys like you¹ and

¹ The interviewer Will Thompson, is 5'10" and weighed around 175lbs at the time of this interview. And has never played a game of football in his life.

guys who have played for four years. (Here Mr. McCracken was attempting to convey that they players were smaller back then, but were still knowledgeable about the game) And so after practice one day he asked us if we had taken the test for aviation, because he was a pilot. And we said no, and he said “Well on Friday you can sleep in till seven in the morning if you take the medical test” normally we would be up at five. So we said we will do it and we didn’t realize after we took all the aviation tests that followed you were making that your first choice, so we made aviation our first choice on accident. So I get my orders and I’m going to flight school, and he was going to flight school. So I went to flight school, Navy Pensacola had the last Navy base football teams. In the 40s, 50s, and 60s, and even into the 70s military bases had teams. And we played maybe at a level above what we played at Gettysburg. We played Southern Mississippi, Louisiana Monroe, Youngstown State, and Middle Tennessee State. What had happened the reason the military had all these base teams was because until about 1962 you could still be in college and be drafted into the service and spend two years in the service. So the service had all these athletes and of course each base wanted to have the best team. So the Navy still had a team, so I got to play on that Navy team that we called semi-pro, which was a stretch. And then out of that I got a chance to go to Cowboy camp, two years in a row when I was a Navy pilot.

Thompson: What is Cowboy camp?

McCracken: What they called Cowboy rookie camp. What they used to do back then, was during the first two weeks of pre-season all the rookies or anybody they had traded for would come to camp as well as all the quarterbacks and receivers. So I was invited for that for two weeks, I took Navy leave for two weeks. So in the first game of the year I was listed on the roster as MLOA, military leave of absence. I never played, I had a jersey, but never put the

whole uniform on. So I wasn't really a Cowboy. But I was in camp for two weeks two years in a row.

Thompson: Which years were those?

McCracken: '67 and '68.

Thompson: And you played schools in the South?

McCracken: Well we played Middle Tennessee State, which is the biggest university in Tennessee, you would never guess that, neither did we. We went and played them and they had 35,000 people there. And you know back then Penn State only sat 60,000. So we played up North too, we played Youngstown State from up North. But mostly in the South, in Louisiana and we flew everywhere. And back then Louisiana Tech, Southern Mississippi they were all the lower... They were the schools Alabama plays first in the year. The best way to say it is that we played the schools that played the real schools.

Thompson: Did you guys do well?

McCracken: Yes, we were I think 7 and 2 one year and then we were 8 and 1 the next year.

Thompson: Yeah that is quite a record.

McCracken: Yeah we did very well. Our quarterback both years was a Heisman trophy winner and later NFL Hall of Fame quarterback. So we had a great quarterback and it made a mediocre receiver look good. [Both laugh]

Thompson: So you ended up doing this because you didn't want to wake up at five o'clock?

McCracken: Yes that's how I got into aviation. I went through Naval Air training with guys who had been building models since they were six years old and I had never done any of that. I had

never even flown, the first time I ever flew in a Navy trainer was the first time I ever flew. And a lot of these guys paid money to get flying lessons and stuff.

Thompson: So this was totally new to you?

McCracken: Right, of course I had a career out of it. I was a commercial and management pilot of Delta Airlines. So I was basically a pilot for 39 years.

Thompson: Wow, football ended up deciding your career.

McCracken: Yes, that's one way to look at it.

Thompson: So you didn't do ROTC because they didn't do the Naval ROTC?

McCracken: Right.

Thompson: Is there any reason why you leaned against it?

McCracken: You know I guess I knew if... I was a seventeen year old, immature freshmen. We had freshmen then that were 21. Here was this fraternity, here was football, here was campus, do I want to do ROTC? You only had to commit for two years, the first two years you went the next two years was you were basically committed to being an officer, and you got paid et cetera. And I think it was I wasn't ready to commit at that time and plus it was 1962 Vietnam wasn't really happening, the Cuban Missile Crisis was just over. So what was the military going to be like, were they going to cut back? So I don't really remember my reasons except I was probably not ready to make the commitment.

Thompson: Any thoughts on the Cuban Missile Crisis?

McCracken: So much of it was hidden from us, because the press could do that and the White House could do that then. And we really didn't know how bad it was until it was over. How close it was or whatever. What we knew was that our nuclear submarine capability was so much better

then the Russians or anyone else as well as our missiles and our airplanes that it would have been a disaster for everybody. But we had a much greater capability to what Russia had at the time. Russian products as I found out were very poorly made. It was almost slave labor made. You know the tanks and the airplanes and the boats, but it still was... what is Cuba 27 miles from Florida?² And the missiles were there. One of the things that Kennedy and the end of Eisenhower's term was that they could have sat there and given Fidel Castro what he wanted and everything would have been fine, but they wouldn't. So we ended up with an emery and the Cuban people suffered, because no U.S. money was coming in.

Thompson: Was the Missile Crisis something you would think about when you were in training was that on your mind?

McCracken: Well keep in mind that this was during the Cold War. Russia was there, when I was in grade school we would practice boom raids by going under the desk or to the basement. And I had a close friend that had a boom shelter. So it was on our minds and there was a fear and probably the reason of why we ended up in Vietnam of where do you stop communism. In other words do you give them Southeast Asia, and basically half of the world's rubber. And then where do you stop it? In the Philippines? or Australia? It was kind of the same thing with the Japanese in World War II, because the Japanese were going to take everything they could, just like Germany.

Thompson: That's an interesting parallel.

McCracken: The Vietnam War, my knowledge of it was of course it was fought wrong. But the idea of intervening, and you know to me we should have helped the French and let them fight.

² The distance is around 100 miles.

Because the French were using ex-German soldiers, let them fight instead of the guys I grew up with.

Thompson: So you got involved with the military training after college?

McCracken: During my senior year I applied to Navy OCS, you have to remember during Vietnam if you were in college you were deferred as soon as you graduated you were 1A and you could be drafted and you probably were going to be drafted.

Thompson: Were they doing the draft when you...

McCracken: Yes, you would be put in the Army and sent to Vietnam. This is one of the fallacies of that whole time period was, if we were in high school and you were going to college and I wasn't maybe I didn't have the money to go to college I was going to be drafted and sent to Vietnam and you were going to go to college for for years. Was that fair, where do you draw the line? My senior year [college], knowing what was going to happen I applied to Navy OCS and got in. I got a date in July, July 23 I think. Back then because the Vietnam War was really spinning up and I had a pretty good record at Gettysburg, Johnson and Johnson hired me and I was only going to be there for six weeks. So they put me in a management program for six weeks.

Thompson: I am amazed you went for a job before being sent over.

McCracken: Well it was six weeks, but I grew up and you worked. That was the mentality of everyone. Plus it gave me a chance to go with a very good company and I did for six weeks. What is interesting is when I was in the service they would send me a Christmas bonus check and a vacation bonus check. And I had only been there for six weeks. And the opportunity was going to be there to go back, I didn't know I was going into aviation yet and the Navy

commitment was three years. But when you went aviation that was almost 5 and a half years. The idea being if they were going to pay all the money to train you, they might as well get the most they can get.

Thompson: Any reason why you went Navy?

McCracken: My dad was in the Navy. I had done probably the Navy in World War II, it really interested me growing up. The books I read, what I followed... It was much more than the Army. What is odd is where I grew up Fort Indiantown Gap was only seven miles away. The kids, the officers kids, went to school with us. So I can remember going to birthday parties when I was in seventh grade at the officers' club. But it was just kind of the Navy thing and so that what I wanted to do.

Thompson: So that military tradition was already ingrained?

McCracken: Yes, we were, all our teachers and coaches were World War II veterans, neighbors were World War II vets. So it was just assumed, and that was at the beginning of Vietnam, why would people do it, well it was assumed we would. You know it was a different scenario, but it was still what happened.

Thompson: I am going to jump back to Gettysburg College, where did you live on campus each year?

McCracken: I lived freshmen year in a dormitory, Rice Hall. John Rice, if you have any idea who John Rice is.

Thompson: I imagine the guy they named the hall after.

McCracken: Yes, he was my grandmother's cousin. We called him uncle John, he wasn't really an uncle. He was... He had the greatest job in the world he was the ambassador to Luxembourg.

They have no military, barely has a police force. He judged flower contests, but when Queen Elizabeth II... Her coronation... the ambassador to England had died or had been replaced so Ike asked John Rice to be, the title was Ambassador to the Court of St. James, that's what the American ambassador to England is. So he was the American ambassador for her coronation. So my grandmother got to go to the coronation, which was huge for a woman from Biglerville to get to go the coronation of Queen Elizabeth.

Thompson: That certainly is a big deal, but what about the housing?

McCracken: So I lived in Rice Hall. Sophomore year, both classes ahead of me were really big so there was not a room in a fraternity. So I ended up being an assistant dorm councilor in Rice Hall. And then my junior and senior year I was in a fraternity. A fraternity officer my senior year.

Thompson: What is a dorm councilor?

McCracken: Well back then it was a way to do athlete scholarships. We had full athletic scholarships and generally they lived in a dorm their sophomore year and each floor would have one dorm councilor and an assistant. The assistant would live with him. So the head dorm councilor had all the horsepower the assistant got 100 dollars a semester. Just for a title.

Thompson: That's not a bad deal.

McCracken: So they were in charge of basically keeping everything under control, keeping the beer out of the halls, no women, etc. I assume you don't have those anymore?

Thompson: The freshmen dorms have RAs and their functionality is generally the same.

McCracken: Now the fraternities had housemothers.

Thompson: I have heard of that.

McCracken: That actually was a very good thing, because they set the bar high for the way behavior should be and it kept it within reason. Fraternities always looked good, the kitchens, the whole place was kept clean and of course you had the pledges doing the work. A lot of people asked why did you do that well that was the reason you did. And once the housemothers went the fraternity level of everything kind of went downhill.

Thompson: As a student I can confirm. [Both laugh]

Thompson: Did you spend a lot of time in any particular academic building, did you have a favorite?

McCracken: Well the History building was Wiedensall?

Thompson: It still is.

McCracken: And philosophy was there too.

Thompson: That is also the case today, I believe.

McCracken: Glatfelter was the main class building. So this is where our Freshmen class were held. And I did freshmen physics and that was in Masters, which is much bigger now. And that was probably it for going across campus. You have to remember campus was more this way [pointed more towards Penn Hall] when I was here. The Gym was sort of the end of campus. And then there were fraternities over on Carlisle Street, four or five of them.

Thompson: So it was mostly in this building where you had your courses.

McCracken: This building freshman year and afterwards it was more mixed up... more in Wiedensall. There was an old Phi Kappa Psi right in the middle of campus its been torn down and that was the math department. So I... I think I had two math courses there maybe three. I

didn't have enough for a major. But it was a strong thing, my dad taught math in college. So I kind of fell into place.

Thompson: How long were you in the Navy training, two years?

McCracken: A year and a half actually. To be a pilot in the Navy is a year and a half. Generally the Air Force is about a year and four months. And the Army a year and two months. The difference is the Navy is the aircraft carrier. By far the most difficult thing and that's what separated us. And back then there was no automation for landing on an aircraft carrier. In other words, what you do when you land is to follow a beam of light. Off the back of the carrier there is a beam of light, now take into affect that the carrier is doing this [motions his hands up and down to represent the movement of the ship out at sea]. So guess what is the beam of light doing?

Thompson: Also going up and down.

McCracken: Right, so if you go to land on a carrier and it looks like you are high and you correct for it, and the beam starts going down you will be going the opposite way. And all the signals were hand signals and of course now its much more automated. The whole carrier operation was much more significant. So that's why the Navy was a year and a half.

Thompson: To practice landing on carriers. That was the major focus?

McCracken: Yes.

Thompson: So I imagine you were stationed on an aircraft carrier?

McCracken: I was on a carrier for a short time. I got into a situation where if your grades in flight training were high enough you could go back and be an instructor, its called a service graduate or something. The reason I did was to play football again, because we had a very good

team. The quarterback was Rodger Staubach, who last year, *Sports Illustrated* said he was the greatest college quarterback ever. So if you look at the level I am playing, coming back to be an instructor made sense. I was living in Pensacola on the beach. I had just married my wife, who was a year after me at Gettysburg and she wanted to be on the beach. So I did that for a year and then I put in for Navy attack which is fighters and you have attack sometimes. Attack is pretty much air to ground while the fighters were air to air.

Thompson: So you would be supporting units on the ground.

McCracken: Correct, and what happened was the Navy decided they needed an attack squadron in Vietnam not on a carrier but in Vietnam. It was the only Navy attack squadron to ever be land based. So I put in for that and that's what I got, that was my tour in Vietnam. It was in Navy attack squadron four which was based in the Mekong Delta and not on a carrier. So my carrier... I only have 29 carrier landings. I was never a real carrier pilot. I qualified but as far as having an actual tour on a carrier I never did.

Thompson: So the Mekong Delta that's South Vietnam?

McCracken: Yes

Thompson: How far from Saigon?

McCracken: We were basically Saigon and south. We were based in two different places, one on the coast and one right in the middle of the delta. The way the rules of combat were the Navy controlled everything within a mile of a waterway. Well when you got down into the delta, everything was within a mile of a waterway. So the Navy and the river boats and special forces and any army units all worked together. The problem was they didn't have any fixed air or close air support. The Air Force didn't really come south much and so their helicopters didn't have the

capability, fast capability or the ordinance capability. But once we got there we had both of those, fast response time and ordinance. The Vietcong and even North Vietnam were hit and run and as soon as air cover showed up they ran.

Thompson: Air cover being the fighters?

McCracken: Yes, but for helicopters it depended on what size they were. In other words if they had armor, the North Vietnamese that is, the helicopters didn't bother with them, and a helicopter couldn't do anything to them. Later on helicopters have ordinance to deal with them. The helicopter, if you go back 50 or 60 years, it took everything they could come up with to have them fly, so it couldn't carry much ordinance. Where planes could carry basically the same amount of ordinance that they do now.

Thompson: So your air support would be mostly against armor?

McCracken: We would do both. If we showed up the North Vietnamese would not keep any armor around. Because our guns, 20mm, could penetrate any thing they had. If you are shooting machine guns, 20mm, even though it is line of sight firing, you were going to hit a tank. Because you were shooting enough shells.

Thompson: Yeah and they are a large enough target.

McCracken: Yes, and also where they would have revetments or anything like that, we had enough ordines to penetrate those things.

Thompson: So how long were you stationed in Vietnam, two years?

McCracken: Just one year. All tours pretty much were one year. It is not like Afghanistan is now where you go eight weeks or something. It was 365 days and I was there for 366 days. Because on the last day we flew in the morning, no man flew at night. It was our last flight and we had a

big party. Well our big party was, there were a bunch of us that played basketball together and played football together, so we had our football game and we had our basketball game. Then we had our party with beer that had formaldehyde in it to keep it, so it had to be ice cold or it tasted awful. Then at about 11 o'clock at night we were sitting around the basketball court drinking a beer and so and so. When they came and said they had already launched the scramble crew, we always had two airplanes ready that could be airborne in five minutes. And we had a backup crew that would be ready in ten minutes and they had both been scrambled. So they said that they need another crew, "McCracken you're in." So I went and flew one more time and then we refueled and came back and flew again. So I ended up missing my flight back to the states, because of which I was declared AWOL, by the people there because they read the names and saw I wasn't present. So they sent a deal in that said that Lt. McCracken is AWOL, which could get straightened out. So I ended up being a day later so that is why I was there for 366 days.

Thompson: So that is atypical?

McCracken: Yeah.

Thompson: How long would your flights last for?

McCracken: Probably an hour. We had both patrols and we always stood scramble alert, you could be scrambled on patrol. The patrols were there as long as you were overhead every so often so many different spaces that the Vietcong. All our intelligence was compromised we knew that, the South Vietnamese Navy, the Vietcong and North Vietnamese knew everything. If they would hear you come over, let's say every three hours, then we would go over and fly ten minutes away and then come back over, so they just never knew when we would be there. The idea was that if they knew that we were around it limited them. In other words they couldn't plan a full

attack on an outpost, because they knew that they would only have 20 minutes to do what they could do.

Thompson: So did you have a set area that you operated in?

McCracken: Yes, well no. We operated on the southern half of III Corps. Vietnam was divided into four sections starting at the top. So the Mekong delta was IV Corps. The Mekong delta was so important, because virtually all rubber and probably 80% of the rice was produced in the Mekong delta.

Thompson: For the whole country?

McCracken: For the whole country, so the rest of Vietnam... The reason North Vietnam wanted South Vietnam was not for the rest of the country they wanted the Mekong delta. And that is why when the Japanese took Vietnam in World War II they were after the rubber. The Japanese didn't have rubber or steal and so and so. What happened was the Vietminh, which were the forerunners of the Vietcong, withdrew into the southern part of the delta. The Japanese never took that... There was no more ruthless an army, then the Japanese Army of World War II, if you look at the Rape of Nanjing and so on. And that is how strong the Vietminh were, the Japanese were just never able to take it. Because they would let the Japanese take an outpost and they would come in behind them, they had what would be called reverse revetment. So instead of facing the enemy they would face the other way, let the enemy overrun them and then come in behind them.

Thompson: So that area was never really secured by U.S. Forces?

McCracken: No, and we tried to take that area. We would make in roads into it, but it was one of those deals where you would take something, then you would kind of give it back. It was one

of the problems of the Vietnam War, instead of just lining up the tanks and saying we are going from here to the watering taking everything, but we never did.

Thompson: So I am trying to visualize was that area fairly flat?

McCracken: Very flat, almost swamp. If you have ever been to southern Louisiana, it is kind of like southern Louisiana. In other words it would kind of be just rice paddy after rice paddy and rubber plantations. There were mountains, but it was most very very flat.

Thompson: So when you would fly through, it would be against infantry mostly?

McCracken: No the Cambodians had MiGs, old MiGs. We never knew if they were flyable or not, because the communists hadn't been there that much. I never got up against any airplanes. We ran into a couple ships off the coast, armed ships. They were basically transport ships that had anti-aircraft guns on them. And we sank one of those and the reason we sank it was, it had the guns but it had no armor and all the ordnance were stored on deck. So if you hit it once it was up.

Thompson: So boats were probably the most dangerous thing you guys came across?

McCracken: That and were the... South Vietnam is what we call triple canopy, in other words there was three levels of trees. So you had the real high trees, the medium trees, and the low trees. And then the brush was the same way, the shrubs. So if you were walking through a South Vietnam forest you might not be able to see five feet ahead of you. Well underneath these high canopies they would have an entire outpost.

Thompson: And you just had no idea.

McCracken: You would never know it. Well there strong outposts where, they had their hospitals and their headquarters and so and so. They would protect very strongly. And so they had a lot of anti-aircraft capability.

Thompson: And you guys had no idea where these anti-aircraft guns were?

McCracken: Yeah, no idea where they were. And the North Vietnamese, very intelligently, gave the Vietcong very poor weapons.

Thompson: And that was on purpose?

McCracken: Yes, because they wanted them eliminated by the time the war was over and that is what happened. The Tet Offensive virtually eliminated the Vietcong. Because what happened is once the North Vietnamese came in they didn't want to give the Vietcong anything.

Thompson: Naturally.

McCracken: So they wanted to take over all the positions and everything else. So here was the Vietcong doing all the fighting, thinking that they were going to reap all the benefits. Well that wasn't going to happen. So the Vietcong their anti-aircraft didn't have tracers. I do not know how much gun work you have ever done.

Thompson: Tracers are the rounds that show you where you are firing at.

McCracken: Yes, every sixth round is a tracer. So you can see where you are shooting. Well the Vietcong didn't have those. So they are shooting a gun and they are thinking it there, but it could really be going here or any other direction. The negative for us was a lot of times we did not know when we were taking fire.

Thompson: You wouldn't know where it was coming from?

McCracken: We wouldn't know where it was coming from or if we were even being shot at. So we could come back and there could be holes in the aircraft, airplane. And I would say we didn't take any fire, we didn't see anything.

Thompson: That's scary.

McCracken: So it worked both ways. But it was much better than not having tracers. Because in theory... Most anti-aircraft guns are at least four guns, 50 caliber guns, rapid fire. Your airplane does not have that kind of fire to take it on one on one. So it's like the old *Dirty Harry* movies where you had a gun that's that big and you have the little gun. So rule of thumb was generally you didn't try to take out anti-aircraft sights with the airplanes. What you did was have artillery Navy or Army artillery hit them, because that was the safest thing, you are not going to get shot at.

Thompson: You mentioned that your plane could get damaged and you wouldn't even know. Did that happen to you frequently?

McCracken: Yeah it happened. Now we had armor around up to about here [gestured to his waist] we had one pilot who got killed, he was shot in the head. But a lot of times you were on your side a lot, when you do roll and come down you are only protected on your side, not in the front and not on the top. When you pull off you are sideways, so basically you are open and there is no protection there for you. So I flew 406 missions and I would say we got hit on 30 of them.

Thompson: 30 of them that's fairly high.

McCracken: Now it could have been one or two shells, sometime more. I never brought a plane back that had to be taken out of service.

Thompson: They would just fix them up?

McCracken: Yeah they would just fix them up.

Thompson: What kind of plane did you fly?

McCracken: In Vietnam I flew a plane called the OV-10, Broncho was its name. And it was made to be a short take off and landing field airplane. It was made to fly in the rough. It could

land on grass, take off on grass and at short distance. So the idea being that it could be based close to the front. Now of course all the new airplanes can take off vertically, have replaced it. We were closest thing till then. It couldn't carry as much ordinance as we would have liked, wasn't powerful enough. But it could take off and land virtually anywhere. It also had two of everything, two engines, two tails. So that made it a very safe airplane, because if you lost one you had a second one, two pilots. The one negative was the plane we were supposed to have was called the A1 Skyraider. The A1 carried twice the ordinance. The A1 was made at the end of World War II, today it would probably still be the best close air support plane ever. It was the only airplane to carry its own weight in ordinance.

Thompson: That is certainly impressive.

McCracken: And the reason we didn't have it was that the Air Force did not want the Navy to have that big of an attack airplane in Vietnam. It was one of the things that really hurt the war in Vietnam. This was that inter-service disputes. In other words the Air Force said they did not want a Navy Attack squadron based in Vietnam, because that is our job. It makes us [the Air Force] look bad if we need to have them there. Remember these are the generals, they were not going to do what was needed. So probably 75% of my missions were flown for the Army, because the Air Force wasn't there. This is not against the young Air Force pilots, who would have done whatever they could. It's just the senior officers said that we need guys north of Saigon, don't do anything south of Saigon, helicopters will do all of that, well helicopters weren't enough.

Thompson: Was the OV-10 a World War II plane?

McCracken: No, it was an American airplane. It was made, developed in probably 1965.

Thompson: Oh fairly recently in regards to the war.

McCracken: Yes, and it still flies in combat in Iraq, there are four of them.

Thompson: Wow.

McCracken: So that is a long time.

Thompson: Yeah, 50 years.

McCracken: It was cheap. And it had as I have said two of everything. It could take off and land on a carrier without a tail hook or a catapult. So it had a lot of advantages. It just didn't carry the ordinance or had what we called the loiter time. In other words you only had about an hour and 50 minutes of fuel. Unless you carried external fuel tanks and if you carried external fuel tanks that meant you couldn't carry more ordinance.

Thompson: So that was a jet engine plane?

McCracken: It was a turboprop, so it was a jet engine turning a propeller. That's where you get the short landing capability. Because what happens is as soon as the airplane's wheels touch down the props go into reverse. So you have 100% reverse thrust or backwards thrust compared to when you usually fly with forward thrust. You know on a commercial airplane you only get about 30% reverse thrust when you land on the ground. But when you have a turboprop you got everything.

Thompson: What enables that?

McCracken: The prop turns completely so it bites the air the opposite way.

Thompson: Right I understand now.

McCracken: I just coved my knowledge of aerodynamics. [Both laugh]

Thompson: How often did you fly?

McCracken: We flew virtually everyday. When we invaded Cambodia, I flew seven missions in a row without ever getting out of the airplane.

Thompson: So you operated in Cambodia too?

McCracken: Yes, when we invaded Cambodia, it was basically us. The Navy boats went up, the thing about Cambodia is by the time the rivers get to Cambodia they are narrow and they do a lot of turns. The problem with the turns is, the bad guys are waiting there on the turns, they let the forward Navy boats go ahead and then they hit the back boat. So we had to virtually fly air cover all the time over the boats. So we had to keep airplanes there, and it was a distance 45 minutes to get there. It was a problem, and that is where John Karry basically got his Silver Star, Christmas Eve in Cambodia. Do you know the whole controversy of whether or not he was really there?

Thompson: No, I am unfamiliar.

McCracken: Somebody with his call sign was there. Was that him? Everybody had a callsign. I was Black Pony 04.

Thompson: That's how your identified over the radio?

McCracken: Yes, in other words our squadron was called Black Pony. There were was a Black Pony 08, Black pony 14 and so on. The guys on the ground were the same way they had a callsign and that's what they used. You might have a callsign call and you didn't know if that was an Army or Navy unit or whatever. John Kerry's was Duck Fern 14. So I know from going back and reading our, we call them set-reps, situational reports that we put ordinance in for Duck Fern 14. So in the whole controversy of whether he was there or not I had to say that "hey Duck Fern 14 was there or somebody called himself that."

Thompson: When you provided support for the Navy ships in Cambodia did you fly with the ships, in front of or follow behind, how exactly did that work?

McCracken: No, we would kind of fly over. We would change speeds. The turboprop... you could have the two engines be out of sink. So for somebody on the ground it sounded like there were four airplanes. Because you were hearing two different sounds. It would drive you crazy, but we would try to stay over them. So they would travel in lets say groups of eight, there would be eight here and then a four miles back eight more, so we would be going in and out and over the whole time. We would be low sometimes, high other times. You had to keep the airplane moving, because we did not know how much automatic anti-aircraft weapons can track sound or heat. So as long as you keep moving they will have a hard time tracking you, but if you fly straight level then they could track you. And that's what happened with a lot of the airplanes we lost with SAM missiles was people wouldn't keep moving. Because it was a pain to be moving around. That's why we say our worst pilot was our best pilot, because he couldn't fly the airplane straight.

Thompson: Did the Cambodians have the same issue gun wise as the Vietcong being without tracers?

McCracken: No, actually it turned out the Cambodians were pretty much on our side. Because the Cambodians knew that if South Vietnam fell, the North Vietnamese with the help of the Chinese and the Russians backing, that they were next. They actually fought very well, but then when the crazy guy came in and took over.

Thompson: Pol Pot.

McCracken: He came in and virtually annihilated half of the country. So the Cambodians were really our allies. In fact they brought a bunch of there navy guys down and we trained them. They had virtually nothing, very antiquated things. We certainly didn't give them anything good. The Vietnamese were not going to give them anything good. But we didn't know what they were going to have, or whether they were going to shoot at us. We were basically going out there to get rid of all these strongholds that the North Vietnamese had in Cambodia.

Thompson: So that was the main objective?

McCracken: On other words you could keep hitting them as they crossed over the border, but they still had supplies and could just replenish them with more supplies. So the idea was to eliminate all the supplies. So that is why we went into Cambodia.

Thompson: So the North Vietnamese would go down through Laos then into Cambodia.

McCracken: Yes, from Cambodian then into South Vietnam into what we called the Parrot's Peak, which was northwest of Saigon.

Thompson: You would have to stop and refuel your plane every hour and 50 minutes or sooner, how did that work?

McCracken: We pretty much went back to our base. Now we had 14 airplanes, so we would keep... there were times when all 14 were flying. So you always flew in two it was called a light fighter team, you always flew in two, so when two were getting low on fuel they would leave and others would come. So we could keep things covered as long as there were not other things going on other places. In Cambodia other stuff was going on. So what we would do sometimes is we started trying to comeback to the big Air Force base north of Saigon and refuel there. The problem there was they did not realize the priority we had. We had to get in and get fuel and we

also had to get rearmed and they didn't know how to arm us. So we almost had to go back to our own base to get rearmed. Sometimes we didn't have to get rearmed and just stopped to get fuel.

Thompson: How long would it have taken to get back to base?

McCracken: When we were going to Cambodia probably 35 minutes. Because we were flying at 350 knots. A jet would fly at 550 knots.

Thompson: So nowhere near as fast.

McCracken: But a lot faster than a helicopter which flew at 100 knots. But it was mainly... like when we were covering their boats up there, we would shoot ordnance just to be seen shooting ordnance. So when we would come back and refuel you would want to make sure you were full of ordnance again. And see the Air Force couldn't do that for us because they had a different kind of ordinance than we did. So we could refuel, but even refueling with them was... you know it was kind of a deal where you had to fill out the paper work and just was...

Thompson: Sounds like a headache.

McCracken: It was. You know they wanted these little things to show you paid for it. Not the way to run a war.

Thompson: Certainly not, it sounds like there was a lot of issues between branches.

McCracken: There really was. We had this in World War II, MacArthur in the Philippines wouldn't let the Navy, it was the Army Air Force, so it was under him and he wouldn't let them do things. He wanted his army to do those types of things. Vietnam was pandemic no question. To put it simply, guys like me we got to Vietnam and we saw especially being an aviator, so I would see the Marine Corps, the Army, the Coast Guard... you could see what was going on.

And so after the first two weeks in Vietnam we were basically there to save American lives and I think a lot of these other guys will tell you the same thing.

Thompson: So that's how they operated?

McCracken: Yes, especially for us junior officers. Now those above us , you know there were a lot of good senior officers, but once you got to the really senior officers. The Navy admiral did not want the Air Force general to have credit for something when he could get credit. It was all like that.

Thompson: What rank were you?

McCracken: In the Navy the first rank is Ensign, then Lieutenant Junior Grade, and then Navy Lieutenant. And Navy Lieutenant is equal to a Captain, and that's the two bars you will see.

Thompson: So you were a Navy Lieutenant?

McCracken: I was a Navy Lieutenant in Vietnam.

Thompson: How long did you spent operating in Cambodia? Was that a good portion of your tour?

McCracken: We were legally in Cambodia after Nixon decided to invade Cambodia for about two weeks. Because once we started going in, then basically the North Vietnamese started pulling everything back until it was out of our range. We would go into Cambodia prior to that only if Navy units got caught in Cambodia. Let me tell you these guys on the rivers during the dry season banks go down, but you can't see above the banks, you can't see anything beyond the bank. Well they are using these maps that were very dated that the French did so they would make a wrong turn and they would end up five miles into Cambodia and then they would start getting shot at. Well it didn't matter where they were we would go and give them close air

support. And then when we came back and did a report we just moved the coordinates back into Vietnam. And they would do the same thing. That's why when John Kerry said that he went into Cambodia they said that you were not supposed to go into Cambodia then.

Thompson: But it was an accident?

McCracken: It was an accident or lets say these Navy guys get to the border and they were getting shot at from the other side.

Thompson: Then they would sail across.

McCracken: Most of the time it was lack of navigational skills or whatever.

Thompson: So we were only officially in Cambodia for two weeks?

McCracken: Roughly two weeks. And then they pulled back. The politics of the time were... Nixon wanted to go into Cambodia, he went before Congress and Congress said we will impeach you if you invade Cambodia. And Nixon for all the negatives that Richard Nixon had he said I am going to save American lives, I cannot not do this. I am not going to be Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy and not save American lives. So he went into Cambodia. Knowing and they impeached him. Well they had other reasons too.

Thompson: Sure.

McCracken: When I went to Micheal Birkner's class and he brought that up and he asked me to share, and I shared that. And I said it will go against... But I said that Richard Nixon when you do the profiles in courage... He might have had such a big ego he though he could do whatever he wanted, but he did that.

Thompson: So after those approximate two weeks you were no longer in Cambodia?

McCracken: Not much. And I forget when it officially ended, but I know this we had the main squad and an attachment. In the attachment we had two Lt. Commanders, which are like Majors they were the only ones that had a top secret clearance. None of the rest of us had a top secret clearance at the time. When the orders came to invade Cambodia they were not there. One was on leave and the other was somewhere else. So the orders were top secret and we couldn't open the orders.

Thompson: So what did that mean?

McCracken: So what we were doing was we were sitting there with these orders that were hand delivered. You know top secret for eyes only.

Thompson: And you couldn't touch them.

McCracken: We knew, we were hearing from Navy units that close air support was needed and they gave us the coordinates and it was in Cambodia. So we knew what the orders basically said, but we couldn't open them. So another Lt. and I went into a closet and opened them, came back and dropped them on the floor. An it said you are now authorized to operate in Cambodia.

Thompson: Would you have gotten in trouble for that?

McCracken: Oh yeah, I mean that is a court marshal offense.

Thompson: But they never found out?

McCracken: No, and we did a lot of those things. First Naval Aviation is a lot different from what we call surface navy. And then their was a war and we were the only squadron. So we could do... and the admiral named Zumwalt that was in charge of us very much backed the troops. He basically said "you do what it takes do not tell me."

Thompson: What is surface navy, you mentioned that?

McCracken: Service level ships.

Thompson: So the ships?

McCracken: Yes, so you separate the surface navy, which was the ships from the aviation navy which was flying and of course aircraft carriers. The aircraft carriers are part of the aviation navy.

Thompson: I didn't realize they drew a distinction like that.

McCracken: What happens is, you will have a carrier, but a carrier is never by itself. There are supporting destroyers and other ships. Once they are part of that group, its called a naval carrier task force, CTF. They are aviation navy, might be a destroyer or something else, but they are under the command of the admiral on the carrier, who was of course aviation. So there is crossover. The difference was they called them black shoes and brown shoes. Aviation was allowed to wear brown shoes in their uniform. The service guys had to wear black shoes. So the terms became black shoe navy and brown shoe navy.

Thompson: So you wore brown shoes?

McCracken: I wore brown shoes, yeah.

Thompson: Is there a reason why they drew that distinction?

McCracken: Aviation wanted to be different. And there used to be, when aviation first started they wore a green uniform, kind of a dark green uniform. And so the Navy kept that color for the aviation's green uniform. Well the Navy decided to get rid of the aviation's green uniform. So to make up for that they distinguished them, aviation from the surface navy, by allowing them to wear brown shoes.

Thompson: Lets jump back to Cambodia, so while you were there you were fighting North Vietnamese?

McCracken: The Vietcong were almost entirely in South Vietnam.

Thompson: Would you see the North Vietnamese in South Vietnam?

McCracken: No, never. I would see vehicles occasionally. Plus 80% of my flying was at night.

So you didn't see really anything. And that is why we would never fire unless we had

confirmation from two ground units and both of the airplanes. Because you just couldn't take a

chance. And the Vietcong were famous for, if they had an outpost, they would go in and take a

village and they would take the village children and place them next to their head quarters.

Because they knew the Americans wouldn't shoot at a place where there were children. And so

that's why we kind of had to go overboard on... It was like, they knew that prisoners of war that

they had taken in the Mekong delta, they were trying to get up north, the Americans and South

Vietnamese. So of course they had to use ships for that. So we had a problem in attacking their

ships. Where those ships really... did they have POWs on them? So what were you gaining, it

was a give and take.

Thompson: And the objective was to save as many Americans as possible.

McCracken: Yes, yeah. You know we were different, the Army guys on the ground the, My Lai

Massacre and things like that. You know these Army guys were being constantly shot at, like this

village would shoot at them. So what are they going to do, how are we going to stop... we have

wounded in that village. Of course the village was some Vietcong, some just people. And that

was a problem in Vietnam, was separating the good from the bad. You know when we were

bombing Germany, they were all Germans. When we were bombing Japan, they were all

Japanese. Now you know you didn't know. And in World War II, when we did the island hopping. We basically bombed Okinawa, everything on it. The people living there, didn't matter, because Japanese what could you do.

Thompson: What kind of weaponry did you have on your plane? Was it mostly machine guns?

McCracken: We carried, the airplane had four 50 caliber machine guns. That was roughly what the fighters had in World War II. We also carried a machine gun that shot 6,000 rounds a minute. It was a steady streak of red. But it was a very small bullet, it was a 7.62 which what you would shoot in a hunting rifle. And because it was a small bullet and had a low velocity, it looked very impressive. But it wouldn't penetrate anything. It was what we called 'keep your heads down' so if you were shooting it at the Vietcong, they didn't know what it was.

Thompson: So they would keep their heads down.

McCracken Yes. Then we carried rockets that were maybe six feet long. And our big weapon our Zuni rockets was about five inches around and 12 feet long. And the Zuni rocket could and would penetrate anything the North Vietnamese had. I mean it would penetrate a Navy ship. We also carried a 20mm Gatling gun, which was a large shell. And it could penetrate virtually anything. And it shot, on fast fire it shot six rounds a second. Slow fire two rounds a second. We always joke that if we had it on fast fire, 'you weren't flying the airplane, you were riding the gun' because the airplane just shook.

Thompson: Impressive armaments.

McCracken: Then we also carried flares at night so we could light up the ground. We rarely carried bombs, because you needed a forward air controller by the rule of the war to drop bombs and we didn't have any. We would have to get an Air Force forward air controller, whose... It

was kind of hard to do. So we just never carried bombs. And there were very few places... most of what we shot we were looking at having to shoot within 50 meters of friendly troops.

Thompson: So, incredibly close.

McCracken: Yeah, so dropping a bomb and things like that were not a great idea.

Thompson: So you didn't drop any napalm or defoliating agents?

McCracken: No, no.

Thompson: So that was the Air Force's job?

McCracken: Yes, the defoliant, remember when I told you about the triple canopy.

Thompson: Of course.

McCracken: Well when they put that Agent Orange stuff down, there was nothing left. There weren't sticks or anything like that.

Thompson: I've seen photos of it.

McCracken: And I used to watch those guys loading those 1 23s. And they had these big canisters and they would dump one into the other one and naturally it was spilling all over the place.

Thompson: Not particularly good for you.

McCracken: No. So I don't know what expose has been, but I'll tell you my personal experience. I had nine inches of cancerous colon removed. Was that Agent Orange or not I don't know. My father and grandfather never had cancer. But you don't know. Well that was 10 years ago now, I am fine and I don't need that colon unless I am going to be a truck driver and eat nine meals a day. But did I have exposure to it? Probably.

Thompson: Any particular stories you want to tell in our remaining time?

McCracken: You know, not really but I will tell you some of the ways I feel. I appear to be very well decorated. I have two distinguished fine crosses, a silver star which is second highest award the Navy has. But to me the guys on the ground did much more than I did. The reason we got decorated was for results. So you have guys on the ground that faced a much stronger enemy force and if we don't show up they've had it. We put the ordnance in and saved those lives. We come back we get written up for a medal. They don't have anything, they were the guys down there...

Thompson: Fighting it out.

McCracken: Fighting it out, yeah. So I have always seen myself not as a soldier. In other words I consider a soldier a compliment I do not deserve. And I respect the soldiers for that. I have spoken at a number of veteran's events, I've done them the alumni weekend this last two years. In fact Janet Riggs was here when I did the Metal of Honor ceremony, before you were in school in 2013 I think it was. She wanted to know how I wanted to be introduced, and I said that I always like to be introduced by one of the callsigns of one of the pilots that didn't come back from Vietnam. So Black Pony 07. She said what about you, I said all I do is Black Pony 07, not my name. She said she can't do that, and I said Janet it's your ship, but I am just telling you that is what I do. Because it was over in what you call the cub, it was a big deal what's his name... Who is the guy on Fox Sunday, he MCed it... Wallace was his name, Chris Wallace. He MCed it, you know Fox 43 was there and so on. And I just did there was one fella Steve Doane class of 1970. That got the only Medal of Honor that Gettysburg has and he was killed in action. So I read his citation and talked about him a little bit and read his citation. My feeling is, and I do not want to put down my fellow aviators.

Thompson: Of course not.

McCracken: But I separate my service from their service. In other words to me they were the guys that deserve everything and respect.

Thompson: Did you interact with those guys a lot, while you were over there?

McCracken: Now the Navy SEALs would be based where we were. We flew close air support for the SEALs. So we would be playing basketball at night and doing whatever so we interacted with them. Yeah but the Army guys we would only see sometimes they would pass through. And say 'hey I am hunting for Black Pony 04, he saved us two weeks ago and I wanna come thank him.' So you know there was some interaction and I will tell you something else about Vietnam a point that I make. Is when guys would call you on the radio and if somebody was Hispanic, African American, epically back then you could tell who it was by the inflection and so and so.

Thompson: Sure.

McCracken: That did not affect anything. In other words we would put our lives on the line for that person no matter, what minority or what he though he was. I don't think prior to Vietnam that happened. So I think in Vietnam it was a different story. An I have talked to a number of the a... There were very few African American fighter pilots.

Thompson: They were mostly on the ground?

McCracken: Yeah, mostly on the ground. But the Army had a number of helicopter pilots. And so those Army guys we would see some, because rescue pilots. So if you got an airplane down, we got four airplanes shot down the year I was there. It was the Army pilots that would pick them up. And so they would come in and we would go over if you get shot down this is what you need to do, how we can pick you up and so on. And the best pilots were, the guys who would go

anywhere were black pilots. And the reason they say it is because 'they keep telling us we are not good enough and so we are gonna tell em.' So in other words those were the guys we wanted, because they would go anywhere. But I like to make that point, it's hard to make in this day and age, but that is the way it was. You know whenever that guy, that Army officer who was African American walked into camp, he was one of us. And we had southern rednecks and it was the 1960s.

Thompson: Yes, a turbulent time.

END INTERVIEW