WAYNE “Mac” McNEIR – USMC -- MAAG + 3 Tours

Mac McNeir: My name is Wayne McNeir (M-C-N-E-I-R). I was born in Baltimore, Maryland, and I've called Baltimore home my entire life, except when I've been stationed outside of the area with the Marine Corps. I joined the Marine Corps in high school. It was in December of 1960. I joined what was then the First Engineer Battalion in Baltimore, Maryland. Stayed there through the graduation date and then went to boot camp in Paris Island, South Carolina, in 1961. As soon as I arrived in Paris Island, I opted to go regular. The whole idea at the time was to find myself. It only took me 23 years because I retired in 1982.

I grew up in a single parent family back in the 50s. Back then the label of single parent family wasn't prevalent. All I knew was my mother worked very, very hard to sustain our little 3-person family, myself and my sister. I was the man of the house until I left home in 1961 to go to boot camp at Paris Island. It helped me mature rather rapidly, not having a father in the house, but the funny part about it is is as mature as I was, a friend of mine talked me into going down to see the recruiter and there was no way in the world that I wanted to go into the Marine Corps, even though I have always admired the Marines. I thought they were a little bit too tough.

I went down to get in the submarine service and the Navy recruiter laughed at me and said, "You're too big. You'd use up all the oxygen." Basically he said, "We don't have a place for you." My friend, who had gone down with me, who had talked me into making that excursion, was dead set on being a Marine. Well, he couldn't pass the test and because of the recruiter, just promised me a hard time and nothing more, I felt that he was probably the most honest recruiter I had talked to while I was down at the main post office in Baltimore. I came to be a Marine and I've never regretted it, even though in boot camp, I did call him a few names.

The high school, I went to Southern High School in Baltimore, the old Southern High School. I really appreciated having gone to an inner-city school of that quality in that era because I had great teachers. I can't think of a single one that wasn't dedicated to the student, and I believe to this day that the education I got at Southern High School in Baltimore City back in the late 50s and the beginning of the 60s was probably equivalent to at least a Bachelor's Degree out of college today. It prepared me well for what I was to face in life.

I was going to be going to college, the University of Maryland, but I woke up one morning and discovered that I was going to satisfy my mother, her sisters, her brothers, who were like my surrogate family since I didn't have a father. I didn't want to go through life following an occupation that someone else had set the course for. I wanted to find out who I was and what I was meant to be. As I said, I joined the Marine Corps to get that period of time where I could find myself and fortunately for me and fortunately for the Marine Corps, I found out that the Marine Corps was where I was supposed to be.

At Paris Island, interesting thing for me was, I had the good fortune to get an émigré to the United States, who had joined the Marine Corps as my senior drill instructor. His name was Staff Sergeant [Pengay 00:03:42], and probably his most distinguishing characteristic as far as heritage was concerned, was he was a 10-year veteran of the French Foreign Legion before he came to this country to join the Marine Corps. I heard that drill instructors were rough, but I was wondering how much rougher he was for the experience of having been a Legionnaire.

I had trouble climbing ropes in boot camp. Everything else I came at fairly easily, but for some reason I couldn't climb a rope. Then one night early in my 13 week stay in Paris Island, I get waken rather abruptly. I think it was somewhere around 1, 2 in the morning, and I get drug down to the athletic field and here's this drill instructor with his Smokey Bear hat in full uniform, and I'm there in my skivvies, and he said, "Grab the rope and start climbing." I'm going, "But, but, but, but ..." and he said, "Private, you climb that rope and I'm coming up behind you and if that tushy of yours touches my Smokey, they'll never find your body." I haven't had trouble climbing a rope since.

When I went there I didn't really know what I wanted to be. Of course, the glory of the Marine Corps is that every man's a rifleman, so I wasn't sure that that's exactly what I wanted to be, because I wasn't sure if I could measure up in that regard because it took a special breed of man to go into death's door, so to speak, and maintain his wits. I still was not sure. The only thing that boot camp had done for me over that 13 weeks was instill me with the pride of being a Marine and what that pride was built on and that was the legacy of almost 200 years of men before me. I didn't want to tarnish it.

I wound up being assigned as a ground radio operator, so for all practical purposes I was infantry, but I was carrying a radio and following a Second Lieutenant around. After I went through technical school, I wound up, my first real duty station was in '62 at Quantico, Virginia. I was with a unit called the school's Demonstration Troops. What we were were basically living training aids for the officer [inaudible 00:05:59] school programs and the basic officer school program.

In the basic officer school we gave talks to the officers, let them know what communications was all about, should they desire to be a communications officer. When they went out into the field, we either provided support in the way of connection back to the main site in case we needed ambulances or there was some sort of an emergency, and we also provided the tactical radio communications if it was a field problem where we were simulating some sort of patrol situation or something of that ilk. We were essentially training agent support personnel.

Probably the closest thing to real-life Marine activity was during my time at Quantico, was the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962. I can remember, I was in Bethesda Naval Hospital and my Sergeant-Major came up there and bailed me out because President Kennedy, and I didn't figure out what it was all about because he interrupted the newscast I was watching in the hospital ready room, to go back to base at Quantico. That's when President Kennedy went on national television to announce that we were blockading Cuba because of the Russian incursion and the staging of missiles there.

We never did get into Cuba, but for years I understood that they had old Korean War era equipment and I could attest to a lot of it had seen better time and we could never get new equipment, new radios, but the thing that startled me most when I got back to Quantico from the hospital was that all the radio equipment, all the weaponry had been replaced with brand new equipment. They were getting serious. Again, we didn't go in, but we were prepared to do our job.

Interestingly enough, most of the Marines at Quantico when I was there, were one of two situations. They either came right out of school as I had, and spent the majority of their time there prior to being discharged after the end of their enlistment, or they had been overseas and came back and were there for being processed. My friend and I were probably the first two in the communication company there who had spent less than a year there when we got orders to go to Okinawa, 3rd Marine Division.

Once we arrived in Okinawa, 3rd Marine Division, Ron and I were separated, and I wound up with the company called 1st Com Company Provisional, which was not attached to any specific unit. We were used as sort of like a trouble force and sent in wherever they needed communications, which is what led to my ultimately going into Vietnam at a somewhat later date.

Okinawa has an area up north called Northern Training Area where most of the recon activity takes place, and that's where we would go when we would do our field training. Most of the Marines that went to Okinawa, it was to get that type of training because you were divorced from your stateside liberty call and your normal activities that you were used to and what you had grown up comfortable

with. You found yourself in a foreign land and in the case of Okinawa, an island. There weren't too many places you could go and you were a Marine 24 hours a day.

You had liberty, don't misunderstand me, but our 24 hour a day existence was actually training, learning what being a Marine was all about. To this day I think that's what made my decision to re-enlist, was the experience I had in Okinawa. As far as getting ready for Vietnam, I didn't even know about Vietnam. I hadn't heard the name. I'm not sure many people in my situation did. I do know that Vietnam, we had advisers in there in the late 50s, early 60s. It's just that we had no unit involvement in far as the Marine Corps was concerned until about 1962 when we had a unit go into Soc Trang.

Producer: Tell me about that.

Mac McNeir: 1962 they sent a Marine helicopter unit to Soc Trang to support a, from what I understand, a missionary down there who had developed his own defense force out of the natives in the Mekong Delta region. Since the threat to the Diem regime, which was probably the most animosity that they were facing amongst the people was that they were Catholic and this was not a Catholic country. The North Vietnamese parlayed that into a resentment and there was a coup I think in early 1960 that attempted to oust them that was unsuccessful. Of course a few years later there would be a successful coup that would take out the Diem regime and would wind up killing Diem and his brother-in-law, Madame Nhu's brother.

Anyway, we went in there to reinforce that missionary and that force of indigents that were trying to defend themselves and we were there from 1962 to early 1963. When I see we I mean, the operation was called Shufly and that was the first Marine Corps unit into Vietnam tactically that went in as a unit rather than as an individual adviser status. In 1963 they were sent north of Vietnam up to the I Corps area and they flew missions which were basically getting the ARVN, the Vietnamese army men out into the field and to resupply them and to occasionally do a medevac occasionally, but we weren't there to fight the war for them. We were there to get them to and from and provide the support that they needed.

That was when I wound up in Vietnam in early 1963, I think it was February or March. My commanding officer came to me and said, "We need to replace a gentleman that's already there, a Marine that's already there. Would you like to go there?" I had no concept of what Vietnam was. I didn't know there was a combat zone. All I knew was that they were sending me down there and it was a 4-man detail that supported the helicopter detachment, which was I believe HMM362 at the time.

They had 2 sergeants down there and another lance corporal and since they were asking me to go, I knew what it was all about. They needed somebody to do the work because they already had a sergeant down there who was going to give the orders. It appealed to me. It would give me more exposure to what the Marines do and I volunteered and it turned out to be a quite fulfilling year of my life almost. I was a city boy at heart and when I went to Okinawa I learned what it was like to live in a more rural surrounding. When I got to Vietnam, rural wasn't the word.

I think uninhabited would be probably the word that I would picture because most of the people of today when they picture Da Nang, if they're familiar with it at all, they see the buildings, they see the huge runway, they see the Air Force side of the field. When I arrived there there was a runway, and on one side of the field about a mile, mile and a half from the runway was the old French compound, which was the French barracks which the French occupied before they were ousted at the battle of Dien Bien Phu back in the 50s. We occupied those.

On the other side of the field was one hangar, a tower and nothing more early. The funny thing to me was they had a traffic signal right in the middle of the runway on both sides off the edge of the runway because the only way to get from one side of the field to the other was to drive exactly across the runway. I was on the side of the field where there was nothing but a hangar, a com shack which was built just before I got there, which was a corrugated aluminum building. It was a shack for all practical purposes, and it was divided in half. In one half we had our radio transmitters plus a back-up radio transmitter and in other half we had 4 bunks for myself and the 3 Marines that I worked with.

What we did was we maintained communications with the Pacific Fleet headquarters, the Marine headquarters down in Hawaii. That was our whole purpose for being was to keep the net up, to keep the radios functioning, to make sure the generators continued to operate, if we had problems with the antennas to get those repaired. I felt very vulnerable because that duty meant that at night when flight operations, for all practical purposes, had ceased, we were at the mercy of the Viet Cong and the ARVNs who were out on the perimeter defending us because we didn't have a large guard force out there at that time.

In the middle of the night when I used to have to go out there and refuel generators to keep the radios up and operating, we were on the edge of no man's land, so to speak. The way the generators were situated, I always felt very vulnerable climbing on top of those generators to put diesel fuel in them in the middle of the night and there's a light shining on me and everything around me's

pitch darkness. I'm saying, "What a great target. If I was a sniper boy, I'd love this one because it would be easy to take that sucker down." Pardon the language.

Producer: How much VC activity?

Mac McNeir: Not very much. When I went there, probably the closest thing that I saw to violence was the first Buddhist monk that did self-immolation, I was just down the main street on Doc Loc Street in Da Nang and there was a Catholic church there. I heard some screams and I turned around and a monk had set himself on fire. That was very upsetting to me. Occasionally we'd have some people trying to shoot at the aircraft as they took off or whatever, but it was minimal.

The one thing that sticks in mind was whenever I went into a foreign country, I tried to get to know normal people who lived there and worked as you and I would work, as shoemakers, as tailors, as barbers. I wanted to get to know those people and have them get to know me, and I figure a lot of the problems that we have as Americans in foreign countries is they don't appreciate our way of life and we're not familiar with theirs. I always made it a point to try to meet people and I laid the groundwork for that probably in Da Nang that first I went there.

Anyway, I can remember one night I went into town and a couple of the Vietnamese citizens that I knew who ran a drugstore in town told me to go back to base because there was something happening that night and they couldn't guarantee my safety if I stayed in town. My friends and I went back to base and that was the night that President Diem and his brother-in-law were killed and the coup took place. As they predicted, there was a bit of upheaval, so would I have been hurt? I don't know. The fact of the matter is, here was a Vietnamese citizen looking out for my welfare and telling me to get back to base.

Producer: From Delta region where the Shufly operation ...

Mac McNeir: I was not in, Shufly had operated down there and when they flew north, shortly after their arrival in Da Nang is when I joined the unit and we were called Sub-Unit 2 Mab 16 Marine Airbase Squadron 16, and we attached to them as a 4-man detail to provide the main radio communication out. Most of our units there were helicopter mechanics, electronics maintenance technicians, everyone necessary to keep the helicopters flying, and of course the flight crews. We had the support personnel, the cooks and bakers, because they were over at the French barracks area to make sure that we got our 3 hots every day, and the normal retinue of support pipes, myself included. We didn't have a lot of grunts.

We had air controllers operating out of the tower to maintain order on the flight ops, because we weren't the only ones using it. We had Air America using the runway, we had a lot of our allied nations which were already flying in there. At

that time, also Air Vietnam, which was the commercial airline for the country was flying in and out of there. It built up gradually. When I first got there, as I said, it was mainly a runway with a little bit of building on one side, but mostly rice paddies and not much more.

By the time I left there they had already started building up. As the years went by it was a mega-complex of multi-services, multi-disciplines. Da Nang, when we went up to Da Nang, we were doing that same type of job. We were flying the troops and their supplies out, and keeping them functioning and bringing them back once their missions were over. It was essentially the transportation of men and supplies that were ARVN, the Vietnamese army, nothing dealing with the Marine Corps.

The only other unit that we had there close by was the Army. The Army had the first Huey detachment that I had ever seen. Not being an air winger, I hadn't seen many helicopters, but I had flown aboard what we used to call the HUS, which was the 34 Sikorsky. Looking at the Huey compared to the Sikorsky, it was like a sleek sports car compared to a transport bus. We had the Army there, but they were staying in town in hotels.

We were staying in this little isolated corrugated shack and everything they seemed to want they got. One of the things that we learned as Marines early is the Army seemed to get everything they wanted and new. We got everything the Army didn't want and used. They got the same thing in quarters, too. They were living in town in a hotel et cetera. We were living right there in the same place we worked in the radio compound.

Producer: Personnel in Vietnam or was it 16,000 by the end of '63?

Mac McNeir: To be actually honest with you, it was in the teens. I can't give you the exact number but I believe it was in the teens. What you have to keep in mind when you talk about that number, you had Air Force personnel, you had Army personnel, Marine personnel, up in I Corps, which were essentially in the Da Nang area. Chu Lai was starting to build up, then in the south you had Navy Riverine forces that were beginning operations in the Mekong Delta.

You had MACV which was ramping up in Saigon, then you had Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base, but basically that was the supply mission, a support mission, and we hadn't really built up to start waging war with our own personnel as an ally of the South Vietnamese. It was strictly in a support function.

Military advisers were probably the closest thing we had to combat troops over there, Marines or Army. We had both Army advisers, the special forces who would go out and actually live with the indigents there. We also had Marine

advisers working with the Vietnamese Marine Corps, and they were solo operators in that they went with these units by themselves and they were the only American there. The one thing I can tell you is that I heard of a lot of deprecating comments about the quality of the ARVN soldier.

To some degree I saw that, but the Vietnamese Marine was to their country what the Marine Corps is to our country. They were the cream of the crop. They were as good as good can be and I've never met a Marine military adviser who worked with the Vietnamese Marines who ever complained about them. They were a cut above the ARVNs.

Producer: What was your assessment of your first tour?

Mac McNeir: To be absolutely honest with you, when I left Vietnam in 1964, I did not feel like I had been in a combat zone because I was isolated. I did get shot at once or twice, but it was isolated incidents and it wasn't a full-blown attack. There were a number of times where we sought positions in a defensive perimeter where nothing came to be, so in that not quite a year that I was there, I never experienced what I consider the combat environment. I was aware of people being killed. I was aware that we had lost a few in the squadron that we were supporting, but it had yet to come home to me.

It was just, for lack of anything more descriptive, it was sort of a graduate school. If Paris Island and my time in Okinawa and this year were anything to me, it was getting out of college and going to grad school. I learned more what a Marine in the field has to do, but being a combat Marine at that point, no. I still did not have a grasp of the severity of the situation.

Producer: Where did you return to?

Mac McNeir: I came back and was assigned to I & I duty up in Chicago.

Producer: What is that?

Mac McNeir: I & I is Inspector/Instructor duty in the unit in Chicago, reserve unit. As luck would have it, there were not many people who had been to Vietnam and I was there with two and we became very, very close friends. Probably the hardest thing for me on that particular duty was we started to ramp up. I was there in '65, because I had, between my leaving Vietnam and actually reporting in for duty, I went in for advanced training, which is another story which I think I need to tell first. They had misunderstood my intent when I re-enlisted, and I had intended to go to tech school and learn how to fix the radios I carried on my back rather than carry them. Somehow or another I wound up going to aviation electronics school, so when I went to Chicago I wound up with an aviation unit.

This is how I wound up in, my goodness, I lost my train of thought. This is how I wound up in Chicago with these gentlemen and by that time it was 1965. This was where I was going with the conversation. This was early '65, we're having the build-up in Da Nang, people were starting to get involved in combat, and the Marines and the Army are not just advising any longer, they're actually doing some fighting and casualties start coming home. Not only wounded, but those who were killed in action.

We in the Marine Corps have this philosophy that a telegram is not going to tell a family that they lost a loved one. The commandant of the Marine Corps makes sure that someone close to that community, that is affiliated with the Marine Corps, is there and personally tells the family that there's a problem, that their son has been wounded, their son has been killed or a daughter as the case may be, later in later years. Woe be the commanding officer of the unit who's notified to make this condolence call who gets there after that telegram arrives. We take pride in breaking the news ourselves.

It's not an easy task, it's probably the worst duty I ever had, but the reason I went on it, it was typically an officer's job, but every time an officer was assigned, they had no idea what Vietnam was all about, so they would take me along since I'd been there, to answer questions for the family. It was probably the most heart-wrenching experience I've ever had in my life.

I was back in the States being trained in aviation electronics when they actually made the landing there. I remember seeing the films, but I was between tours. I hadn't returned yet for my second tour. It would be just about a year later, September the following year that I went back for my second tour.

Producer: '66?

Mac McNeir: Yes.

Producer: Yes. Were you eager to ...

Mac McNeir: Actually '67, I'm sorry, '67.

Producer: Were you eager to get back in the fray?

Mac McNeir: By that time I was a career Marine and I wasn't eager but I wasn't trepidatious either. I knew that the environment had changed. I knew that we were involved in more of a traditional sense, combat-wise. At this point in time, I'm now married, I know have a child, which I didn't have before, so I was worried more about having them exist without a father and without a husband than I was worried about having anything happen to me. When I returned I was just intent

on doing the job the best that I could, staying alive, and keeping those that I was responsible for alive.

As it turned out I was working in the ECM shop, which was Electronic Counter Measures, which was what I had gravitated towards, but it was in very short order where they put me in charge of controlling maintenance for everything dealing with the electronics within an aircraft. We flew aircraft that were called EA-680s. They were a 4-seat plane that had a pilot and 3 ECM operators. What they would do is they would scan the electronic spectrum as bombers and fighters would fly into a hostile environment and they would degrade the radar by a number of means. The equipment that did that was the equipment that we were responsible for on this particular aircraft.

Producer: Was it jamming?

Mac McNeir: Jamming, dropping chaff. Individual fighter aircraft, as they evolved in the Vietnam War, had individual protection systems on them, but when you sent a large flight of aircraft in there, you had to provide more than just that self-contained coverage on each individual aircraft. We went in and did what was called barrage jamming, which would basically blossom the radar scopes of the people on the ground so they couldn't tell specifically where the aircraft were. It was to deny them the accuracy that they needed in order to effectively fire anti-aircraft or fire missiles.

For quite awhile and probably for the majority of the war, the majority of the losses we had aircraft-wise were because of anti-aircraft and the reason that was, it's very, very easy to see that if you're flying into an area to take out, it must have some military importance. If it has military importance, they're going to have a lot of anti-aircraft around it and as you come in to make your run, you're going to have to fly through it. Whereas, the missiles aren't quite as many in number and they have to be much more accurate. As the radars progressed, that's when the need for barrage jamming and chaff carters et cetera, really evolved.

My first exposure with them was when I got there in that '66-'67 time frame in that one of the funny things that happened was when they were flying north one of our pilots came back and was complaining that he had something wrong with his warning receiver. It kept going off but they weren't firing any weapons, or they weren't seeing them at least. We couldn't find anything wrong with the aircraft and then we had another aircraft come back with the same complaint, that we kept getting indications that they were tracking us and firing weaponry at us but because of the guidance signals that we were intercepting.

What we found out later was that apparently the Vietnamese had run short of missiles and didn't have any to fire, but they didn't want the aircraft to come in scot-free, so they at least wanted to unnerve the flight crews to make them think they were painted by an acquisition radar and subsequently a tracking radar, and take evasive action to make their run a lot more difficult. At least that was what I was led to believe by the people in the intelligence shack, which was right down the road from me. I didn't recognize it.

When I landed at Da Nang, I was prepared for old home week, I was going to know where everything was because it hadn't been that long since I had left. I didn't recognize anything when I landed because of the Air Force compound having been built up. That side of the field which I'd known as just a barren area with our shack and a hangar, all of a sudden was very populated. The Vietnamese air terminal had blossomed into a very nice building. We were no longer living in the French barracks.

There were plywood and aluminum hooches built all over the area that housed not only the Marines, but the Army and the Air Force et cetera. The Air Force even had barracks believe it or not. It was quite different. I went from living in the place that I worked with 4 people to having a huge mess hall, which was made out of plywood and aluminum. It wasn't like the Air Force's. Everything was plywood and aluminum as far as the offices, the sleeping quarters, and it was typically 10 to 12 men in one of those hooches. We had the comforts of home, but without the comforts that home would provide. In other words, we didn't have hot water showers.

In fact, for quite a while we were still taking showers out of the helmet so to speak, using 5-gallon jerry cans and then the first showers after they were built were only cold water showers because we didn't have water heaters. Then ultimately the CB's took pity on us and got us some hot water heaters. It was quite a bit of build-up. Plus, my mindset was totally different.

When I went in there the first time I was basically a ground radio operator functioning with the mind of a ground radio operator and now I'm in there controlling maintenance on aircraft that are keeping people alive by keeping the planes in the air to make their bombing runs and to degrade the enemy radar, whatever. It made the likelihood that that ground Marine was going to survive that much longer, so we took our jobs very seriously.

It was the first time that I really got to know a little bit of, I wouldn't say fear, because of my position I didn't allow myself to be frightened. I allowed myself to be concerned we would get hit. We were now, I went from a rather isolated environment in '63, '64, to now, it was on regular occurrence we would take

rockets in and when I first got there, they hit the Air Force side first typically. They had a habit.

They would hit the Air Force side and then walk the rockets across the runway and bring it over to the Marine side. The Air Force getting hit was our early warning system for awhile. Then they started getting indiscriminate and hitting everywhere. They would hit the airfield, they would hit the Air Force side, they would hit the Marine compound. I remember they hit our ammo dump and listened to bombs cooking off for it seemed like a day or two. The life and death struggles that the grunt Marine was facing every day when he was in the bush, we were starting to get a taste of. It brought the reality of war home very, very quickly. They did but at my age, I can't quite remember what it was anymore.

Producer: It wasn't Rocket City was it?

Mac McNeir: Yeah, at one time it was. What I do remember is when Tet started, having been a grunt, one of the things they did was they put me in charge of the defense platoon. If we were ever to get hit with any large-scale attack, the reinforcements being provided to the outer perimeter, which was the Marine grunts, we were supposed to set up on the perimeter of the airfield to provide a fallback position.

Because I was a ground Marine for my first 4 years, they made me the defense platoon sergeant, so that was sort of a secondary job of mine, to go out there and get into the fight in the hole, make sure my runners got the ammo out to my platoon. We'd sit there and wait and watch the rockets come in and watch the destruction.

Fortunately we never really had to engage at that level as the grunts did that were further out. The thing I remember most about the Tet Offensive is once the initial barrages started to ease off because of the grunts getting the upper hands out in the boonies, we still had large numbers of North Vietnamese and Viet Cong out there that had to be dealt with.

As the sun come up, I can remember to this day aircraft taking off of the Da Nang airstrip loaded with ordnance, getting down to the end of the runway and it seemed like no sooner than they cleared the runway they were dropping their ordnance, circling around and coming back to the other side of the airfield and landing without having really gone anywhere. Then we knew that this was serious business.

Producer: What's the range of those things if they were able to launch them any effectively against the base?

Mac McNeir: Well, I don't know what the range is because I never really worried about where they were coming from. I'd wonder where they were going to and the case coming down and how close they were landing to me. I know that they would fire those from the other side of Hill 327. They would fire them from over by Monkey Mountain, Marble Mountain, where the other Marines were stationed, and there was also a hospital set up over there. The thing was that they could move them anywhere and fire from whatever position they wanted to, so I really can't answer that with any degree of specificity because I was strictly on the receiving end rather than on the launch end.

There were times when sappers attempted to come through but they never were successful in really creating any damage. I understand we had them come through once or twice but they were apprehended by Charlie Company MPs, which was the unit at that time, so we didn't really have any serious issues with sappers, though they always remained a threat.

I went there in September of '67 and I stayed to September '68 because you had to go through Okinawa. That was our depot where we ran people through on their way in, on their way out. At that time the statement was 13 months shore to shore, so by the time you left the States, got to Okinawa and then finally wound up in Vietnam, that was a week to 2 weeks, and then another week to 2 weeks to get back, so 13 months shore to shore gave you about a year in Vietnam.

Everybody had a short timer start, and usually they took a picture of, well it wasn't a picture, it was a drawing of a well-endowed young female or something that gave them pleasure and it was broken down into a hundred spaces, each having a number. You would color it in each day and when the calendar was filled you were a short timer. You counted the days. The things I remember was I didn't think about home except when things like the assassinations that took place here in this country and the riots that ensued.

I was worried about my family more than I was worried about myself. That was at the heart of my existence over there. I didn't want to leave my family without a father and a husband and that was my only concern for me, was to do everything I could to come home. As far as fear, I was more afraid of what happened to my families because they lived in the inner city of Baltimore and at the time there was a few riots there. That was always a big concern.

I also learned something else at that point in time, which has stuck with me the rest of my life, and that's how a lot of people and me now as well, God has a certain time and place that your end is going to take place. I kind of felt that way most of my life, but I had two occasions in Da Nang. One occurred during this tour and one would occur on one of my later tours.

During the Tet Offensive, when we got hit, rocket attack, mortars, whatever, one of the things I used to do, and my wife still jokes about it, is that instead of running for cover, I went through the compound that I was responsible for and made sure that all my troops got out, to make sure nobody got run over in the stampede and was laying unconscious. As I was getting to the end of the complex, I heard a strange sound and I didn't quite understand what it was. I went back to the other end and got into my command bunker and we waited out the attack there.

When it was all over, got up in the morning, went back into the complex and I was filling out my morning reports, and on the way out the back door where I heard this strange sound, I noticed that the corrugated aluminum roof had a hole in it. When I looked down, I noticed there was a big piece of concrete. The CBs had put sidewalks of concrete in the work areas. We didn't have that in the living areas, but around the aircraft of course, everything had to be concrete, whatever, so they had sidewalks.

Anyway, there was a big hunk of concrete out of the sidewalk and right across from it we had a corrugated aluminum building called a butler building, which is where we kept a lot of our equipment. Well, there was a hole in the side of that. What had happened was a rocket had come through the overhang by the back door of my complex, hit the sidewalk, ricocheted through the butler building and went across to, I believe it was VMFA 235's hangar, it was an F8 squadron. It was the only flush toilet that we had in the immediate area and that's where it chose to detonate. I was probably no more than 5, maybe 6 feet from where that rocket passed through without detonating, thank God.

A couple of years later I had a similar circumstances where I was out on the flight line and I heard another sound and I looked back and there was a rocket embedded in ground behind me in the soft dirt because it was typhoon season. It had failed to detonate, so that was a couple of times that I was within 15, 20 feet of meeting my maker and I didn't. I became a fatalist. I didn't worry about dying after that. I worried about keeping other people from dying as much as I could in my limited sphere of influence in the people I was responsible for.

I don't want to sound too political because I don't want to offend anybody's sensibilities. I had difficulty on my first tour of duty because I went through Tet then, and I saw all the celebrations that the Vietnamese families had, all the preparation they did. It's probably, in its way, as big if not bigger than Christmas is here. They didn't have the wherewithal because of the poor nature of the majority of the people who lived there, but they were so festive. They went out of their way to do things that they couldn't possibly do the rest of the year.

I knew it was special, but I still found it incongruous that both sides would set aside this period of time to celebrate Tet and quit killing each other. You're either at war or you're not at war. I just found it incongruous. In '67 as we transitioned into '68, when we had that big Tet Offensive, the idea of Tet was not foreign to me. I knew what it had meant in the past, so I was probably as shocked as everybody else was.

But I think also in the back of my mind, I said, "Well, we're finally getting around to it," because I knew it was inevitable. I just never thought about it, but in my gut you know that somebody's going to push for an advantage and sometimes it means you break your word, which is what the North Vietnamese did. What did that mean to me? Well, it meant to me that we were getting serious at long last, but unfortunately, myself and a lot of the other Marines that I knew and maintained contact with over the years felt that the United States wasn't as serious as it should be about waging the conflict.

One of the things that we always had difficulty with is you fight for days, weeks, you take a hill, and within a matter of hours, you leave it. Then the Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese would reinhabit the area. It was a "what are we fighting for?" type of situation. We'd waste the American lives and what did we gain? Body count was for paper, but we were dealing with flesh and blood. We were dealing with the misery of many families at home and when you deal with the misery that the families at home that supported us were undergoing, and then the misery that was being imparted by that element of society that didn't believe in what we were there to do, it was not something that was easily grasped. I wrestled with it for years.

The negative impact that it had on me arriving back in California and the peaceniks, for a lack of a better description, that tried to make me feel uncomfortable, never succeeded, but they did get to a lot of people. They did hurt a lot of people. We weren't baby killers. We were trying to keep babies alive. What a lot of people don't realize, and I've even heard some veterans saying, the villagers weren't concerned about them. The one thing that I came to realize by having known a number of the Vietnamese people, is they had been at war for thousands of years. In that thousands of years, the aggressor changed.

It was the Chinese, it was the Mongols, it was the French, now it's the Americans. They knew that a thousand years from now they were going to be fighting somebody else. It was a way of life for them. If an American comes into a village and says, "We're here to help you. We're going to help you build a school," whatever, they're going to take advantage of it, but only if the VC doesn't threaten to kill them if they do. What would I do in that same situation? I would look after me and I would look after mine, and that would come at a cost. I'd have to judge who's the bigger threat and that's what those villagers did.

For those who don't think that the South Vietnamese did as much as they should have, they knew they were going to be there when it was over. I'm ashamed of having to say this, but they saw the writing on the wall long before we did, because they knew they were going to have to live with what was left and we weren't. That probably sickens me because I already saw the duplicity of the American government that would commit us but not support us.

A lot of people share this belief that I do and a lot of people will argue the point, but the reason I think ultimately that South Vietnam fell, was President Nixon had the United States representative at the Paris peace talks, the North Vietnamese had representatives there, the South Vietnamese had representatives there, and the Viet Cong had representatives there. The Viet Cong had representatives there. They were not an entity as a nation, but they were there, and they all signed the accords.

The accords were that the Americans were going to pull out the manpower, peace would be maintained, but we would support the South Vietnamese government with equipment and supplies, and everything but manpower so that they could sustain their sovereignty. For a number of years that was working, and then Watergate happened and no sooner than Watergate happened, Nixon comes under fire and ultimately gets impeached. A Senator named Fulbright, a Democrat, abrogated all those agreements and pulled out the support.

The Vietnamese were left without re-supply. They were left without more ammunition. They were no longer getting aircraft. Their demise was to come shortly thereafter. That was because we lacked the courage of our commitment to support those people through thick and thin, which is what we signed up for, and we didn't. If I may, that's what bothers me about the world situation today with ISIS and what's going on in the Persian Gulf. I see this vacillating government that we have right now putting us in the same situation. Those who do not learn from the lessons of history are condemned to repeat it.

Let me interject one other story about the mindset. Having gone back as a parent and a husband now, on that second tour, we got R&R and it was up to you to where you wanted to go on R&R and when you got to go on R&R. We were talking about this feeling of self-preservation that I tried to keep subdued. I knew that would be an issue with me when I left my firstborn at home and I went back to Vietnam on that second tour, so I made the conscious decision to go on R&R to Hawaii to meet my wife approximately 60 days before I was due to come home because I didn't want to wait until the tail end and be traveling.

I went to Hawaii, my wife and I had a great time. It was the first time she'd ever flown and we enjoyed the beaches and went down and saw Don Ho, and I forgot about the war, she forgot about the war. We renewed acquaintances and it was

really a great time. But when I got back to Da Nang after the R&R ended, she saw me off, and that was a little bit hard, but the reality came to me that now I'm thinking about, "I've only got 60 days. I've got less than 2 months and I'm back in the land of the big PX, and there won't be anybody shooting at me unless I walk into some sort of crime situation."

That bothered me, because now my focus is not on doing my job. My focus is not on keeping my awareness of my surroundings and protecting myself and the people I'm responsible for. I'm finding myself thinking too much about home. That upset me, the fact that I was doing it. Fortunately I was able to get it back under control so I was really, really happy that I put off having the R&R until the very end, because I don't know if I could have done it for any more than about 60 days. When I went back the third time it was in the '71 time frame.

Producer: Then we're really in the driving.

Mac McNeir: Getting there. Getting there. What had happened was, the Air Force during this period of time, I'm in actually in Iwakuni, Japan, is where I'm assigned with the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing, still in that ECM aircraft community because it was such a specialized community that if you were successful in it, you never got out of it. I evolved up through the senior staff ranking, but I made some steadfast friends that I've kept all my life as a result. Anyway, when I went to Iwakuni, we were there for awhile and the reason I was in Iwakuni was shortly before I left the States, the Air Force had told our squadron and the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing that they didn't need our type of support anymore. They could handle it.

They flew them and took all the equipment, all the vans where the electronic workbenches were set up and flew them into Japan and established a working squadron up in Japan. I hadn't been there all that long, a couple of months maybe, and all of a sudden the Air Force says, "Well, maybe we can't do it." We were directed to go back in. I don't remember the exact time frame, but I remember we went back in and we were told it was just temporary. We went in and rather than taking the equipment that we would if we were going to have a permanent setup, we took in just enough equipment to work as a temporary additional duty type situation.

We lived and worked in the revetments. The revetments were these covered areas where they kept the aircraft park so if they shot the rockets and mortars in, unless they went through a very narrow opening, the aircraft would not suffer damage via airburst. That was our quarters. We slept on the concrete and made life as best we could. We were there for I think a month or two, and they said, "Okay, we got it now," and we went out again. We were back in Iwakuni in a few months.

Then they said, "Well, really, I think we need to have you back here." We went back in, but this time we took our vans with us and set everything back up and we stayed there for maybe 4 or 5 months. Then when we left that time, that was approximately the end of it for us. The attacks were far more frequent. The North Vietnamese and the VC seemed to be more adamant in accomplishing their goal, and we were getting hit much more frequently, much more frequently than I had ever remembered.

Producer: What did your mother say about you going back for another tour?

Mac McNeir: Well, it wasn't my mother so much as my mother-in-law. I married an Italian lady, and they had come to this country in 1956, so American military was something totally foreign to them. My wife told me one day when I had come back from a run, because I was a runner in those days. I used to go out, even when we came home on leave, I'd go out and run around Clifton Park, through a few of the neighborhoods and get my 5 to 10 miles in every day. While I was out on one of my runs, my mother-in-law, who didn't speak English very well, asked her, "Why does he keep going back to Vietnam?"

My wife had trouble explaining to her as a career Marine, I went where I was told and that was the life I chose, and I had no bones about it because had I, I would have not re-enlisted. She had a hard time thinking, why does somebody keep putting himself in that situation like it was voluntary. No, career means that's automatic volunteering. You sign up for everything and anything that they direct you to do.

Producer: When you got back after that third tour ...

Mac McNeir: I came back that time, I wound up at Cherry Point, North Carolina, same type of squadron. I'm thinking, "I'm now married. I've got 2 children. The Marine Corps has been good to me." A lot of people would find that humorous but I actually felt that way. "The Marine Corps has been good to me. How can I pay them back?" I volunteered for recruiting duty and the one thing that you were taught at a very early age in the Marine Corps is never volunteer for anything. I learned the reason why as a recruiter. I went out to San Diego from Cherry Point, went to recruiter school, and in 1977, I wind up in Richmond, Virginia, and get assigned to take over the recruiting sub-station down at Newport News, Virginia, Hampton Road.

I had a 5, 6 man recruiting sub-station and we did basically everything east of 95 except for Norfolk and Virginia Beach. Everything back to 95 and that is probably the most thankless job I ever had to do. I spent more time away from home as a recruiter than I think I ever did in any other, except when I was overseas, but I had an appreciation of what Marines really did. I was able to, this was during by

the way, the time of the great recruiting scandal in the United States where recruiting offices all over the country were having people thrown in the brig for falsifying high school transcripts, whatever.

Philadelphia was our operational headquarters and Baltimore, believe it or not, was the number one recruiting station in the area, if not the country, for quite awhile. Our commanding officer down in Richmond wanted to be the number one recruiting station in the country and he put that feather in his cap. Here we are in the midst of a recruiting crisis, recruiters everywhere supposedly are cheating to make quota, and the onus on us is to be honest so we're not going to go to jail.

That was the thing that I tried to do, was try to cover for my men in that if you didn't feel comfortable doing something, I would do it for them and if I lost the assession, or that contract, I would make it up to them by getting it and giving it to them. We weren't going to cheat and we became the go-to sub-station in the station of Richmond. After a year we became number one in the entire country, number one recruiting station in the country.

The reason we were able to do that was not to cast aspersions on other services, but as when I tried to join, I heard all the stories and the wild come-ons and the lures. The only recruiter that told me what I thought was the truth was the Marine recruiter who told me, "All I'm promising you is a hard time." I wasn't quite that bad, but I told them what they could expect and if they went up for another service, I told them what they could expect.

A lot of them were basically brow-beaten to signing the contract when they weren't really sure that's what they wanted, and when they came back they were somewhat bitter. When they brought their friends around to the recruiting station, they brought them down to see Master Sergeant McNeir because he was the only one in that entire building that told the truth. That was my reputation on the street.

Again, live your life right, do what you must do, don't worry about the incidentals, and treat others like you would be treated is what I took away from Vietnam. Because if I were to go out, that's what I wanted to have as my last thought. I did the best I could with what I was given, and that's what I tried to teach my Marines, it's what I tried to teach my kids.

It was a very difficult time. I already alluded to our government dropping the ball, so I felt a lot of animous towards my government and at times I even questioned my God. How could you let this happen? But, what I really felt worse about was each time I went back over these 3, actually it was 2 complete tours and 2 small segmented tours. Each time I went back during those 4 different

iterations, after the first one, I knew the merchants in Da Nang. I knew some of the people who lived in the outlying areas.

Every time I went back there were fewer there that I remember from the time before. The few that did make it all the way, I don't know where they are now. I know about the re-education camps that they were subjected to. We could've, we never lost an actual engagement in that country. We never lost the will to do what was right, but we were hamstrung and not being allowed to sake the final verdict the way it should've been done.

War is a dirty business. It's something I hope that nobody in the world ever has to face again. But by God if you're going to enter into something like that, there's only one outcome to a war that is just and right, and that's vanquishing the enemy and having them come to the table wanting to end the war. Until we achieve that mindset in the aggressors that we face, we're going to have the situation that we have today, and that's what really bothered me.

The treasure that we lost, my friends, the friends that never came home. The people who lived there that I didn't know, but those faceless entities that I was there trying to protect that suffered because we didn't have the courage that we should have had as a Congress, as a Senate, as a President to see through what we started. That's what really hurt me when I watched those helicopters being pushed off the sides of the ship. That's what really hurt me when I listened to Jane Fonda spill her venom and now trying to apologize.

She had to have the conviction to do the things that she did. She didn't do what she did not knowing what she was doing. She should pay those consequences just like the people that died because of what she did. I'm not bitter, but it frustrates me that people haven't learned from that lesson.

Producer: Well, Mac, I want to thank you for, thanks for coming out.

Mac McNeir: I'd like to say my pleasure, but the filming was the pleasure. The recollections, it served the purpose of bringing back faces that I hadn't recalled for awhile. Thank you.

Producer: Thank you.