



Jim McRoberts, US Marine Corps, Vietnam War Veteran

Interviewed by: Joe Galloway

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Joe Galloway: Mr. McRoberts, before we talk about your experiences in Vietnam I'd like to get a little biographic information about you. How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

Jim McRoberts: Twenty nine. ... *Twenty nine. You were an old guy.* ... Yup.

0:35 JG: What was your family status?

JM: I had a wife and two children. And the children were three and one. ... *Wow.* ... And they were living in Santa Ana, California when I moved over-- when I went to Vietnam. We came from Beaufort, South Carolina. ... *That was your hometown?* ... That was the home base, but my hometown was Ketchum, Idaho. ... *Ah, alright.* ... You've heard of Sun Valley. ... *Yeah.* ... It's right next door. ... *Ketchum's a famous town. Hemingway's town, wasn't it?* ... Yes, Sir. Yup. I knew him somewhat. ... *Somewhat.*

1:16 JG: How long had you been in the Marines when you deployed?

JM: I joined the Marine Corps as an officer in 1959. And I was deployed in 1966. ... *Okay.*

1:34 JG: What led you to a Marine Corps commission?

JM: I went to University of Colorado at Boulder, Colorado on an NROTC scholarship. And during the sophomore year I spent time with the Marine side of it. But in the freshman year I spent the summer on a destroyer in the North Atlantic, and I knew that was not my ... *[Laughs] Not what you wanted.* ... cup of tea. So I-- and I'd come from the mountains, and I was a hunter and all that, and a skier. And I thought, well, the Marine Corps' obviously a better choice. ... *Far better.* ... So that's how I chose it.

2:14 JG: What sort of training had you had to be a pilot?

JM: Well, I had a-- got a Bachelor of Science degree in aeronautical engineering at the University of Colorado. My father had been a light plane pilot a little bit, and I wanted to learn to fly. So I did-- I learned after I was just about to graduate from college. And then I went into the Marine Corps as a ground pounder down at Camp Pendleton. And one day while we were out doing maneuvers, and the airplanes were coming over us and practicing the shooting and all this kind of stuff, the gunnery sergeant in the hole next to me said, "Lieutenant, why are you down here and they're up there?" *[Both laugh].* I said, "Well, I don't really have a good idea." So the next week I applied for flight training. ... *And they accepted?* ... They accepted me. ... *Yeah.* ... So that's how I got there.

3:14 JG: You landed in Vietnam in 1966? ... January 10th. ... January. ... Yeah. ... What were your first impressions?

JM: It was hot, even in January. It was muggy. I had been in the Far East a little bit, but not much. Anyway, it was kind of like a real rundown South-- southern town. ... *[Laughs]*. ... In fact, they called it Dogpatch is where we live there on the-- out-- just off the runway there at Da Nang. ... *At Da Nang. I know Dogpatch well.* ... Yeah. And so-- but anyway, it had a lot of historical, cultural things to it that were-- certainly didn't know anything about. But yeah, it was shocking to say the least. But-- .

4:09 JG: What were your initial duties?

JM: Well, I was the assistant operations officer, so I was sent over there with another-- with a major. I was a captain, and the major was the maintenance officer. And we went over there to be with the squadron that we were gonna take over their airplanes. And they were going to leave. So our whole squadron was coming over out by-- ... You were the advance party. ... That's-- yes, Sir. We had a couple of enlisted men and then the major and myself. And so that was our program: to get everything lined up for our group to there.

4:42 JG: How long did that go on?

JM: Probably two weeks.

4:47 JG: What was your daily routine once your squadron came in?

JM: Well, as operations officer I was in charge of looking after schedules, making sure that every-- somebody was assigned to each mission that we had to fly, and then just making sure that everything ran smoothly after that. And that all the people that recorded the time and the missions and the mission briefings that were given-- the mission briefings were given by somebody else from the Marine Air Group 11¹.

5:21 JG: Now were you on flight duty at the same time?

JM: Yes. ... *So you were flying missions--* ... Yes. ... *plus doing your other operations work?* ... Almost every day, yes. ... *Yeah.*

5:31 JG: What were your living quarters like?

JM: They improved from when we got there. The tents we had didn't have floors, but we got floors shortly thereafter. We had-- they were tent-covered wooden floors. ... *Yeah.* And that was it. ... *Sandbag walls.* ... Well, part way. Yes. And we had closing lockers and things like that, that you know, keep you-- the bugs out of your clothes and keep 'em somewhat dry and clean. But like your-- in your bathroom where you have all your stuff, shaving gear and everything, we had a little wood shelf there that held all that stuff ... *[Laughs]*.

6:15 JG: How was the chow?

¹ 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing, I Marine Expeditionary Force

JM: The chow was actually quite good. You know, I can't complain about it. We-- nobody ever went hungry, and-- ... *Yeah*. ... there had-- ... *Hot meals*? ... The meals were hot. Yeah, we had a good mess hall. And a little later on if you ask the same question I'll tell you, 'cause I was in charge of the mess hall later on [both laugh].

6:42 JG: What were your impressions of the Vietnamese people?

JM: They all seemed to be very friendly. We-- they were walking around, all around us. They worked out in the fields and rice paddies right next to the town. And they seemed-- and then because we were right in the city we had a lot of association with them because they worked for us. ... *Yeah*. ... They had-- we did-- they did menial tasks; they would clean up around the area. And then we also used to have them help with road building and things in the local area. ... *Yeah*. ... And we bought stuff from their local vendors; roofing material and things like that to build our officers club and our chapel. They were good-- *Good people*.

7:35 JG: Describe your friendships with and your impressions of your fellow Marines.

JM: Well, we had worked together in Beaufort, South Carolina from 1963 to the end of '65, first in one squadron called Marine Air Fighter Squadron 451 (that was my first squadron there), and then after they decided that our sister squadron, Air Squadron 235 was gonna go to Vietnam, they chose a few of us that had been instrumental in founding 451 and put us in 235 to be the advanced group to prepare it for Vietnam. ... *Yeah*.

8:27 JG: I don't know if this is applicable, but what did you do for recreation or off duty activities?

JM: Well, we played basketball and a little bit of soccer. There was enough room to that. And I can't remember doing much else. ... *That's about it, huh?* [Laughs]. ... We were pretty darn busy. *Yeah*.

8:52 JG: Do you have any specific memories of the popular culture at that time—music, books, film, et cetera?

JM: They don't-- I'm not totally recalling that I-- that anything stuck in my mind about what-- . I know what was going on back in the States, but I don't remember much about the popular culture, no-- ... *Yeah*. ... of the music or stuff like that.

9:23 JG: Where were you flying missions? In what area?

JM: All of-- ... *I Corps*? ... all of Vietnam north of Chu Lai, and up into Cambodia and Laos, and up to the DMZ, and sometimes beyond; out over the-- we did some patrolling out over the water to do some protecting for people that were out there, other ships-- ... *Yeah*. ... that were out off the coast. And-- but mainly we flew up and down the Ho Chi Minh trail, interdicting that; night and day. And we were controlled-- when there was air control required, the people that-- . If you've been to Da Nang you know Marble Mountain. ... *Yeah*. ... Okay, Marble Mountain was the-- all the radar sites. ... *Right*. ... And so they controlled us.

And then we would work with the forward air controllers that were out in the air over the areas that we were going to interdict. We did helicopter preparation landings. I don't know if you've heard the term punji sticks or not? ... *Yep*. ... Okay, punji sticks were commonly used in areas where they thought that we might be gonna land troops, and so they'd stick 'em in there. We had these 500 pound bombs with a four foot long fuse on 'em that were-- so that they would explode before they hit the ground. ... *Clean all those punji stakes out*. ... They called 'em Daisy Cutters. ... *Daisy Cutters, yeah*. ... So we did a lot of that in preparation for landing zones. And then because we had 20 millimeter machine guns, we took care of the perimeter of the zone while the troops were getting out of the helicopters and spreading out to take over an area. ... *Right*.

11:14 JG: Describe your interdiction operations on the Ho Chi Minh trail.

JM: Well, we would be told by the forward air controllers that they had word that there were gonna be trucks, or actually sometimes elephants carrying stuff; they used-- that was really hard, I'll tell ya, trying to kill elephants. ... *Kill elephants*. ... That wasn't fun. But anyway, we would get notified of that and then we would go up there and we would-- there may be somebody already there that had been working on the target. There were a lot of river crossings, and we tried-- that was a good place to catch the trucks because they couldn't go very fast and they were wide open when they were in the river. So those were the kinds of things we did. And we also-- we sure-- we bombed a lot of trees. ... *[Laughs]*. ... But they-- the controllers and the local natives would tell-- they'd find out where somebody was that wasn't supposed to be there, and so we would go in and just saturate an area with-- ... *Bomb it up good*. ... yeah, bombs, 20 millimeter cannons and/or napalm.

12:25 JG: Now were you also doing close air support for the Marines?

JM: Yes. Yes we would. Yeah. ... *Yeah*. ... If they called that they needed help, if they were having trouble in a landing zone, or moving beyond someplace, we would, yes, go in and support them either with-- *Fly the A Shau Valley?* ... Yes. ... *Que Son?* ... Yes. ... *All of that*.

12:51 JG: Can you describe significant actions or campaigns that you participated in?

JM: Well, I was-- the Tet Offensive was part of one of the events that I-- . But as far as other-- just by name. There was just hill number such and such and that was it. There was ... *Right*. ... Marines on the hill, and we went out there and took care of trying to get to 'em. ... *Get to 'em. Yeah*. ... One very strange event occurred right in Da Nang. There was a big meeting of top brass, both US and Vietnamese. And then there was a rogue Vietnamese pilot in an AD². And he was flying around, and he was threatening to bomb the meeting. So they sent us up (it happened to be my turn on duty) to go up and fly around behind him. An AD flies about 120 knots, and the F-8 doesn't do well unless it's landing below about 180. ... *Right*. ... So now we've gotta fly behind him case he decides to drop a bomb I'm supposed to shoot him down. ... *[Laughs]*. ... But that was a disaster that never happened. ... *Didn't happen*. ... He didn't need to-- he got tired of that and went off, but-- and we went back and landed. But that wasn't gonna be-- .

² Douglas AD Skyraider

JG: What's your memories of the Tet Offensive?

JM: It was just continuous operations. We had-- there was some Vietnamese tank drivers that went into Dogpatch, and they had a tank, and they had the barrel pointed right at the Buddhist chapel, cathedral, whatever you call it-- temple. ... *Temple*. ... And we lived just the other side of that. Our tents. ... *Whoa*. ... If he'd have shot that tank, it'd have gone right through that building, which didn't have much strength, and would've gone right through all of our tents. So we were very, very nervous the whole day he was there during that particular time.

14:59 JG: You were flying support for the Battle of Hue?

JM: We did, yes. Yes. Yeah. Hue, Phu Bai. Yeah. I went up to Hue and hauled bodies after I had my 100 missions I got out of the active fighter squadron and went into the Marine Air Base Squadron. ... *Right*. ... And that's when I was in charge of the workers that had the-- . But anyway, during that time I flew missions at night with the F-8. And then I flew the C-117. And we went up-- used the C-117 to go up and get bodies from Hue and bring 'em back to Da Nang to have them-- ... *Sent home*. ... sent home, yeah. ... *Yeah*. ... That's the only time that I ever actually got hit. ... *Mm*. ... It must have been a farmer in the field, and he was mad and he shot at this transport taking off. And the bullet hole went between the engine and where I was sitting there and the copilot's seat [both laugh]. Fortunately we didn't know that 'til we got back-- ... *Yeah*. ... to Da Nang.

16:15 JG: What's your most vivid memory of your tour in Vietnam?

JM: Well, my most vivid memory is when one of my squadron mates was shot down and captured just north of Hue. His name's Orson Swindle³. ... *Yeah*. ... Yeah. Orson was my squadron mate. ... *I know Orson*. ... Yeah. Very fine gentleman. And anyway, that was a real-- *He was shot down this side of the DMZ*. ... Yes he was. ... *South of--* He was captured there. Yeah. ... *And captured and taken north*. ... Correct. ... *Yeah*.

And then the other one was one of our young pilots-- he had target fixation, and he let the bomb drop; then flew into the ground. ... *Agh*. ... And just a fine young Marine and-- *Just done*. ... Yeah. And unfortunately that was-- those are the two that were the most traumatic at the time.

17:14 JG: Describe for me the best day that you had during your Vietnam tour.

JM: The day that I left [both laugh]. ... *Everybody says that*. ... Yeah. ... *I'm gonna ask you about that later*. ... Sure.

17:32 JG: Describe for me the worst day you had.

JM: Well, I think it was during one of those high intensive operational periods where we worked 24 hours a day. We had airplanes up all the time. And there just was no-- ... *No let up*. ... no rest. And you know, sometimes you knew that you were sending guys out there that were really tired. And-- or you

³ LtCol Orson G. Swindle III

went out yourself, if you-- *Yeah*. ... But anyway, those-- you know, they didn't-- . There was no really "the worst day" like that. There were just a lot of days-- *A lot of bad days*. ... *Yeah*.

18:16 JG: *How much contact, if any, did you have with our allies (i.e., the Koreans, the Australians, the Thais, the Filipinos)?*

JM: Actually I had none. ... *None*. ... No. Our side of the base there at Da Nang was pretty much all by itself. And we had more contact just with the local Vietnamese population than-- ... *Yeah*. ... anybody else. I did hear 'em on the radio when we were flying. ... *Yeah*. ... You could tell. But-- .

18:48 JG: *What was your general impression of the South Vietnamese military?*

JM: The ones that we had contact with in the local area of Da Nang was-- they were just, you know, kind of like MP type people, so there was-- . You saw no action from them. They weren't performing any duty that, you know, other than to help us protect-- *Rubbing up against you guys*. *Yeah*. ... Right. *Yeah* .

19:22 JG: *How much contact did you have with your family back home?*

JM: [Laughs]. Well, that-- we used to use the MARS radio-- ... *MARS radio*. *Yeah*. ... And so in order to talk to my wife I had to wait up 'til two o'clock in the morning in order to be able to get a channel through to them. And-- *I love you*. *Over*. ... *Yeah*, right. *Yeah*, that was the part: *Over?* ... *Over*. ... No, I said over [both laugh]. Anyway, no, we did that. Then I did-- had R&R. So I did get to go to Hawaii and visit my wife for a week. ... *Yeah*. ... And that was, you know, but-- that was pretty exciting. ... *Yeah*. ... Get out of Vietnam and get to see your wife. But anyway, we used tapes; the little disks. ... *The little cassette tapes*. ... *Yeah*. I bought a cassette at the PX for my wife and [?] she went off with my parents. And used to make tapes and send those. And of course they'd go-- they'd be gone; three or four weeks later they'd be back. And you know-- but to hear the kids talking on those tapes was really, you know, exciting. *Yeah*. ... *Yeah*.

20:31 JG: *How much news did you receive about the war from home? ... Are you-- ? ... Either through letters, or Stars and Stripes, or-- ? ... Yeah*.

JM: *Yeah*, mostly *Stars and Stripes*. Or somebody would go on R&R and bring a newspaper back or something like that. And everybody'd, you know, read that 'til it fell apart. And-- but my wife was not for the war when I left. And she wasn't for the war when I got back [both laugh]. But anyway, we didn't really get-- *Stars and Stripes* or the-- you know, somebody just coming through. There were a lot of people transiting through that area-- ... *Yeah*. ... coming in to replace people that were leaving. So you got their cut on what the news was. ... *What the news was*. ... *Yeah*.

21:21 JG: *Were you aware of any particular political or social events or movements going on back home?*

JM: *Yeah*. We were. ... *The antiwar stuff?* ... Yes. *Yeah*, we were. And that was always sort of discouraging because they had no idea what was happening over there; they just had what they thought was going on. Whether the war turned out to be good or bad, or whether we won it and then walked away I don't-- that's not for me to say, but there was no-- we didn't think of anything that the people

were doing back home that were making it any easier for us over there—especially the guys that were up on the front lines. ... *Right*. ... So it was no encouragement.

22:20 JG: *Now we'll get to: Tell me about your return home. ... [Laughs]. ... Your trip back.*

JM: Okay. Well anyway, I was a regular officer. And fortunately I turned in my request to resign my regular commission and enter the Reserves when I came home. And I did that as it turns out just the week before they cut it off. ... *[Laughs]*. ... And so I always felt-- there was another guy in my squadron and I- we both did the same thing. So we thought, well gee, we won the jackpot on that one. ... *[Laughs]*. ... But anyway, going back home-- getting on the airplane (I think it was Continental was the airplane that was hauling everybody home) was just such a relief. And we always counted down: I got, you know, two days and a-- two weeks and a wake up-- ... *Yeah*. ... and all that kind of stuff before you can go home. And then you kinda-- ... *Short timer charts*. ... Yes, that's right. We backed out of the schedule somewhat to give ourselves a little comfort zone to-- before we had to leave. But taking off out of Da Nang was a-- certainly an uplifting (no pun intended, but--) *[both laugh]*-- but a very wonderful feeling.

23:46 JG: *What was it like landing at the other end?*

JM: Well, there were smiles; and little kids that had grown up quite a bit in a year; and hugs and kisses and all that kinda stuff from the-- *No bad experience?* ... No. No, not there. ... *Where'd you land? You land in San Diego, or-- ?* ... No. We landed in-- *Travis?* ... No, I'm trying to think now where we did land? I think it was at El Toro ... *Mm*. Because we were in the Marine Corps-- I can't remember. But I had gone back there to do a-- I had two weeks before-- or after I'd only been over there two weeks I was sent back to El Toro to talk about what they could do to improve. But then-- so I don't remember where I came back to. ... *Where you came back to*. ... That was-- other things were so much more overpowering to see than to remember where it was. ... *Yeah*.

24:44 JG: *What-- your-- and you had your resignation in works when you got there?*

JM: Yeah. It had been accepted and I was going to be put-- turned in to the Reserves and not stay on active status. And I--'cause I had a job lined up then.

25:03 JG: *Was it difficult readjusting to life after the war?*

JM: Yeah, it was in the fact that now I knew that there was a lot of hostility. And a lot of people didn't like-- we were baby killers and things like that. Just by assumption you were convicted of those atrocities. And so it was-- you had a hard time with certain class-- certain ages of people that-- . And I'd been here in Seattle. I was held up at lunch one time (downtown Seattle) by a march of-- you know: "Hell no, we won't go" and all that; "Get us out of Vietnam." And this was in April or something like that of '67. ... *Mm*. ... So we-- *After you came back*. ... Yeah, I was working here at-- for Boyd.

26:11 JG: *How much contact have you had with fellow veterans over the years?*

JM: Well, the ones that were in the squadron are-- since email became popular we've all been, you know, keeping in touch and-- about the guys that have passed away and that-- *Have a reunion now*

and then? ... Well, they have had multiple reunions, but they've all been on the East Coast. ... *Hm.* ... And I don't go to the East Coast. ... *[Laughs]. Won't go, huh?* ... No. Yeah. But anyway, in fact in May one of our guys is gonna be interred in the National Cemetery, and I won't be able to make that. But anyway, what I have been doing in the last few years is I've been working for something called Project Healing Waters. And I teach veterans how to tie flies and take 'em fishing. And I do that once or twice a week here at the Seattle VA and then down at American Lake. ... *Yeah.* ... In fact, we're gonna take a group on a fishing trip this weekend. We've got about 20 veterans lined up to go fishing in a little lake up here, and ride around in a boat, and have a good time. ... *I've heard about various projects around American Lake.* ... Yeah. That's-- I'm a-- I work down there at least three or four times a month there. ... *Yeah.*

27:37 JG: Is there any memory or experience from your time in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life?

JM: Well, there was two things. The first time I did bombing at night on the Ho Chi Minh trail where they were dropping flares out of a C-130. And when you're flying along and in the cockpit it's all dark. The instruments are red to protect your night vision. And then all of a sudden you go down-- and you go underneath all these flares. And now it's just like bright summer day. And your eyes sort of pop wide open. And then you drop your bombs, you pull back up into pitch black; you can't see anything. ... *Can't see a thing.* ... And so there's been times when folks have gotten disoriented doing that and gotten close to being in trouble. ... *Yeah.* ... So that was something that I remember that you better expect things that you don't normally want to happen. They are gonna happen sometimes. And you'd better be ready for 'em. And you gotta accept 'em, that they're gonna happen.

One other time on the Ho Chi Minh trail I told you that when trucks were crossing the rivers it was easy to-- and there was this one place where they had a big bunch of trucks going across; and the forward air controller told us that there were antiaircraft guns in the hills; and-- but they didn't think they were manned. So we went down and we made a strafing run on them. And I'd made-- fired two bullets, and the guns jammed. So there I was. I had nothing left, and-- just a-- I just pulled up and got outta there as fast as I could. ... *[Laughs].* ... And so, don't always count on technology to save you.

29:34 JG: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

JM: Yes. Yeah, I-- I'm so happy that the veterans nowadays are not the problem. The government might be the problem for the war, but it's not the veteran's problem that did their job. And that was not what it was from Vietnam. ... *Yeah.* ... It was the veterans' problem in Vietnam. The government wasn't even considered. ... *Yeah.* ... And now it's-- the outlook (at least as far as I can tell, and the veterans that I work with here, they feel much the same way, although they may have problems with the VA and their treatment and scheduling, but the fact that they are not spit upon or harassed, you know, if they're wearing their uniform or things like that, or-- *Been pretty warmly welcomed home.* ... Yes. Yup. And I think the media that has shown these commercials of the veterans on airplanes, you know, being thanked for their service, and things like that. And in fact now many of the big stores around give

veterans discounts-- ... *Right*. ... and thank you for your service. ... *Yeah*. ... No matter how long ago it was.

30:58 JG: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today, or is it?

JM: I think it is either not understood (not that I understand it)-- but anyway, they 'd just as soon forget it. It wasn't-- it wasn't a great war like the Second World War. It was-- and Korea was sort of a mess, too. ... *A mistake*. ... *Yeah*. So anyway, I think most people are so overwhelmed by the other wars we have going on that Vietnam-- if you hadn't said it was 45 years or 50 years since the start of Vietnam War they wouldn't even think about it. But you're gonna remind 'em of that with this-- *We certainly are*. ...

31:53 JG: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

JM: Well, since I wasn't on the front lines being shot at every day, I would say that I probably didn't give out as much blood, sweat, and tears as a lot of folks. But I did come back with the idea that we could go over there and do our job, and that was all that was asked of us and that that's all that we had to do. ... *Yeah*. ... No matter what anybody else does, as long as we did what we were supposed to do.

32:35 JG: What lessons did you take from your Vietnam service that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans?

JM: Well, we had draftees. And a lot of 'em were very, very good, and a lot of 'em didn't seem to care one way or the other, but they all-- all the ones that we-- were in our units were-- they did what they were supposed to do. They obeyed orders. They did a good day's work. And I would just say that no matter what-- what you get-- endeavor you're in that you just do what you're supposed to do and do it-- a full day's work for a full day's pay or whatever. And don't try to shortcut anything. Do what you're supposed to. ... *Yeah*.

33:26 JG: Have you visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC?

JM: No, I haven't. And in fact I thought I was gonna get to visit the travelling Wall when it came down to Joint Base Lewis-McChord, but wasn't able to make that either, so I have not. ... So you haven't seen it yet. ... No. I haven't seen it. I know that I have two guys, two friends of mine that are on the Wall-- their names are on there. But I've not physically seen it. I don't know whether I could stand it or not. ... *Yeah*.

33:57 JG: Have you heard about the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration project?

JM: Only vaguely. And I think it was maybe just something that maybe James-- *Setting this up*. ... *Setting this up*. ... *What do you think about it?* ... Well, I think it's outstanding. *Yeah*. I-- there was a lot of--well, a lot of false impressions and I think anything you can do correct that-- and maybe it'll help correct whatever comes out of these other wars that we have; you know, the outcome and what people think.

34:35 JG: *Thank you, Mr. McRoberts.* ... Oh, you're certainly welcome. I do appreciate the opportunity. ...
Thank you. ... I'll drink to that [reaches for a water bottle]. ... *Yeah [both laugh].*