Bob McGregor

Salt Lake City, Utah

Interviewer

Give us a little background of how you got into the Vietnam War and what your thoughts were going in.

Bob McGregor

Well, I had been in college, and I was in my third year of college at Hawaii Pacific University. And in those days, the University was in a five-story building in downtown Honolulu. Two floors below that was the Navy recruiting office. Now, my dad being a former Navy officer kinda got me instilled with that, and so I'd hang out there when I didn't have anything else to do, and I kinda got to know the guys. And for the five or ten years prior to that, Vietnam had been a big discussion point in high school and in the community, and it was kinda nice being able to talk to some of the sailors that actually had some of that experience.

And I decided while I was preparing myself for a business career in communications that I wanted to see if what I was really learning would apply in the real world. And I figured oh, what better place to try it than in military service, because there was a definite structure, and you had opportunities to use what you learned. And so I just decided well, I was gonna go ahead, and enlist, and I did. And I delayed until the end of that semester, so that was June of '72. And I went in right around the 4th of July of '72. And it was everything I thought it would be.

It gave me a lot of good grounding, good experience on how to deal with other people, good experience on how not to deal with other people, and also a lotta good training because I was given collateral duties that kind of gave me a sense of what was going on, not only in the military, but in the world at large which we really never had any connection with. So I got into Vietnam kind of, like, in a quirky way 'cause my first duty station had been Midway Island. And I was there for 18 months, and I had received orders to Point Mugu, California where they had a slot open in their research office.

Interviewer

Were there protests going on when you were in high school?

Bob McGregor

There was always protests because there were people that didn't believe in war period. But remember in Pearl Harbor, the greater population was very much neutral, if I had to say anything. You had the core like you have today. You have the hardcore people, not necessarily native, who did not believe in the war. But there was a lot of pro-war sentiment, again, not so much, because of why we thought we were there, but more because of the benefits that the state had been receiving. 'Cause one has to keep in mind that a lot of the soldiers and a lot of the

sailors all came through Hawaii. And when they came through Hawaii, they usually left their green. And in those days, Hawaii was still struggling to develop their infrastructure, to develop a plan for tourism. And all that influx of tourist dollars helped to spur that construction. So it was kind of like a very ambivalent feeling towards the war.

And I know a lotta the kids that I grew up with were ambivalent, too. There were those who came from military families. I mean, the high school I went to catered to a lot of the military families and we picked up a lot of officer kids, who I would run around with, and we would always discuss what we were doing. The political ramifications of it we never really cared for. But if it were up to us, we would've had the war won by the fall of '68. But it wasn't up to us and it was up to the other politicians, and that's what we had to deal with.

And I know my dad, again, going back to him, he was a former Naval JAG officer, naval line officer. And he always instilled within me a sense of rightness about what the country was doing at any point in time. He had college classmates who ended up being very, very influential politicians. And he had done a lot of good things in World War II, both as a JAG officer in Hawaii, as well as his at sea service, where he was involved with the last major pacific campaigns in World War II, and it was, for me, fascinating. But he also instilled in me a sense of rightness about this country, and that's probably for more of anything else why I went in 'cause it was like my way of repaying this country for all that it gave me: my education, good parents, a way of life that was very comfortable, and something that was worth fighting for no matter where it was.

And I think that sometimes we lose sight of that, that there is something worth fighting for, something worth protecting. And even though we're so isolated, and until 9/11, so much apart and separate from that. It's something else when you grow up in a place that has actually been attacked. My dad was at Pearl Harbor, and he'll never let us forget that. Any time he had visitors come in from the states, he would always take them to the Arizona Memorial, and he would always take one or two or three of us along with him. And I guess I was the one that was most susceptible to that, because I thought it was kinda neat getting in that Navy boat and going out to the memorial in those days. And it was like just the calm peacefulness of that harbor told me man, some day you're gonna be doing the same thing. And sure enough, I was there.

Interviewer

So at the age of 22 you joined the Navy.

Bob McGregor

Yeah. Basic training for me was kinda fun. I mean, I can't say it was a typical kinda training because I had, still have, and probably always will have, special talents. In those days, I had quite the voice, still do, and I was put into a company, it was kinda like an honors company. We didn't go through the regular training, where we learned how to tie knots, where we learned nautical terms, where we had the shipboard life. The USS Recruit never saw the

bottom of my soles there in San Diego. And we were educated in Navy ways, but we also spent a lot of time rehearsing, learning music, and performing every Friday at recruit graduation. And then every Sunday we would go to religious services, and we would be singing for religious services. So it was quite the different training, but it was something that I began to appreciate because of those talents. And the friends that I made out of recruit training were friends, who had a lot of things that lasted quite a while with me.

And it kind of brought me to Utah because, like, if it weren't for the fact that the guy in the bunk across from me was LDS, I would've never been introduced again to the church, never would've had the desire to come to Utah. I probably would've stayed in Hawaii. But it showed me some interesting things. The things I always will remember, like, are the shipboard firefighting lessons that they taught us. I had to go through that two or three different times in my career, and it's something that to this day I will always remember 'cause it's not very often you get confronted by fire in an enclosed space, and you're supposed to put it out. And it was a fascinating thing, and to this day I still carry those memories. I know how to put out a fire, I know how not to get one started, and I still qualify in knowing how to put out fires.

Interviewer

Were most of the Navy guys drafted?

Bob McGregor

Well, all of the Navy guys were there because they wanted to be there. A few of 'em were given the choice by courts as to which branch of the service they wanted to go into or whether they wanted to go to jail. Now, you don't have that kinda choice anymore. But I did run into a few of those, but they began to find themselves. I mean, it was like given an opportunity to do something, to get some training, and to have an opportunity to earn a paycheck. To some of these kids, actually it straightened 'em out. And it was like going in at 22, in my recruit company, I was the oldest one in the company except maybe my LDS friend, and I never did find out how old he was. But it was amazing to see.

We came from all different parts of the country. We were all different races. And for us to be together that way was a fascinating thing, and it stood me in good stead because when I went to the cook, my ship, they assigned me collateral duties as a minority affairs officer, where I got to know the problems confronting Hispanics, for example, in the Navy. And I had an opportunity to attend a lot of minority affairs classes because before I went in, I was very active in Hawaiian affairs, and I knew what the issues were, and I knew how to speak for minorities. So that was one of my collateral duties.

The other one was as a drug and alcohol abuse officer. And that was, even to this day, something that fascinates me because of the changing concepts of what we have our military for, what our military is doing, especially in the

Navy. And I keep up with some of the things that are going on. And I still see the drugs are still a problem. We're still having people jumping off of mass towers onto piers because they're still high on some of the drugs that they've ingested. And I see some problems never go away. But one of the things we started to approach in '75, '76 was the issue of alcohol, and some of the issues of alcohol with our more senior enlisted personnel, and some of our officers. And I would notice that. Because of my LDS background, I would be the sober one, so I got the pleasure of being a designated driver. And I would see not only our enlisted, but some of our officers coming back pretty well wasted.

Interviewer

You were assigned to the USS Cook; is that right?

Bob McGregor

After basic training, I was assigned to Midway Island. After not only my basic training, but my advanced training, I was an enlisted administrative officer. I was dealing with enlisted personnel. And they decided that they needed me on Midway Island rather than at a ship or a shore installation, so they sent me off to Midway, which is an amazing isolated duty station. It amazes me to this day because of what happened on Midway during World War II. And if it weren't for that, probably Midway would just be a forgotten bit of sand on the Northwest Pacific islands where a lot of birds, and a lot of NOAA people go when they wanna get a vacation and get away from it all. But having spent 18 months there counting the birds and looking at all the different types of birds, and in those days going to Kure Island, which was a Coast Guard station, that I could never understand why the Japanese wanted to invade it because there was literally nothing there. But from Midway I also --

Interviewer

What were your duties there?

Bob McGregor

Oh, I was in personnel. And in those days, computers were unheard of, but they were just starting to come into fashion. And we had to deal with that, and a lot of things started to go into optical character recognition forms, and pay forms. And even though we weren't payroll, we still had to make sure all that got done. But I dealt with a lot of enlisted personnel issues, like transfers, emergency transfers, the ordinary paperwork. Making sure all their forms were up to date.

And I also did a bit of career counseling. And as a matter of fact, my division officer, my first division officer was a Salt Laker; he came from Salt Lake City. And I'm saying wow, somebody from Utah. This is really cool. And he was a pilot, but they needed him to do something else, so he was the enlisted personnel division officer. And that's what I ended up doing. And for the first 10 months on the island that's what I did.

And then the last eight months I ended up working in the mess hall learning how to cook, learning how to not

believe everything you hear. And I also had the opportunities to work with our armed forces radio television service. And I ended up becoming a sports anchor on the American Forces Midway Island TV station. And the kids loved me. I don't know about the parents, but the kids loved me.

Interviewer

Were they anxious to get over to Vietnam, or were they happy where they were?

Bob McGregor

I don't know. I can't speak for them because we never really did talk about it. But at the time, my brother had just received Air Force orders to Thailand. And that was right about the time of Operation Rolling Thunder, or one of the big bombings, the last of the Nixon bombings in North Vietnam. And he was a forward air controller with a B-52 squadron that ran out of, I believe it was Udorn Airbase in Thailand. And we corresponded regularly, I in my nice, safe little island, and he in his nice, safe little airbase out in the middle of the jungle in Thailand. And he would relate to me, even though he was never in-country, and even though he was supposedly never in Thailand, he would relate to me some of his experiences about what he went through with that particular operation, and some of the things that he did. And I was saying to myself, sitting there eleven-hundred and fifty miles northwest of Pearl Harbor, and I'm saying to myself "man, I'm gonna miss all this good stuff".

And there were others like me, I'm sure, that were sitting on their bases wishing they could get in on the end of it. And then, of course, in '73 Nixon had finally pulled the last of the in-country soldiers out, and the only thing that was left were maybe a few CIA types and a few embassy types, but very little military presence whatsoever. And so when that was announced, the funny thing was that Secretary of State Rogers was headed on his way to, I believe it was Saigon to talk to the government there, and they made a refueling stop on Midway. And one of my collateral duties was with the TV station, and I was called up and I was supposed to go out and get some footage of him coming to the island. And it just so happens that my dad and Mr. Rogers were personal friends. And so after he gets greeted in the greeting line by the commanding officer, I walk up to him, shake his hand and said, "My dad sends his deepest regards." And Mr. Rogers says, "Thank you very much." And I wanted to do an interview with him. And he said, "Sure. But I'm only gonna be here a short time." So the commanding officer invited me over to do the interview in his quarters, which was cool. And I did the interview. And it was at that point in time my orders got changed from Point Mugu to the USS Cook.

And today I can say I was grateful for it, but back then what I had to go through to get them was like not good. But I think it helped me shape my character. And so Mr. Rogers gets back on his plane and goes on, and I'm figuring well, no matter what happens it was worth it. And it was because I would've not traded my service on Midway for anything.

Interviewer

What was it like when you were there?

Bob McGregor

There was a civilian presence, and it was very limited because they were limited to doing certain support activities, like at the fuel farm and working with some of the freighters, and the things that came in to supply us. And it was really funny that you mentioned that because there's a very dear friend of mine back in Hawaii, who was part of that civilian workforce on Midway. And I don't know. We never were able to establish whether we were on the island together. But I never really knew the civilian force because my focus was with the naval force. And I know we had also some research facilities there that were doing open-water research. It was all classified, so I really don't know what they were researching but you heard all the rumors. That's why I learned how to not believe 'em all. But they had certain civilian presence there in the research they were doing, so we did have our share of civilians. And I'm sure because even in those days, it was partially a sanctuary, habitat sanctuary, that there were I'm sure NOAA people there. But again, I never got around the civilians because we never really interacted except maybe in '75 when we stopped off on our way back to refuel. I'm sure that was civilian done because I never knew naval personnel to be involved with refueling naval ships. And I know when we came back, I think it was civilians that refueled us 'cause we were there like three hours, and we weren't there long enough to get into trouble like the Coast Guard did. But it was like there was a civilian presence. And I think we also had some communications people because, like, in those days they were still running cable. Satellite was not really solidified yet, and there were some, I'm sure, AT and T people or Hawaiian Tel people that were there working the lines.

Interviewer

Tell us about the USS Cook and how you eventually got to Vietnam.

Bob McGregor

Like I said, I got my rating changed. I no longer was working personnel, and I was working as a cook at the time. And because my rating was changed my orders were changed because those orders were for a 3rd class personnel petty officer, and I was a non-rated seaman. So they changed my orders to the USS Cook, which was a destroyer escort now known as fast frigates. It's like a 320-foot long by 34-foot wide frigate. She carried something like 340 officers and enlisted men. And her basic mission was in anti-submarine warfare. And it was like that was the coolest thing. I figured okay, now we're gonna see some action somewhere doing something. She was a Knox class escort, who is now serving off of Taiwan as part of the Taiwanese Navy. When the United States Navy sold off the whole 1052 to I think it was 1093 in Knox class of frigates because they had no need for those.

In the '90s, they were developing the Spruance I think it was, class of destroyer, which became the ASW platforms, and they no longer needed them. And so I came there with, like, okay, I'm going to actually now learn the craft of how to be a seaman. I ended up doing deck work for the first three months I was there after we all came to the mutual conclusion that I was not really cut out to do personnel work. So they sent me to the deck force, which was

fun because I actually got to be a seaman. And I was very fascinated by the ship because she had just returned prior to my arrival in March of '75 from Hai Phong Harbor where we were cleaning up the mines that we had laid in Hai Phong Harbor one or two years prior. And the story had it that the Cook was the last frigate out of Hai Phong Harbor after the mine layers and the like left. Cook was the last ship out. And I loved the ship because it was small and very intimate. And I had an opportunity to do a lotta different things, get to know a lotta different people, and they would task me with a lotta different things.

And I mentioned being the minority affairs enlisted person, being the drug and alcohol abuse enlisted person. I was also asked to do weapons filing for the gunnery office, the weapons department. So I got to dealing with all the different kinds of weaponry we had aboard. And we were nuclear capable. And don't ask me if we ever carried 'em because I do not know and I don't care to know. But I do know we went through a lot of different evolutions dealing with nuclear weapons, and nuclear accidents. And when I see things going on today that are dealing with emergency disasters all that comes back and I'm saying wow, now everybody else is learning what I went through.

Interviewer

During those first few months, what were the duties at Midway?

Bob McGregor

Well, like I say, we had just gotten back. We were based in San Diego at the naval station at 32nd Street. And what we were doing was basically trying to refit and retrain for whenever our next deployment was. I got there in March, and we were there pretty much the whole of '74. March of '74 is when I got to her, and we were there pretty much the whole of '74 until they sent me off for further training at the anti-submarine warfare school somewhere in San Diego, and I'm not quite sure where it was. But again, it was operational readiness. We deployed in the area. We practiced plane guarding. When carriers would go out to work with their aircrews, we would go out and plane guard. And that's basically following the carriers around, and when they were in flight operations we were either the target for the planes to land over or we were one of the wings that would pick up the planes if they happened to go in and the pilots needed rescuing. We were that rescue ship.

But one of our other primary duties was, again, rehearsing our anti-submarine program because we would be assigned to a station whereby we would be able to protect the carrier from submarines. That was our primary duty was submarine warfare. And we had quite an array of sonar gear, both forward and aft. The Knox class was probably the only class of escort that had the variable-depth sonar that the Coast Guard had taken and used in their cutters. But we were able to stream it off our stern, and it would go below thermal layers and all that technical stuff.

Interviewer

Did the North Vietnamese Navy have submarines?

Bob McGregor

My understanding was no. But remember, we were in the middle of the Cold War and the one big fear that the country had was the Soviets coming in, Russia getting involved there. And from what I've been reading recently, that was apparently a big political consideration for not doing some of the things that they finally did because they did it earlier. And it was like we never knew what was going to happen, but we needed to be prepared. And in those days we didn't have attack submarines the way we do no to escort the carriers. It was all the surface ships. And after World War II and Korea, the surface platforms for sonar were some of the best in the country, or in the world, and we had some of the best sailors manning them. And it was like subsequent to Vietnam on my last cruise we did do ASW work off the 38th parallel in Korea. And we were confronting a Soviet submarine. That close. We were, like, within a mile of the 38th parallel, and we had subservice contacts. And funny thing was right about that time our squadron had been tasked with developing and working on new sonar techniques. So we were grateful for the opportunity to use that submarine to perfect those techniques that our higher ups, the Pentagon, wanted us to try.

And again, it was the quality of the sailor, and by that time I was very short, they didn't want me to work in that area because of my shortness. They wanted to make sure they had qualified personnel. But I know when we did ASW training after we got back from Vietnam that I had great ears, and that's what it takes to be able to do the acoustical identification in those days that needed to be done. I mean, telling the difference between a biologic and a submarine was all in the ears.

Interviewer

Is there any evidence at all of Russian submarines involved in the Vietnam War?

Bob McGregor

To my knowledge, no. But we never knew what was manning those patrol boats. Right in the evacuation 36 years ago, there were patrol boats that came down from the North, and they had gotten in and amongst the rescue fleet. And the story was that we were a target. And there was a North Vietnamese patrol boat sitting about 500 yards astern of us. Five-hundred yards further astern of that was our squadron flagship. And the story was that that patrol boat had targeted us and our flagship had targeted it.

Interviewer

Tell me how you got to Vietnam and some interesting stories of your experiences there.

Bob McGregor

Vietnam was kind of interesting because in late March of '75 we were preparing for a cruise to Taiwan and places in the eastern Pacific. Or actually, it's the western Pacific, but it was east of where we were at Subic Bay in the Philippines. And we were preparing for that, and as we were preparing, we had taken apart some of our engineering equipment. We were in a stand-down phase in restoring some of our electrical plant and the like. And mind you, again, we were sitting in Subic Bay. We did not have very much access to news. We did not know what was going on in Vietnam, either through sheer ignorance or we just didn't care because we had a ship to maintain,

we had a life to live. And part of that life was definitely not watching American news. We would what Filipino news and very little of that dealt with what was going on in Vietnam.

So in late March, our orders apparently were cancelled for our port call in Taiwan, and we were given a 24-to-36-hour standby notice. That meant that we couldn't go any further afield whereby we couldn't return to the ship than 24 to 36 hours. And subsequently, that was shortened to 24 hours and shortened even further. By the first part of April, we were shortened to, like, an eight-hour standby. And unbeknownst to us, the USS Hancock was returning to Subic Bay from Pearl Harbor where she had left her air wing at Barber's Point and had picked up 200 Marine helicopters, and the attendant Marines to fit into them. And she was on her way back. And as soon as she got back and refueled, we were given orders to attach to the USS Hancock and sail west into the South China Sea. So it was probably the first week in April we were in the zone, in the warzone. And the really neat thing about that as a sailor is you hope you stay there long enough to become eligible for combat pay and become eligible for a tax-free paycheck. That's what we all looked forward to. Well, we were there 24 hours, which was long enough to get that tax-free paycheck.

Interviewer

This was '75 or '75?

Bob McGregor

This was '75. '75 because I was temporary duty to ASW school, and I completed that in January, returned to the ship in February in Subic Bay. She had deployed while I was in school, and so I returned in February. I got stuck in transit base in Subic because she was on a temporary deployment and I had no ship to report to because she was out and they weren't gonna ferry me out because I wasn't that important.

Interviewer

How long did it take to get from Subic Bay over to the warzone in Vietnam?

Bob McGregor

Well, to get to Vietnam itself, it was a three-to-four-day steam depending on how fast you went. And we ended up on a five-day steam because we weren't stopping in Vietnam. The ultimate destination of the Hancock battle group was Cambodia. And we were off Cambodia on April, I'm wanting to say 10th of '75, and it was at that point that all those Marine helicopters went into Phnom Penh to pick up the embassy staff. And that was what is now known as Operation Iron Eagle.

They pulled out the embassy staff. And as somebody put it, and I don't know who to attribute it to, but it was they turned out the lights, locked the door, and we left Cambodia. Two days later as we're steaming back to Singapore, which is where we ultimately ended up, the Khmer Rouge came into the capital, and Cambodia was under the rule of the Khmer Rouge, which was not our allies. So we ended up steaming into Singapore. This was the middle part

of April. And I know we left the Hancock in the port of Singapore, and we, along with I think the rest of our squadron, went to the royal naval base on the other side of the island where we were, again, on availability for engineering purposes, to get refueled, refitted, resupplied. And I don't think we were there more than three days before we got, again, the good ol' standby order. And we were told, again, to stand by, the eight-hour standby. So I was getting dressed and getting dutied up ready to, as Navy people would call it, hit the beach, go into Singapore, go do more shopping and go eat some good Chinese food. And just as I'm ready to cross over to leave the ship on liberty, we got the word that all liberty was cancelled. We were restricted to the base. Now, me not being a drinker I said "okay, I ain't gonna go exploring a base I don't know because I don't wanna get lost". And so I went back aboard, got back into my uniform. And by that night, actually, later on in the afternoon, we were told that we were restricted to the ship because we were waiting for the Hancock to retrieve all her personnel.

And once she was able to get underway, we were to meet her to get underway. And so probably about four to six hours later, just enough time for some of the senior petty officers to down a few brews at the Royal Navy Petty Officer's Club, we were underway again. We were told to immediately depart. The departure was kind of unique in that usually we are able to pull in our lines. But we had to leave in such a hurry, and since there was nobody on the ship inboard of us to give us our line back, and we had to leave immediately, we literally took a fire ax, cut at least our lines aft where I was stationed, and we pulled out to join the Hancock. And within 24-to-36 hours, we're on station in a one square mile box, three miles off the mouth of the Mekong River awaiting whatever orders were to come our way.

Interviewer

How many other ships were escorting you?

Bob McGregor

To the best of my knowledge, there were probably about three or four other frigates or destroyer escorts in her battle group. I know there was us and the USS Kirk, and I don't know who the third one was. But I do know that in that fleet there was the Hancock, the USS Blue Ridge, I believe the USS Iwo Jima, which would have made her first deployment, and various other warships and supply ships that had come in because apparently things had gotten very, very critical in Saigon. And there was some really crazy stuff going on that we knew nothing about. Because by that time, the only thing we were concerned about is making sure the patrol boats didn't get into the middle of our fleet, they didn't get into the middle of us. And of course they did, but their problem was they were in the middle of us, and they didn't wanna raise any havoc. But we needed to get 'em out of there. I assume we did. But that wasn't my primary duty. My primary duty was making sure all our sonar gear was shut off because we did not wanna put any kind of energy into the sea. Because even in those days, active sonar could fry people, and their concern was people going overboard and making sure that they didn't get into any of that and they could be rescued. So that's what we did.

We just ride around in our one square mile box. And then probably from the 24th on it was like crazy. That's when you see all the Miss Saigon stuff. We sent the Marines in. The CIA was going nuts. And I was reading one of their reports, but I know we took on at least two blue Air America helicopters onboard our ship. They were bringing personnel off that were CIA personnel that were needing to get somewhere. I guess we happened to be one of the closest "somewheres" because as I was reading their reports, we happened to be right almost in the direct line of one of their major southern bases. And I believe they were trying to pull out the U.S. Consulate people out of that city that we were almost in a direct line with.

Interviewer

So that was right at the time of the major withdraw from Saigon.

Bob McGregor

Yep.

Interviewer

Did you guys have deck guns aboard?

Bob McGregor

Oh, yeah. We carried a five-inch gun, but that was not our mission. By that time, Mr. Nixon had determined that we're not gonna give air support, we're not gonna give any kind of gunfire support to the Vietnamese at all, and this is what led to the craziness because you have a whole lot of jets, Phantoms and the like that we had given to the Vietnamese sitting at their airport, you have all kinds of helicopters, both CIA and Vietnamese Army helicopters sitting there at the airbase in downtown Saigon. And you didn't know who was manning them, or at least we didn't. And the Vietnamese were trying to get their people out, but the advancing North Vietnamese were taking out a lot of those assets at the airport, just using their howitzers on their tanks to wreak havoc at the airport, and they wreaked havoc with the CIA.

But right about that time, our concern was getting as many out as we could out of the consulate and the embassy, and to bring out as many assets as we could. And that's why we had such ships as the Blue Ridge and the Iwo Jima to try to take as many as we could, at least the Americans. And the Blue Ridge did a fine job of that, as I learned in subsequent years. But we were there to take whatever came. We had a helipad for the helicopter that we carried. We carried an anti-submarine helicopter. I believe it was a Sea King. And it was flying its duty, and its duty basically was to stay out of the way because we had a Canadian pilot. And part of the swap was that he was not to be involved in any war activities. So I don't know where he went, where the helicopter went. But I do know that we took on eight or ten helicopters, four of which were Hueys, three of which we pushed over the side, half a million dollars.

Interviewer

These were evacuating personnel.

Bob McGregor

These were evacuating various personnel, American and Vietnamese. And they were landing on whatever was available. So a helicopter would lane. They'd discharge five or ten people. We'd put 'em in as many spaces as we could. Now, my workspace happened to be probably one of the larger workspaces that was free and clear of any obstacles and wasn't being used, so it ended up kinda being our holding cell as it were for these people. And we probably ended up with 50 or 75 evacuees on our ship during the height of it, and we also had embassy personnel come aboard.

There was a rumor that one of the embassy people had the payroll for the embassy that he had brought out in a rather large case he would not surrender, nor would he surrender his pistol. So, you know, you begin to wonder, all the rumors going around. I never did verify it, but I did see the gentleman and I do know that he was one of the few that came aboard that actually kept his weapon. So we were busy taking all these people on, trying to figure out what we were gonna do with them. We finally were able to get 'em to another vessel, where they were able to be taken care of. And I think it was April 30th our involvement in the operation was supposedly at an end.

So we were ordered to rendezvous with a tanker. We were to top off with fuel and head back to Subic Bay. And this was the evening of April 30th. So we're pulling out, we get refueled. Next thing you know, we're getting a call back on our tactical radio that the Hancock is under attack and they need our anti-aircraft weaponry, and mostly our missiles, I think it was Sea Sparrow missiles, our service to airs. So we go back in at 18 knots, meet with the Hancock, find out it was a false alarm. It was in actuality a Vietnamese pilot trying to find a place to land his Phantom or ditch his Phantom, and he forgot to throw on his friend or foe switch. And everybody thought he was a foe until he actually flipped it on and he was identified. So we're sitting around in these massive ships.

Interviewer

Tell me about these friend or foe switches.

Bob McGregor

Well, not being a pilot and not really knowing the insides of an F-4 or any of those fighters, there are ways that in combat a pilot can identify himself, and especially to a carrier they can identify themselves as they're getting into the landing pattern. There's a switch on the console. And again, I've never familiarized myself with the old Corsairs and Phantoms and Crusaders, but it's one simple switch. All you do is flip up or down, depending on which way it's turned that would send out a signal that the fleet would know that this is a friendly aircraft, you don't fire on it. And it's basically a one-handed thing. But if you're a land pilot and you are not used to carrier operations, sometimes you have a tendency to forget those things, and if you're on the wrong radio frequency and/or you don't have a good command of English and you don't have a clue, you sometimes forget the little things. And in the heat of

battle, it's sometimes awfully, awfully close. And apparently, somebody got through to him and told him to turn on his IFF so that the fleet could identify him.

Apparently, again, another one of those things we knew nothing about was that there were North Vietnamese pilots in the Vietnam Air Force that were firing on Americans. And that's probably why they made a very, very big deal about that and got us back. But that was only the start. We still weren't able to get back to Subic because we had not been totally detached. Once they called us back, we were sitting there.

Interviewer

So there were all on F-4 Phantoms.

Bob McGregor

Even if they did have IFF and understood, they probably would not be familiar with what the signal was for that particular day. 'Cause like with any code, it would rotate. And if you were on the right frequency, had the right chip and the right code in there, then you were a friend. I mean, we also had some good people who understood the difference between a Phantom, a Crusader, a Corsair and a MIG. So we weren't concerned about the MIGs, but we were concerned at the end about those Phantoms coming out of Ton Son Nhut, and Saigon because we were wanting not the North Vietnamese pilots, we were wanting to pick up the South Vietnamese pilots. And the only way we knew how to do that is if they had all the proper electronics. And so it was more recognizing the right people and knowing that they knew what they were doing to pick them up.

And again, that was something that was kinda out of my range of knowledge because I have never served on a carrier, and that's why I never had that kinda familiarity with the air crews. I mean, my familiarity was with our helicopter, and she was never very far away. And so it was a little easier to deal with helicopters than it was jets.

Interviewer

What was the attitude of the evacuees?

Bob McGregor

Well, at the time with that first wave of refugees that came on the helicopters, we really couldn't talk to them because firstly, we were in the middle of the end and we were trying to pay attention to what we were doing. And secondly, those people were isolated. Once they were escorted to where we were gonna isolate them, that's where they stayed. We did not have that interaction with them. The thing that we found was that in the subsequent operation, in our last operation on our way back to Subic, that's when we had the opportunity to interact more with refugees because we were tasked with doing some things that were one, not in the heat of battle, and two, it was a much easier paced kinda thing because the negotiations were going on around us and all we were trying to do was get a boat that really wasn't seaworthy, that really shouldn't have been on the South China Sea in open water, from there back to wherever it was she was going to go. And we did not know, even then on May 1st, where those ships

were going. And it wasn't until much later that I realized that somebody had spotted 'em and apparently they were coming down from Saigon on the Mekong with people who were like the helicopter people, but they just weren't afforded the opportunity of getting on the helicopters. And it's marvelous reading the story of how that happened, but it was like we were wondering what are we going to do, why haven't they detached us.

And the next thing you know, we are receiving orders, although we never really found that out until much later, that we needed to go to an island off the mouth of the Mekong and start receiving these ships. We were told that there were ships coming out of Saigon that had been underway that couldn't go very fast that needed an escort. And there were two of us, or at least there was one of us. We realized subsequently that we were to have two others that were to escort these ships back. Now, we only got involved as things played out with only two of them. But yet, this was where I had the opportunity to interact with the refugees, that wave of refugees.

Interviewer

So did they come on board your ship, or did you just escort that slow ship back to Subic Bay?

Bob McGregor

Apparently, what had happened was that one of the State Department people had been ordered back to Saigon to effect the evacuation of the Vietnamese Navy. And this is where these people came from. Part of the deal was if we were gonna take those ships back, because they were mostly American ships of World War II vintage that we had given to the South Vietnamese Navy, that if we were gonna take those ships back, we were gonna have to get 'em out, we were gonna have to allow the Vietnamese sailors who were manning those ships, we were gonna have to allow them to bring their families out, get their families onboard and get them underway. And the most interesting thing was we did not know, being three miles offshore, who we were getting. We just were assuming that these ships were sitting in dry dock--this is what we heard--sitting in dry dock ,and were just floated on a dry dock, loaded with people and pulled out.

And it wasn't until, for me, a couple years ago that I found out that there was a concerted effort to bring out personnel, Vietnamese personnel, from the middle of Saigon where they were around the naval base. And I don't know this because I was in country, never was, but right next to the naval base was the Vietnamese Army Hospital. And one of the most interesting things was that the man who was arranging for all of this had gone to the hospital, told them what was going on and made arrangements that if any of them wanted to come, that they were to bring their people, meet the ships and leave. Now, the story said nobody came. However, as we were escorting and working with this one particular LST--and I was part of the boarding party that effected the orders of the diplomats--that there was a family that was on deck. That was all the space they had was, like, about maybe a 10-square-foot space for, I think, it was a family of four or five.

And as some of our party was effecting the orders, some of the rest of us were there interacting with these people. And the one individual that I happened to remember that we interacted with said that he was the chief medical officer of the Vietnamese Army and that he had come with his family. And he was telling us how he had been evacuated from Hanoi, that he had left Hanoi, came to the south and he was along the demilitarized zone. One could only imagine where, whether it was Hue or one of the provincial capitals. He left there, left that place for Saigon. He worked there, and then now he's leaving Saigon. And he knew where he was going. He knew he was gonna go to be with his brother. He was taking his family to his brother in West Germany. And he was one of the few that actually knew where he was going. And he was just grateful to be out of there.

And when you look at what some of the other people had that were on deck, it was like they only got outta there with the clothes on their back, maybe a few personal items that they could trade for capital, and not much else. And I wondered what was going on with these people. So here were are with these two ships, and unbeknownst to us some of our other mates were escorting 20 to 36 other ships, depending on which report you read. I had read 26. Some are saying 36. But the only four that seemed to be unaccounted for are the four that we were dealing with. And we were only able to do two knots because that's as fast as that LST could go. And what was ordinarily a three- to four-day trip from Vietnam to Subic Bay ended up being a week. Not just because of us, but because of all the diplomatic red tape that was being thrown up between Washington and Manila. And the Philippine government wanted these specific things to be met.

Interviewer

How many people did you have onboard that came by helicopter?

Bob McGregor

By that time none. None. All these people were boat people.

Interviewer

Tell us about dropping those helicopters.

Bob McGregor

Well, when you look at the stern of the Cook, our helipad was only big enough to hold one helicopter. And what we were told was we needed to keep our deck clear. We needed to take as many of these helicopters as we could handle, and we needed to get keep them free. And we weren't to refuel them because we didn't have any JP4 aviation fuel to refuel them to send them off again. So what we would do is we'd clear all the people out, including the pilots and the crew, we'd take 'em out and some of our crew would literally pick it up, take it to the edge, move our safety netting and push it over to the side. And I wish I had had my own personal pictures, that they had survived. 'Cause I had one picture of a relatively new Huey going nose first, missing the side of our ship, into the South China Sea. And we were told okay, no more helicopters are coming out. And so we had this really nice, almost like-new, half-million dollar Huey on our deck. And we said "oh, goody, we're gonna keep this one".

Well, they found a straggler for us, so there went that nice new Huey over the side. We picked up this old beat-up thing that had probably seen more years than we had been in. And she sat on our deck like forever because when we pulled into Subic, she was still there. And I guess they took it off with a crane. I don't know. I don't remember because I wasn't there I don't think when that happened 'cause that could have very well happened the day I went into the refugee camps. But it was like we just needed to keep space cleared, not only for them, but in case we needed to get our helicopter back, which we never did. I think we got it back just in time to return home. She had apparently flown off to the Blue Ridge or to the UO or one of the other larger ships that could take helicopters with no problem. She may have even ended up on the Hancock. I mean, I'd love to read her logs as to where she ended up. But it was like something that literally for me was a life changer because I looked at those people that we escorted and I looked at the condition of their ship, and I looked at the condition that they were living under as we were steaming back. Yeah, we had no fresh food, we had no fresh vegetables, we had no fresh milk or liquid milk, and yeah, we had no water because we were giving it all to them. But the one thing that we all had in common was we were still alive and that we were free.

They were not being threatened by communist reeducation as some of their countrymen were that stayed. They had voted, literally voted with their feet that this is what they wanted to do. They wanted to live not under the North, but they wanted to live in a place where they could be free and where they could start a new life because they had nothing but their own intelligence and their own abilities, and their own desires, their own get up and go to go. And that's all they had. And when we got back, it was like where were these people gonna go? What were we gonna do with 30-, 40-, 50,000 people? Well, it ended up they put 'em on an island in the middle of the Bay that I believe the word was that it was where the officer's club golf course was. And I think it was, like, three or four or five days later, every ship that was in Subic Bay was tasked. At some point in time in that first two weeks, those that weren't dealing with the Mayaguez incident were tasked with providing support personnel to the refugee camp. So I had the opportunity because I volunteered to go into that refugee camp. And when I looked at what they had, when I looked at how they were trying to make a life for themselves in the middle of Subic Bay in the Philippines, a country very foreign to them, I was saying to myself "what did these people do, did they really know what they were getting into? And could I do the same thing? Could I actually pick up, leave my whole life that I knew and I had before behind me for a concept that I wasn't sure was ever gonna work out? "

I probably asked myself that then, but today it becomes even more imperative because today I've had the pleasure of working with second and third generation Vietnamese, some from those very people that we escorted back. And when I look at our Vietnamese community here in Utah and I see how they've come about, how they've struggled, made a life for themselves, become part of this community, become a contributing part of this community and every

single other community they've lived in and they're living in, I say to myself "can we as Americans do that? Go to a totally foreign land and do what these people did". And when I look at them and when I receive the thanks from that second generation who've had the opportunity to go back to Vietnam today, and they come back and say, "Thank you for doing what you did because it made a difference for me," I mean, that is definitely life changing. And I know when I got back and we were on our 10-day stand down that my life was changed. I knew I was no longer the activist, so to speak, but I was always wondering, there must've been something more. There must've been something more to me to do in other ways. Because I know those people that we escorted on that one ship, maybe three or four or five-thousand people on that LST, would never be able to say thank you. And that's when I guess I finally learned what it means to serve, to truly serve where you aren't even getting a paycheck and thanks.

Yeah, you earned it, but what is it really gonna get you? Does it get you life, does it get you freedom, does it keep you happy? I mean, to me, seeing that end, seeing those people and even seeing that doctor who was saying, "Once I get to Germany I'm not leaving again." To see them that certain that this is what they wanted, to me that's what Vietnam was about. Giving those people that opportunity to choose how they wanted to live and where they wanted to live. They of course I'm sure would've preferred to have stayed in Vietnam and lived in a free Vietnam, but that wasn't to be. And so wherever they are now, they know that they left a home that will always be home. I've heard of many of those first generations going home to visit cousins and brothers and sisters that they left behind, and yet they know they're happier where they are. They know they're living in a place, wherever that might be, that to them is much more significant than what they might've left behind. Because at least here, or wherever they are, they're free to be who they are, to be what they can be and to live a life that's gonna be a quality of life for them, and something that nobody else has given them, but they've earned.

And it's an amazing lesson to have learned at such a young age because subsequent to that, I had a choice myself. Do I stay in, make the Navy a career, which I could've done very selfishly, or do I get out and go find something else to do, maybe go work for the family? And it got cured rather quickly on my last deployment in '76. 'Cause in our run up to the deployment, we had gone to Long Beach for some technical work, and Long Beach is where all the river patrol boats happen to end up. And we had pulled in, and I had gone with a buddy of mine over to the enlisted man's club. And he ran into some of those river boat crews and they just started commiserating with each other, "Oh, my goodness. Where's the next war gonna be? When's the next war gonna be?" And I asked myself, "Is this what I want for the rest of my life? Do I wanna be looking for the next war?" And it was then I decided no, I had a much more pulling requirement to get out, finish my college education, and go on to work with my family. And as it turned out, that was probably for me the best choice I coulda made because it allowed me a lot of different things.

Interviewer

Is there a message that you'd like to give to future generations?

Bob McGregor

Well, war is not a good thing. It never has been, it never will be. When it comes down to you or that other person, then you find it a no-brainer. But don't think that taking another person's life is easy. But it's just as difficult to give a life. When you think about what is it that life is about and why do we value it highly or why do we value it cheaply, how do we value life. And that's the thing that I think every generation in its own way needs to look at, needs to evaluate. Vietnam was about a generation of Americans who truly lost their innocence. Those of the '60s--and I was brought up in the '60s. And I know that there a lot of my contemporaries who I was brought up with, who I went to school with, and I can't say went to war with because we all went to war together, but we never served together--but we understood that we were giving a part of ourselves that we could never get back.

And the one thing that I try to instill in every young person I come across is that you are given life. You are given an opportunity to live it. Live it to its fullest. Don't cheat yourself. Don't say I'm gonna do this just because it was done. Don't think that it's easy because life and making choices isn't easy. And you're not always gonna have parents to make those choices, and you'll have to make them for yourself. Someday, the choice could very well cost you your life. But don't ever lose the innocence that's there because as you're growing, as you get older, you'll begin to realize, where did my innocence go, how did I lose it. And you'll either lose it through the hard realities of war or the hard realities of life. And either way, it's not easy to lose that innocence. And that's what Vietnam should've taught us. That's when America truly lost its innocence. And that's where it puts us today. And I hope that as we go forward, we'll be able to see, and try to recapture some of that innocence. What it meant to be the perfect country, the place where everybody could come to to find their freedom.

Interviewer

Talk about it in the sense of a nation.

Bob McGregor

When a nation thinks that it's doing the right thing all the time, that's where we were for what, the first 200 years of our existence or the first 150 years of our existence? We could do no wrong. We got involved in the right wars. We got involved in doing the right things. We were the perfect, perfect thing. Then Vietnam came along. The '60s came along. Things started to change. We started to have to look into ourselves. And this is what Vietnam did to the segment who did not serve. They started looking and they started saying, "Is this what my values are? What are my values? What should the values of our country be?"

And this is where you started to see separations and you started to see changes in a lot of aspects of life, how we dealt with our minorities, how we dealt with our indigenous populations, not only Native Americans, but any of our natives, native Alaskans, native Hawaiians. And then we started to look at how we dealt with other countries. Were we doing the right thing in World War II or were we doing the right thing in Korea, are we doing the right thing in Vietnam? And we started to question ourselves, and then we started to see well, what are we going to choose? Are

we going to choose to deal with this or deal with that? Are we gonna continue to send men into space or are we gonna take that money and put it into social and economic programs that are gonna make our populations better? And that's what I mean by innocence because there was a time where we trusted our institutions. Today we don't, and that comes I think as a direct result of Vietnam, not necessarily of Korea 'cause we still have that innate trust in our institutions. But after Korea and after the Eisenhower years and during the '60s especially we started to distrust our system. And today we still distrust our system because we're still seeing things being dredged up.

I ran into something recently that talked about how the incident with the two naval ships in the Gulf of Tonkin never happened. Does it matter today? No. So why are we talking about it? Because we're trying to still come to terms with the country and what was going on at that time. That's the '60s generation, those of us boomers that were born between '50 and '52, who were trying to realize where we are, where we're headed. And I can see in many of my friends things that they would've never have thought of doing they ended up doing, getting burned as a result. And now that we're our parent's ages when we were kids, we're looking at it and saying did we really do right? Is this really the way we wanted it? And it's like that's kind of what I mean when a country loses its innocence. It loses that sight of what its core values are, and you're still seeing that argument continue today. It could be continuing on for the next 40 years.

But will there ever be another America, another United States, another country who went through the process as we did? No. And I think you see it in England. England, which has a whole lot richer history than we do, even today questions itself. It's trying to remake itself, trying to reshape itself. And it has that innate distrust of what's going on. And you see it, you hear it. I mean, it's as current as the last national newscast where it just isn't there.

Interviewer

How were you treated when you came home?

Bob McGregor

I must preface this. It wasn't so much the coming home because I knew what to expect when I came home. It was while I was serving that I think it came to a head. Because while I was serving, I had the opportunity to visit with my sister. And my sister was a polar opposite to me--where I believed in God, country and the institutions of the United States of America, my sister questioned everything.

My sister was like, "What are we doing in Vietnam? What are we doing here? What are we doing there?" I have terms for her, but they're too personal, I don't really wanna share them. But when I got called by my sister in the summer of '72 a fascist for believing that countries have the right to determine how they want to be governed and to live, it was like I knew then my sister and I would never get along. I knew then that my sister and I were polar opposites. And I knew then that I would not be able to count on some of the people that I grew up with because

they had no clue as to what it was that I had within me as to what the country was about. So when I was discharged in '76 I wasn't expecting a big parade. I was hoping that Vietnam would just be able to die a natural death and become a part of history and that we'd move on. Now, who would've known Vietnam would've gotten so dredged up under other administrations that everybody wanna use it as finger pointing and all this and that. And I'm saying no, don't do that because Iraqi Freedom, Enduring Freedom are different wars, different times, and different concepts.

But yet there's still a little part of me, and this is part of my PTST that I'm dealing with at the VA, is a little part of me, every time I see a welcoming home for an air wing or a guard wing or, you know, somebody who's coming back from Afghanistan or Iraq I'm saying, "Good for them, but where was it for us?" We never got the flag waving, we never got the thank you's for serving, we never got the hugs for what we did. It was just we did it and we came home and we tried to get on with our lives. Some of us did that better than others. Some of us were able to survive. But just look at the Vietnam vet today and you see the wide disparagement of careers. You'll see McCain in congress and in the senate, you'll see people like myself, who are relatively comfortable in forced retirement because my skills are now considerably outdated. And then you have others, like a high school classmate of mine, who had promising careers, who chose to go to Vietnam, and who came back so changed that their lives were changed.

And a real quick short story before we have to go, I went down to Las Vegas and I ran into an old high school classmate of mine I hadn't seen since I had gotten out of the Navy and we had worked together in the Hawaii tourism industry together. I hadn't seen him in 30 years. His daughter was playing in a volleyball tournament down in Vegas and we ran into each other. And we got to talking and I said, "Well, what have you been doing since we last saw each other 30 years ago?" And to paraphrase, he said, "Oh, I made some bad choices and I got burned for it as a result, but I'm happy." And he should be. He's got two wonderful boys who are both baseball players, one is doing very well, I might add, and a daughter who's gonna have a good life. But I was talking to his wife in more depth, and when I told her of what we spent the last hour and some sharing, she said, "You've gotta tell the story because it needs to be told. Nobody will tell it for us."

And there's a generation of people, a generation of military people, people who served the last draft army that this country will probably ever see, whose story is not being told, and that story needs to be told so that we can come to terms with what we had to deal with and move forward. And it's like I posted on Facebook, some of us still can remember where we were 35-, 36-, 37 years ago. And no matter how much we try to forget, that is so engrained in us that unless you do what you're doing, you get this story out. And that operation with those refugees had no name. It was a nameless operation. But for those thousand Navy men who were there with those ships, who saw the stains on the sides from open potties, open facilities, we know what those people paid to get out of there. And if

we weren't changed, then it's probably a very hardened person, who wasn't. And this is the story that nobody saw. When they determined Saigon was done, Vietnam was conquered, the lights were turned off. Those stories weren't told. And the first generation who came to America aren't having their story told. That is just as important a story because it has helped shape the fabric of Salt Lake City, of Northern Utah and I'm sure Southern Utah as well. There's a second-generation Vietnamese young lady who's doing well for herself and is happy that her parents came. I've never met the parents, but I've met her.