

ORAL MEMOIRS

OF

STEPHEN McNEAL

An interview conducted on

February 25, 2017

Interviewer: Michelle McNeal

Angelo State University

West Texas Collection

“War Stories: West Texans and the Experience of War, World War I to the Present”

LEGAL STATUS: The oral memoirs of Stephen McNeal are unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on February 25, 2017.

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M. McNEAL: Hey, Dad. Thank you for taking time out of your day to come help me for my interview. Um let's go ahead and get started. Um I appreciate everything you did for the service in your helping out with the military. Go ahead and start off with your official military name.

S. McNEAL: Uh it would have been Intelligence Specialist Chief Petty Officer Surface Warfare Steve McNeal.

M. McNEAL: Okay, and my name is Michelle McNeal. When were you born?

S. McNEAL: I was born in 1964.

M. McNEAL: And where was . . . were you born?

S. McNEAL: San Francisco, California.

M. McNEAL: Did you grow up there?

S. McNEAL: For a short bit of time; my . . . my mom moved around a bit. So, uh I was born in San Francisco, raised young there, but I joined the Navy from San Mateo, which is about twenty to thirty minutes south of San Francisco.

M. McNEAL: Okay. When and where did you enter the armed forces?

S. McNEAL: From San Mateo. I got out of high school and joined right from there.

M. McNEAL: Which branch did you serve in?

S. McNEAL: The Navy.

M. McNEAL: And what . . . what were your years of service?

S. McNEAL: Nineteen eighty-two to 2003. So, almost twenty-one years. Twenty years, eight months.

M. McNEAL: During your years of service, were you primarily enlisted ranks, a non-commissioned officer, an officer, or a warrant officer?

S. McNEAL: I was enlisted the entire time. Um my first ten years were spent as a . . .well, uh my first four years were as an . . . an . . . an . . . not even a non-commissioned officer, just a junior enlisted. Then I was an NCO, E-4 through E-7 for my rest of my tour. I retired as an E-7.

M. McNEAL: If you were . . . if you served as an officer, what was the source of your commission?

S. McNEAL: I didn't serve as an officer.

M. McNEAL: Okay. Which military conflict did you take part?

S. McNEAL: Um I actually worked the Libya in '85. Uh . . . and I worked Desert Storm, Desert Strike, and the global war on terror.

M. McNEAL: So, what made you enlist in the armed forces?

S. McNEAL: Uh when I graduated high school, I . . . I never took education seriously. So, I had a very bad GPA. So, I knew I wasn't going to go to college. Um I'd actually played for Cañada College for a short time, on their . . . their soccer team. But again, academics kicked me, and uh that summer, I decided I was going to join the Navy. Just . . . there was no opportunity for me since I wasn't going on any further education.

M. McNEAL: What was your training like?

S. McNEAL: Training for me was hard. Um it's in the intelligence community, and I initially joined for advanced electronics and realized that I didn't want to do that. This was the pre-com . . . you know, pre-PC age. Um but when I went to intel school, it was harder for me. Again, I wasn't an academic person and didn't know a whole lot globally. My mom . . . you know, my parents tried to get me involved with news and current events, but I never really paid much attention to it. So . . .

M. McNEAL: What were the race relations like when you were enlisted?

S. McNEAL: I didn't notice it as much in boot camp and school. But when you get assigned to a ship, people sat according . . . Filipinos, who I never knew were a . . . a demographical race, they would sit at one table. Blacks would sit at a table. Whites would sit at a table. They would still talk to each other, but generally, they hung out uh during their alone time when they're not on shift with their own race. There was very little cross-racing in the beginning. But towards the end, because I was a senior member, there was more involvement across race as I was finishing up my service.

M. McNEAL: Did you find service challenging . . . your service ch . . . chall . . . challenging?

S. McNEAL: Yeah . . . there's different facets to it. There's the military facet, your job facet, and then just being in the military as military life. And uh I would say none of it was extremely trying. The hardest part was working in intelligence, the fast pace of that, especially during times of crisis.

M. McNEAL: What conception did you have of the United States at the time of your enlistment?

S. McNEAL: I was very ignorant. I didn't have any conception. I didn't . . . I didn't think about it at all, to be honest. It wasn't a thought.

M. McNEAL: What did America symbolize to you?

S. McNEAL: Nothing. I didn't think about it in any sort of way.

M. McNEAL: Were you deployed overseas?

S. McNEAL: Yes.

M. McNEAL: What did you understand about the mission you were being asked to complete while overseas?

S. McNEAL: Probably a lot more than most, again, because of my intelligence community. Once I started understanding the big picture—to do my job, you have to understand geopolitics and . . . and global things. So, I always knew what we were doing and why we were doing it. I may not have understood a lot of strategic-look things, but, for the most part . . .

M. McNEAL: What unit did you serve in during your deployment? Or units?

S. McNEAL: I served in several units. Uh the first unit was uh the *USS Simon Lake*. It was a submarine tender. Uh then I went to intel school, and then I went to the Fleet Intelligence Center Europe and Atlantic in Norfolk, Virginia. From there, I went to the Fleet Ocean Surveillance Information Facility in Rota, Spain. Then I went to the *USS Midway* in Yokosuka, Japan. Then I went to uh a classified unit in the Philippines. Then I went to the Joint Intelligence Center Pacific in Hawaii. Then I went to the *USS Russell*, which was a destroyer in Hawaii. Then I became an instructor and came to Goodfellow Air Force base in Texas. And then my last tour of duty was with the commander of the Sixth Fleet in Gaeta, Italy.

M. McNEAL: Were you ever wounded in action?

S. McNEAL: Not in action. We were deployed up in the Northern Persian Gulf, and a guy that worked for me had a seizure. And when I was getting him to sick bay, I uh twisted my spine, and it's a disability I live with to this day.

M. McNEAL: Did you ever become a prisoner of war?

S. McNEAL: No.

M. McNEAL: What did you think of the local inhabitants if you ever encountered them?

S. McNEAL: For the most part, I like them. I got along well and I always immersed myself in the language. So, uh when I was in Spain, I learned some Spanish. Same with Japan and in the Philippines.

M. McNEAL: When you acted . . . when you interacted with the local inhabitants, what did you think their conceptions were of the United States?

S. McNEAL: I tried to go against convention of what most Americans are: very arrogant. The way they act, their behavior, the way they dressed, the way they talked. Because America is such a great nation to be involved with, they take that and they . . . they exert their influence . . . they don't really respect local customs and courtesies. On the other hand, I tried to do that. Uh I tried to learn the language, learn the customs, learn the courtesies and actually found out the people appreciated that a lot more than just being the "ugly American."

M. McNEAL: How did your service influence or affect your family at home?

S. McNEAL: I think the roughest part for them was, obviously, the going away. Because even coming back, we . . . when you come back, you've done a six-month or more deployment. They learn to live without you and they've grown. When you come back, you almost have to . . . to reintroduce yourself to them.

M. McNEAL: I personally don't remember. I was too young. What are your most vivid memories of your time in service?

S. McNEAL: The most time . . . the most vivid memories I have are . . . are being with my shipmates. Um if we had duty together where you can't leave the ship—you have to stay on the ship—uh the things we would do. We'd play cards together or watch movies or . . . you know. And of course, shore leave in all these other countries and stuff, the friends I make. To me, it was . . . it sounds funny, but being in the Navy, a lot of times, was a lot like being in prison. You're on a ship. You work seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. It's always moving. And then you come back after six months and everything's changed at home. It's almost . . . but you build a bond with all the people. You've actually built a very, very close-knit . . . especially on a small ship like a destroyer. To this day on Facebook, the large majority of the people—the 300 people I was friends with on the ship, officer and enlisted—we're still all talking, and we'll talk every day.

M. McNEAL: What source of technology did you use in the service?

S. McNEAL: Wow. [Both chuckle] When I first joined, there were special people that did their own thing and minor stuff for us to do. PCs didn't exist for a while. But about '85, PCs came out and we started using it. The biggest technologies ever for me, one of my specialties, was satellite imagery . . . analysis. And there's been leaps and bounds with satellite imagery and how we've progressed as a nation. Obviously, a lot of it is classified and I can't get into it, but working and seeing how we advanced is . . . is pretty incredible.

M. McNEAL: Did you expect to face any challenges when you returned to civilian life?

S. McNEAL: Um yeah, I was worried about uh some of the . . . how I was going to assimilate to civilian life. After being in the military, especially being a senior leader, how was I going to adapt to being a low man on the totem pole again? And how was I going to face people, not having a clear chain of command?

M. McNEAL: Yeah. Did being from . . . being in Texas shape your years?

S. McNEAL: I wasn't from Texas. I was from California.

M. McNEAL: [Chuckles] Sorry! Uh after your time in the military, has your conception of Texas changed?

S. McNEAL: I wasn't from Texas. I was from California.

M. McNEAL: No, but [both laugh] . . . but . . .

S. McNEAL: But I'll be honest with you, yes. Before I ever came to Texas, being from California, um I know a lot of people were exposed to the show *Dallas*. I never watched it. I don't know whether my parents ever did or not. But uh to me, it was just a bunch of cowboys and a bunch of uh . . . but even after having lived here and served here, and then my retiring back here, uh . . . an entirely new uh foundation for most of Texas, with the exception of the major metropolitan areas.

M. McNEAL: Had your conception of the United States changed after your time in the military?

S. McNEAL: Yes, both for the good and bad.

M. McNEAL: How do you feel about your military service looking back?

S. McNEAL: I'm proud of my service . . . I don't know if I could serve in today's military, and sometimes I'm ashamed that I gave so much of my life for what I see as the state of America today.

M. McNEAL: Do you have any advice for the people, the young women and men, who are just entering the service?

S. McNEAL: Get the most out of it: the training that you do, the friendships that you have, and the places that you go. Although there may not be places you want to be all the time or people that you want to be around, make the best of everything because when you look back, those are the memories that you're going to have.

M. McNEAL: Do you have any items, objects, correspondence that you wish to share?

S. McNEAL: I don't have anything.

M. McNEAL: Anything else that you'd like to point out in your service? Or any comments?

S. McNEAL: No. I enjoyed my time. I think it was good. I was glad I was in when I was in. I don't know that an old dinosaur like me would fit in today's military but, uh I wouldn't change it.

[Indistinct whispering]

M. McNEAL: I appreciate the time that you took out to help me out with this project, and I do appreciate your service.

S. McNEAL: If you have any other questions, let me know.

M. McNEAL: Thank you.