

MILITARY WOMEN AVIATORS ORAL HISTORY INITIATIVE

Interview No. 9

Participant Edited Transcript

Interviewee: Commander Claudia McKnight, United States Coast Guard, Retired Date: August 6, 2019

By: Lieutenant Colonel Monica Smith, USAF, Retired

Place: National Air and Space Museum

Satellite Library

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SMITH: I'm Monica Smith, at the National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Today is August 6, 2019, and I have the pleasure of speaking with Commander Claudia McKnight, United States Coast Guard, Retired. This interview is being taped as part of the Military Women Aviators Oral History Initiative. It will be archived at the Smithsonian Institution. Welcome, Commander McKnight.

MCKNIGHT: Thank you.

SMITH: Let's start by you stating your full name and occupation.

MCKNIGHT: Okay. Claudia Van McKnight. I currently work at the MITRE Corporation, where I'm a systems engineer. I work in aviation safety.

SMITH: Fantastic. And you were in the service. You were in several services. So can you...

MCKNIGHT: A couple.

SMITH: ...tell me your dates of service?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. I entered the Army after two years of ROTC in 1984 and resigned my commission so that I could apply for the Coast Guard's Direct Commission Aviator Program. And I didn't have any break in service. I got out of the Army on September 30 and sworn into the Coast Guard on October 1 of 1990. I retired in 2008, August of 2008.

SMITH: And how many years total?

MCKNIGHT: 24 years.

SMITH: 24 years. Fantastic. And what were your total flight hours?

MCKNIGHT: I think I had about 4,700, give or take a little.¹

SMITH: Impressive. And what type of aircraft?

MCKNIGHT: Mainly in three aircraft. In the Army, I flew the UH-1, and in the Coast Guard, I threw — threw? Flew. [laughs] Sorry. In the Coast Guard, I flew the Dolphin.

SMITH: The H-65?

MCKNIGHT: The H-65. I think I had about 2,400 hours in that.

SMITH: Wow.

¹ McKnight's autobiographical military history indicates more than 4,800 flight hours.

MCKNIGHT: Something like that. And then my last assignment, I flew the Falcon jet.

SMITH: Nice.

MCKNIGHT: HU-25.

SMITH: Okay. So let's talk about how you came to be in the military. And let's start with where you were born.

MCKNIGHT: I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, and moved when I was one to California. I didn't grow up really being aware of the military. I grew up in the '60s, '70s. All the peace and love, you know. Our — my environment was more around the peace and love side of things than the Vietnam side of things. My brother — older brother, he did have to put his number into the lottery, but he got — he didn't end up having to go. He just missed.

SMITH: During Vietnam?

MCKNIGHT: During Vietnam.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, having to go.

SMITH: Did any of your siblings or any family members serve in the military, or —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Well, come to find out, after I got in the military, like everyone, every generation, has served in the military. But I really didn't know much about it.

SMITH: So growing up, you didn't know.

MCKNIGHT: I didn't. No.

SMITH: So what were you like as a kid?

MCKNIGHT: A little tomboy. There's a lot of pictures of me playing Army. Yeah, with — we used to play War and Army. And yeah, I was always outside, you know, trying to be like my older brother, really.

SMITH: How many siblings did you have, or do you have?

MCKNIGHT: Two siblings, both older. My sister is eight years older than me. My brother is six years older than me.

SMITH: Now, tell me about your parents.

MCKNIGHT: So they both were basically born and raised in the Midwest, in Aurora, Illinois. They met in high school. They were high-school sweethearts.

SMITH: What were their names—or what are their names?

MCKNIGHT: Bill McKnight — William McKnight, and Joyce McKnight. And my mom is still alive. She's going to be 92 this October. And my dad passed away in 2000.

SMITH: I'm sorry.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So tell me what you thought you were going to be doing with your life after high school.

MCKNIGHT: Ooh, after high school. So here's just one little tidbit. I went to

[5:00]

an alternative high school in Los Angeles— I grew up in Los Angeles, and —

SMITH: How did you come to be in that high school?

MCKNIGHT: Well, it was a normal public school, but they had a school within a school, and it was — they recently did an article on it in *LA Magazine*. It was kind of an anomaly in the L.A. public school system, a little sort of blip on the radar. It was all about learning what you wanted to learn. There was no curriculum, per se.

SMITH: Like Montessori, but at the high school level.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, Montessori probably is pretty structured compared to — [laughs]

SMITH: Really?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So what was the name of this high school, now that you bring this up?

MCKNIGHT: IPS. Innovative Program School.

SMITH: And how did you find it?

MCKNIGHT: So I was in middle school, and they came to the graduating, you know, middle-schoolers and gave their pitch on, you know, this is an option for you when you go to high school. If you'd like to go to IPS instead of the regular school, we'd love to have you. And I was the only one that did it. None of my friends did it. But it was a great experience. It was a great experience for learning about yourself and, you know, it was about — do you remember back in the '70s — do you remember EST²? No?

SMITH: No.

MCKNIGHT: Like *I'm OK - You're OK*. No? [laughs]

SMITH: I remember that, but I don't remember EST.

MCKNIGHT: Alright. Well, that was — yeah. Well, it was all based on feelings, and how are you feeling, and taking responsibility for your actions, and things like this. So I learned a lot of things like that. Not so much in the academic area.

SMITH: Got it.

MCKNIGHT: We — you know, graded ourselves. [laughs] So I had a pretty good GPA. But I did study some good things. I did a whole project on women's history, and I was able to do that in that environment, which I probably wouldn't have been able to do, but I didn't have chemistry, math, you know, the hard skills that you normally associate.

SMITH: But then you go to Cal Poly, so [laughs] how does that happen?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Okay. Well — so I didn't go to Cal Poly right away.

² (Werner) Erhard Seminars Training began in 1971, <http://www.wernererhard.net/index.html>.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: I went to the San Francisco Art Institute, because I wanted to be a filmmaker. After a year there, my parents were like: no, I don't think so. So then I went to Sonoma State for almost two years, studying photography. Once again, my dad was like: eh. You know, this is not really working for us. You know? [laughs] I don't see you — what are you going to do, you know? So he, to his credit, brought me home to L.A. and he, I'm sure, paid for me to go through this weekend program at UCLA where they had me take like every kind of test you can imagine. I literally spent two days, everything from using tweezers to move little things around, to taking, you know, regular math tests and all kind of tests. Spatial orientation tests, everything. And out of that, they said I should either be an industrial arts teacher in like high school, or I should go into the printing industry. There were two schools in the country that did this printing program. One was in Rochester, New York, RIT, and the other was at Cal Poly. So I went to Cal Poly. And I enjoyed it. I mean, they were right. I really, really enjoyed all my classes, but then I kind of got waylaid and ended up going into ROTC.

SMITH: How did that happen? What —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So you know, like I say, even though my family, like my grandfather, was in World War I. Yeah, World War — no. My great-grandfather was in World War I. My — no, wait. Let me do that again. [laughs] How old are these people? My grandfather was in World War I, and actually, his father — who was a teacher — was also in World War I. Different

[10:00]

types of assignments. Neither one of them saw actual combat duty. My father was — and I didn't find this out until after I had already gone through flight school and everything — was in the Navy as an aviation cadet, ready to go to flight school when the war ended.³ I never even knew, hardly, that he was in the Navy, except I've seen a few pictures and everything. So military was not part of my — it just wasn't part of my consciousness. And I didn't — if you asked me what's the difference between a, you know, colonel and a private, I probably couldn't have told you what that was.

SMITH: At that time.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, at that time.

SMITH: Alright.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So anyway, at Cal Poly — and I — you know, I knew about the National Guard, and I thought: well, this would be cool to make a little money and like save people on the weekend. [laughs] So I didn't even realize the National Guard was really like the military. Saw a recruiter, got swept up into the recruiter — you know, he had me in there, and he wanted to send me to basic training and put me in the military — put me in the Army.

SMITH: This is an Army recruiter.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, an Army recruiter.

SMITH: On campus, or —

MCKNIGHT: No, he wasn't on campus. It was just in town.

SMITH: Okay.

³ World War II.

MCKNIGHT: I probably saw the number on the commercial for the National Guard and called that. My parents were freaking out, because that was going to take me out of school. Meanwhile, I didn't know anything about ROTC. Didn't know what it was. Nothing about it.

SMITH: What year were you? Sophomore, or —

MCKNIGHT: So I was my first year at Cal Poly, so I'd already had three years of school, but it was really my sophomore year when it comes down to it, because I had to spend three years there. I decided I was going to go down. I was at the MEPS station.⁴ I'd done all my physical, everything. I was going to sign up, and I wanted to be an MP.⁵ And I got down there — you know, I'm just — you know how you — you're jazzed. You're ready to do it, right? You've made all the tough decisions, and you're ready to commit and do it. And he told me I couldn't be a military policeman, because I had too many traffic violations. Yeah.

SMITH: Speed demon?

MCKNIGHT: No, it was U-turns. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] Ha! Uh, oh.

MCKNIGHT: So he offered me laundry specialist.

SMITH: Oh, wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Which, to this day, I'm so thankful it was something that bad that I — it, you know, kind of snapped me out of it. And I was like, now, I'm going to have to go think about that. I was — I wanted to raise my hand and sign up, but not for that. Then he said: well, you're at school. Have you thought about ROTC? And I was like: well no, what's that? And he told me. And then I checked into ROTC and was actually just in time to go to basic camp that summer.

SMITH: So then you went to the actual detachment at your school to get signed up?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, then I went to the school and found out about it. I found out that I could go to basic training, and if I didn't like it, I could quit at any time. I thought that that was great, even though I ended up loving it. You know, never — quitting never crossed my mind.

SMITH: I think there's a picture. This would be '82, I think you told me.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah, that's Fort Knox. Alpha 18-4.

SMITH: So tell me a little bit about basic and what that did for you.

MCKNIGHT: Basic — I'm sure these memories get better with age. [laughs] But I was actually looking through my yearbook last night, and just such — I mean, it was hard. It was really hard. We were in the old World War II barracks. At that time, they had — all the women were in one barracks, and then the guys were all in separate barracks, but we trained together. I know the Army went kind of back and forth, either training all women together or — and you know, training men and women separate, to combining them. And when I went through, they combined us in there. So we had probably six women in our platoon. And we had a great time. I mean, we had all the — you know, getting yelled at and everything, but it was such a fun group. It's the first time I'd really been around people from all over the country. You know, we had people from

⁴ Military Entrance Processing Station.

⁵ Military Police.

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Bowling Green, Kentucky, and Boston, and they were just from everywhere. And you know, when you go through something like that with people, you just — you know, under tough circumstances, you help each other out, and you come together, and you actually end up having a great time.

SMITH: Were you exposed to different career fields during the training?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Actually, they did have a day where they took you around, and you know, there's pictures of me sitting in a Jeep, in a tank, and a helicopter. I'm sitting in a Huey. So you got to see the different — all the different branches of the military. At that time, the Aviation branch was not yet a branch.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: So —

SMITH: But you did get a chance to fly. So tell me about that.

MCKNIGHT: So did the ROTC thing, went back to school, and then I still had two years until I graduated. So I took my Military Science course, had our few exercises throughout the year, and then the following summer would be Advance Camp at Fort Lewis, Washington. But at ROTC, they had, you know, all these different posters on the wall. And there was one of, like, a Huey pilot, you know? And I was like: how do you do that, you know? And they did have a program called the cadet — oh, what was it called? Flight Training and Orientation Program, FTOP, where they took — I think they took two cadets from every state. I think that was it. But you had to apply. And I went to my professor of military science and said: I'd like to apply for this program. And he was very like, *errhh*. You know, they only pick, you know, in the fourth region, they're only going to pick, you know, a couple people. And you — eh, are you sure? It's a lot of paperwork. And I was like: well, you know, they're not going to pick me if I don't apply, so come on, buddy. [laughs] Let's do this.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: So we did it, and I was the third alternate. So that's kind of the story of my career. I'm like, always the [laughs] alternate, but —

SMITH: Better to be the alternate than not on the list at all.

MCKNIGHT: That's right.

SMITH: So tell me about your ROTC detachment, and how many women there were.

MCKNIGHT: Oh, it was very small. Honestly, I think there was, in my graduating class — I think there's like 12 of us. So it really was a small detachment. There were — Sharon. There was one other female. It might have been just — I think there was just two females of those 12 in that class, and then in the couple classes behind us, there might have been one or two.

SMITH: Was everyone bound for the Army, or were people planning —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. This was all Army. I probably — that may have not have been my first choice, but that was the only thing that my school had. So, yeah.

SMITH: Alright. So then you graduate, or —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. I will just say —

SMITH: Before graduation, you get to fly, right, at the Advance Camp?

MCKNIGHT: Oh, right. Okay. So I went to Advance Camp, and unfortunately for a couple people on the list who were going to FTOP, they like, broke their ankle or you know, sprained a this or that. And so you know, and up I move. And suddenly, I found out like the week before that I got to go to Fort Rucker to get 15 hours in a TH-55 and solo.

SMITH: Is that in lieu of Advance Camp, or is that in addition to?

MCKNIGHT: No, no. That was after Advance Camp.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: See, all these kids got hurt during Advance Camp.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: And couldn't go. [laughs]

SMITH: So tell me about your — going to Fort Rucker.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. That was just awesome. It really was.

SMITH: There's another picture of you with a flight instructor in a Huey, so that's later.

MCKNIGHT: That actually is later, yeah. That's when I got accepted and went. The other thing I'll say is that by getting — going through this FTOP program, it guaranteed you flight school upon graduation.

SMITH: That's great.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So that was a huge thing.

SMITH: Tell me about your first day at FTOP.

MCKNIGHT: Oh, you know, you get there — I remember flying into Dothan, Alabama, which I think I was pronouncing DOTH-an, or something. And you know, you get there, and you're all nervous. And you know, there was just kids from all over the country. Everyone was, you know, just excited to be there.

SMITH: About how many kids?

MCKNIGHT: There was probably — it feels like there was like 60 or so.

SMITH: About how many women?

MCKNIGHT: Three. There was three of us. Yeah. Lisa Mills,

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and Laura Jacksina,⁶ I think. Yeah, and then we — yeah, they split us up into a couple of groups, kind of like a morning group and afternoon group. And we did. We got 15 hours in the TH-55. And then if you're ready, and I think almost everybody soloed. There might have been one or two...

SMITH: Oh, great.

⁶ Accessed Aug 29, 2019, <https://www.congress.gov/nomination/98th-congress/792>.

MCKNIGHT: ...that didn't solo. You know, the instructor gets out, and off you go. Just trying to pretend [laughs] that they're still sitting there. Yeah.

SMITH: Tell me about that flight. I know you remember it.

MCKNIGHT: I just remember — I kind of talk to myself anyway, but I remember just talking to myself over the intercom, just kind of like I was talking to him, you know? Okay, I'm turning base, da da da, you know, just running through everything. And they're — of course, they're in the tower, and they're talking to you. You know, your instructor's talking to you, so — and then afterwards, after you land, at that time — I don't know if they still do it, because it's probably considered hazing or something, but they — you know, they all picked me up, carried me, you know, out like this, plopped me down, and hosed me down while I had to do push-ups. So [laughs] —

SMITH: [laughs] That was the solo celebration for everybody.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah.

SMITH: That's fantastic.

MCKNIGHT: And then I got my certificate that says: "he soloed" or "his first solo flight."

SMITH: Oops.

MCKNIGHT: You know, even by the time I went through flight school, they still hadn't changed it.

SMITH: Really?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, they just had to cross out and put "her." [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] They couldn't reprint it?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: They didn't have the template?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Oh, my gosh. So you go back to school that fall. Are you pumped up? What's your attitude when you go back to ROTC?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, I was pumped up. I also joined the Simultaneous Membership Program, where I was attached to a Reserve unit. And I was attached to the Reserve unit in Santa Barbara, which was an hour away — an hour and a half. I don't know how long it was, but not that — you know, easy to drive down, one weekend a month. It was a Civil Affairs unit, which I thought was very, very cool. You know, during a conflict or whatever, they go in, and they've got arts and archives, so they try and safeguard all of the arts and historical things in a town so it doesn't get, you know, blown up or whatever. You know, they go and pay locals for damage that the military's done, like ruining all their crops or something. It was just a great unit. I — you know, I kind of see in hindsight that that was, you know, kind of more in line with the Coast Guard mission, I think, than the regular Army mission. But the reason I bring up the SMP program and drilling there is our Reserve station was — underwent repairs for a year. And for that whole nine months or a year, they had us drill at the Coast Guard station. And that was really — even though I grew up in L.A., I wasn't aware of the Coast Guard. I just wasn't. So during that year, we drilled at this Coast Guard station in Santa Barbara, which is about as nice as you can get. You know, now it's a museum. But it was — you know, it's right in the harbor there. Beautiful building, a couple boats here. I was like — this. How do we do this? You know.

SMITH: The seed was planted. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah. And I did actually find out at that time that they had a Direct Commission Aviator program. You have to have 500 hours, and then you can transfer from the other services into the Coast Guard. And the Coast Guard does get about half of their pilots through that program.

SMITH: From other services?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, from other services.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: So that did plant the seed.

SMITH: Yes. Then you go back to school, you complete your —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, I completed everything. I actually had — I didn't finish all my credits, so I didn't graduate in June. I did get like sworn in in June, but I had to stay for two months and take one more class.

SMITH: Now, that's interesting.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: They swore you in, even though you hadn't completed your —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, they did swear me in. And I'm not even sure how that worked on my time, because it does count as time, but it's weird time.

SMITH: So when did you first report for duty in the Army after graduating from Cal Poly?

MCKNIGHT: So I told you that Aviation was not a branch when I first went through.

[25:00]

Well, I was actually commissioned into the Aviation Branch. It had just become a branch in 1983. So I was commissioned into the Aviation Branch, but they didn't have an Officer Basic Course yet. Actually, they did. They were just starting it, and I think if I had graduated in June, I could have gone to it. I think they had like one trial one, and then they weren't going to have another one until December or something like that.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: So I had the choice of either waiting for that one or going to another Combat Arms Officer Basic Course. And I chose Air Defense Artillery.

SMITH: How?

MCKNIGHT: I don't know. I don't know. I mean, you know, it was Field Artillery, Infantry — I couldn't do Infantry — I couldn't do Armor.⁷ There's only a couple, I think, that I could actually do as a female, and that seemed like the least awful one to pick. [laughs]

SMITH: But you had a guaranteed flight slot as well.

MCKNIGHT: Oh, yeah. I was going to flight school, and I was Aviation Branch. So I was the only aviator in the whole group, and of course, the butt of all the jokes, you know, because their motto is: if it flies, it dies. But once again,

⁷ Army Branches that women were prohibited from joining.

great group of people. Just, you know, had a lot of fun. Was — you know, OBC is all that, you know, military officer training, preparing you to, you know, command a platoon, things like that. It's a good experience. I think it was 12 weeks in Fort Bliss, Texas. And then I went to Fort Rucker, waiting to start flight school.

SMITH: Before Fort Rucker "Two," [laughs] at Fort Bliss, were there any other women in the Basic Course, Officer Basic Course...

MCKNIGHT: Were there any other women?

SMITH: ...that you recall?

MCKNIGHT: Isn't that funny? I don't recall. But I also can't remember being the only one.

SMITH: It's okay. Just curious.

MCKNIGHT: I'll have to look at — you know what though? I did look at pictures last night.

SMITH: [laughs] That's alright.

MCKNIGHT: And you know, I remember on the weekend — there was a picture on the weekend. We went up to like some caverns that were — and it's me and like seven guys, and we all rented a cabin.

SMITH: And how many people were in training? I mean, I know that was your platoon, but —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. I mean, we were in a platoon. I don't know. There was probably a company's worth of people going through. But I just remember being in that platoon.

SMITH: A company's worth, being —

MCKNIGHT: Like three or four platoons, and a platoon is — you're putting me on the spot, here. [laughs] I'm forgetting this.

SMITH: Oh, just roughly.

MCKNIGHT: Just roughly.

SMITH: I'm not looking — so maybe 50 people?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: 50 is — okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: [That confirms my estimate?] Alright.

MCKNIGHT: And I actually — looking at that picture, thinking: wow, I went on this little trip with all these guys. Just guys. And they were all perfect gentlemen. And I look back on that, and I thought: that was very nice. I mean, that nothing weird ever happened or anything.

SMITH: If only everyone could behave. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah. It's a good group of guys.

SMITH: That's great. So let's talk about going back to Fort Rucker. Or, before that, can you tell me the commissioning date — your actual commissioning date, if you recall? If you don't, then —

MCKNIGHT: I'm going to say August 9.

SMITH: August 9--August of '84.

MCKNIGHT: But I'd have to get my DD-214.

SMITH: And this is 1984, of course.

MCKNIGHT: Yes. Yeah.

SMITH: Okay, so back to Fort Rucker. You've already been there before, so it's like, yeah, I know where —

MCKNIGHT: Oh, yeah. I know what I'm doing. Yeah, but —

SMITH: You know it's Dothan. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: [laughs] Yeah, I know how to speak — speak Alabamian. Yeah, I went back to Fort Rucker. Flight school is nine months, generally. There was a — this happens a lot, or at least it used to. There were too many people waiting to start class, so you had to be a snowbird and just find other work to do. They'd put you in the museum or, you know, working somewhere.

SMITH: When did you actually go to Rucker at this time?

MCKNIGHT: So I graduated OBC in December, and then I was able to go home on leave for two weeks, which was great timing. And then I reported to Fort Rucker, I'm sure, in January.⁸

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: While I was waiting, they sent me to NBC school for two weeks, which was —

SMITH: NBC is —

[30:00]

MCKNIGHT: Nuclear Biological and Chemical. That was two glorious weeks at Fort McClellan, Alabama, where I learned about blue laws and not being able to buy beer on Sunday.

SMITH: How'd you learn that?

MCKNIGHT: On Super Bowl Sunday. Yeah.

SMITH: So you went to the store to get some beer?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah, and I'm like: Super Bowl. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] 1985. Who was playing?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. I don't know.

SMITH: Yeah, just —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Alright.

⁸ 1985.

MCKNIGHT: So yeah, yeah, yeah. So then I didn't start until March.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: And they had so many — so every class that went through Rucker at the time, you had a number, but you also had a hat color. And you had a senior flight and a junior flight of each hat color. There's brown hat, gray hat, orange hat, etcetera. And then you had a warrant officer candidate class, and an officer candidate class, that were going through at the same time. And then, you know, the warrant officers would like go out in the morning, and the officers would go out in the afternoon, and then they'd switch later. So it was these two classes that went through together, but they really were separate. So they had such a backlog of officers that we had a double officer class.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: I see your class was Initial Entry Rotary Wing —85-24.

MCKNIGHT: I think it was 85-24. Yeah, Gray flight. And we had 62. Second lieutenants, mostly. I think there were a couple of first lieutenants. And we just split up into two classes, but actually, when our grades came out and everything — because everything was about class ranking — it was always out of 62 people.

SMITH: Interesting.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So assignments were divvied out of 62, or —

MCKNIGHT: No. We'd get a card that said, you know: here's all the grades you got on either your flight check or, you know, the exam you just took on weather, or aerodynamics, or whatever it was. And you'd get a grade on that, and then you'd have a class ranking.

SMITH: So you knew all — that was given to you periodically?

MCKNIGHT: Oh, yeah. Those cards came out, and it was like —

SMITH: Every week, or how many —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, I think they did come out every week.

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: How many women were in this class of 62?

MCKNIGHT: Okay. So now I'm going to have to — because now, I'm thinking — wait. Maybe it was Lisa Mills and Laura [laughs] were in this one. I don't know.

SMITH: At flight school? Yeah, that's fine.

MCKNIGHT: Oh, that's awful. No, it's not. Jodie — ooh, okay.

SMITH: A handful.

MCKNIGHT: I really think there were three of us.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Yeah, they're not —

MCKNIGHT: I'm probably wrong on three — on each one, so I will have to clarify that.

SMITH: That's —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. But it certainly wasn't...

SMITH: That gives people —

MCKNIGHT: ...any more than that.

SMITH: Right. That gives people a perspective of your —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: You were one of very few.

MCKNIGHT: And I remember one time, the local — I don't know. It was the Dothan paper or the Fort Rucker paper came out and did a little article on the women going through flight school.

SMITH: Oh.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So tell me about how you were received by your instructors and your peers.

MCKNIGHT: Absolutely fine.

SMITH: Good.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. The instructors were great. They were mostly old, retired guys, especially in that initial part of training. They were all Department of Army Civilians. And yeah, they were just — they were awesome. They were really awesome. I mean, learning from people like that is really — it's like a privilege. Not to say that learning from someone with, you know, a few hundred hours is awful, but you know, if you learn from someone with 7,000 hours right off the bat, it's pretty nice. Yeah.

SMITH: So you had this 15 hours, but that was two years before.

MCKNIGHT: It was.

SMITH: Did you have any flight time in the interim?

MCKNIGHT: No, I didn't. No.

SMITH: Was it like riding a bike when you got back in the aircraft?

MCKNIGHT: Almost.

SMITH: Was it the TH-55 first?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, it was still the TH-55. Yeah.

SMITH: Was that the first aircraft, or —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. That's — yeah, you do that for the, you know, four or eight weeks, and then you move into the Huey.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: So yeah, it was — yeah, I maybe had a little bit of an advantage. Those of us who — you know, there were a few of us that were in FTOP together. So you know, I did have a little bit of an advantage. But you know, after like 10 hours, I think we're all [laughs]...

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: ...kind of in the same boat.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

[35:00]

But I soloed again and got sprayed down again. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] But you knew it was coming this time.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah. Definitely.

SMITH: Alright. Well, just tell me about — you already told me about flying the TH-55. Tell me about your first Huey flight, what that was like, how you —

MCKNIGHT: That was —

SMITH: Because it's a — first explain...

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: ...the difference in the aircraft.

MCKNIGHT: Well, the TH-55 is like a flying lawnmower. You know, it's just like a — that noise, you know, with a little bubble around you—*errrh*—and off you go. The Huey is just like a big, you know, shaking thing that just, you know — it's just — feels bigger. And I mean —

SMITH: Did you ride in it first before you actually piloted?

MCKNIGHT: I did. And I got to ride in a Huey. I'm going to say Advance Camp was my first time. They transported us somewhere, and I got to sit in one of the two seats on the side, looking out.

SMITH: With the door open? [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: With the door open, and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven, you know? It was just — I mean, that feeling of picking up and then just, *fehhr*, you know, going. So cool.

SMITH: This reinforced your "I want to do this." [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: So yeah, the Huey was great. It was just a lot bigger, but you know, then you had two students, and the other one would sit in the back while one was in the front, and halfway through, you'd land, and swap out. So yeah, it was even fun being in the back most of the time. Some people didn't like it. They got a little — *ehh*, you know? But it was great. I enjoyed just looking out and flying around.

SMITH: It probably depended on how the other student did... [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Well —

SMITH: ...as far as whether or not they had a good ride in the back or not. So — wow.

MCKNIGHT: [laughs] Yeah.

SMITH: So tell me about your assignment. Like, when you got your aircraft assignment and how that happened.

MCKNIGHT: So everything was predicated on class standing, what aircraft you were going to get. And by the end of instruments, which was a little over halfway through, is the people in the top slots got to pick their aircraft. So I was number one, like all the way through until like the last week. But that's — you know, oh well. [laughs]

SMITH: But you — yeah, because you got to pick first.

MCKNIGHT: But hey, yeah. I got to pick, and I picked the Blackhawk. I wanted to fly the Blackhawk. And I got assigned Blackhawks to Germany, which is exactly what I wanted, so —

SMITH: How many Blackhawks were there in your class?

MCKNIGHT: Oh, gosh. That's a good question.

SMITH: You didn't care, because you're like: I'm taking this one.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: I'm thinking somewhere around eight.

SMITH: Oh, wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. I think I even have the list of people of — who went where. But you know, a couple people flew like the OV-1, or the — whatever that fixed-wing deathtrap was.⁹ [laughs] I don't know. I think they called it like "the Widowmaker" or the something-killer.

SMITH: Did you have any fixed-wing time down at Rucker?

MCKNIGHT: No. Nada.

SMITH: Okay, because some people —

⁹ The OV-1 Mohawk was also called the "Widowmaker." Accessed Nov 26, 2019, https://www.ov-1mohawkassociation.org/home/where_are_the_mohawks_now; <https://aviation-safety.net/wikibase/type/V1>

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Not a second of it. so I got Blackhawks to Germany. Really excited. Again, flight school ended in December. I had my — actually, I think I had my mom pin on my wings.

SMITH: Nice.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. And perfect timing, because then I got Christmas break off again. I've always had pretty good timing as far as that goes. And then in January, I went over to Germany.

SMITH: Tell me about your first assignment and your reception.

MCKNIGHT: And yeah, the day — like the day I got there, I think was the day the *Challenger* exploded.¹⁰ Yeah.

SMITH: Oh, so January 26, or —

MCKNIGHT: Something like that. Yeah. And oh, it was just awful. And it was — all the TV was in German, so I couldn't really get what was going on. I could hear the English in the background a little bit, but yeah, that was an interesting — I mean, that just sticks in my mind as, you know, where I was on that day. Got to my unit. Shortly after I got there, or possibly it was before, they had had one or two really bad accidents with the Blackhawk.¹¹ The rear stabilator like, cranked forward and locked forward, and the aircraft just went boom.

[40:00]

So they grounded the fleet, and they grounded the entire fleet, and it was going to be like nine months or more. Yeah. It was a long time. So pretty soon, they said: well, that's great you want Blackhawks, but you know, you're not going to sit here for nine months. So now you're Hueys. It's alright. I love the Huey.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So quite happily, I went over to the Huey company. It was a General Support Aviation company, which is "ash and trash," you know. They would say — we flew — you know, occasionally flew generals around. Stuff like that. It was a great — so I had a platoon. First, I was an assistant platoon leader, but it wasn't too long after that that I became the platoon leader. I had eight Hueys, and all the flight — gosh, what are they? Crew chiefs. That's what they call them. I got my Coast Guard and Army nomenclature — you know, had all the crew chiefs. Had a great — I had great platoon sergeants, too. You know, the good ones that pull you aside and say: alright, Lieutenant, let me tell you how it really is. And I was like: yes, Sergeant. Yes, Sergeant. You know — and they really helped me out. They were on my side and taught me so much. So another good example of just having guys that are really willing to teach you, you know?

SMITH: So did you have any negative reception at your unit in Germany, either unit?

MCKNIGHT: Not really. You know, I've never been like sexually harassed or anything. I had my battalion commander — one time I was in his office, and he was like: you know, I can see your underwear line through your flight suit. And I was like: yeah, alright. [laughs]

SMITH: So?

MCKNIGHT: I was like, what are you — you know, so I was like: yes, sir. Goodbye. You know, so it's just a stupid comment.

¹⁰ Jan 28, 1986.

¹¹ The Army temporarily grounded its entire Blackhawk fleet in 1985, and following a March 11, 1986 fatal crash at Fort Rucker. Accessed Nov 26, 2019, <https://apnews.com/b5fb4ee67dc20c99612c86846d35299a>; <http://www.armyaircrews.com/blackhawk.html>.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. I don't want to get off of the progression of, you know, my assignments.

SMITH: Oh, sure.

MCKNIGHT: But just on this one aside. The only — the worst thing along those lines was when I'd gone back to Rucker, and I was an instructor, and I was teaching nights at that time. And we refueled at an LZ, where we had, you know, refueling — hot refueling.¹² And the student was flying, so I made the radio call coming in. And after I'd made the call, over the radio comes: "Another cunt in the cockpit." And I was just like — I'm thinking: did I just — did I hear that? You know, and...

SMITH: You're thinking —

MCKNIGHT: ...my student was like: oh, my God. [laughs] You know, he's like: oh, ma'am. You know, and so whatever. But when I got back — you know, when we finished the night and came back, all these guys here, who were in my platoon, who were mostly Department of Army civilians, they were — oh, they were pissed. They were like: we're going to find out who did that. Don't worry. You know, I mean they were so supportive of me, as you can see in this picture.¹³ [laughs]

SMITH: Yes. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: So for every bad thing, there's been way better good things.

SMITH: Good to hear. Good to hear.

MCKNIGHT: I feel lucky kind of, because I know that there are quite a few women that have not always had that be the case.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: But this is your story, so — [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: This is my story.

SMITH: Right. So moving on to your Germany tour. Anything else you want to share about that tour?

MCKNIGHT: Well, it was just an awesome tour. I met great friends. One in particular, who we were buddy-buddy, and are still very close to this day.

SMITH: Nice.

MCKNIGHT: He got out of the Army, went to Harvard Law, and ultimately was the — oh, good lord.

SMITH: That's okay. That's his story. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Okay.

SMITH: So — but yeah, and then after that assignment, you go to — back to Rucker as an instructor.

¹² Landing zone. Hot refueling is refueling with the engine running.

A 1989 picture of at least six guys in her platoon supporting a horizontal McKnight about five feet above the ground for a group photo.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, went back to Rucker.

SMITH: Did you choose that...

[45:00]

assignment, or how did that assignment come about?

MCKNIGHT: I did. So when you're flying in the Army as a commissioned officer, you're told over and over again that's not your primary duty. You know, you're an officer first, an aviator second or third. I went back to Rucker because I went to the Officer Advanced Course, which was several months, maybe six months, long.

SMITH: Where was that?

MCKNIGHT: And then — that's at Fort Rucker.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. And then from there, you know, they were going to send me somewhere to like, write doctrine or something like that, which is not high on my list of fun things. So I applied and fortunately got accepted as an instructor pilot at Rucker and was able to do that the rest of the time I was there.

SMITH: How many hours did you have about — at that time?

MCKNIGHT: When I went there, I had just under 500. You were supposed to have 500. I think I had 400 or — yeah, I didn't quite have the 500.

SMITH: Were there any other women instructors?

MCKNIGHT: Wait, that doesn't seem right. This is awful. The — you know?

SMITH: You're fine. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: I know, but now...

SMITH: Don't worry about it.

MCKNIGHT: ...I'm thinking to be an instructor you only had to have 200. The 500 you needed for the Coast Guard.

SMITH: Okay. And we're going to get there. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So you're an instructor. Were there any other women instructors at that time?

MCKNIGHT: There were. There were some. There were a couple when I went through, also, as a student.

SMITH: Oh, great.

MCKNIGHT: There were none in my flight. I think there was one like, when I was on the night shift, she was on the day shift. She was a warrant officer.

SMITH: Was there any kind of support, like, did you all get together at all, try to support each other, or was it just kind of in passing that you would speak?

MCKNIGHT: It certainly wasn't — no, we didn't really get together. It just wasn't my — you know. It was not always just because they're females, I mean, you're going to get along buddy-buddy, right?

SMITH: No. No.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. [laughs]

SMITH: Yeah. And certainly, if you're not having any issues...

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: ...there might not have been a real reason to band together.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: I was just curious, so —

MCKNIGHT: So I'm going to bring in one other little thing into the thread here...

SMITH: Sure.

MCKNIGHT: ...if you don't mind. I'm gay, which was not what was supposed to be going on at that time [laughs] in the military.

SMITH: According to — right, the UCMJ.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So in flight school, I actually got married to a guy in my class, who was in the Reserves, and he wanted to keep that ID card when he got home. And I wanted to have a husband when I went to Germany so I wouldn't have to explain anything.

SMITH: Answer questions.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, exactly.

SMITH: Huh.

MCKNIGHT: When I was in Germany, I was investigated for being gay. Somebody told my commanding officer that I'd done something nasty in a public place that I did not do, even remotely at all. And so he called me in and had to ask all these questions.

SMITH: Your commanding officer.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Uh huh.

SMITH: So your — was this the battalion commander, or —

MCKNIGHT: This was the company commander.

SMITH: Company commander.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So another captain.¹⁴

MCKNIGHT: Company commander. Yeah, a captain. And you know, I answered all the questions. Everything was fine, but it was kind of like — hmm.

¹⁴ McKnight was a first lieutenant at the time, not a captain.

SMITH: So at this time, I think, you know this brings us to--

MCKNIGHT: This wasn't even "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

SMITH: — right, it's before that.

MCKNIGHT: This was before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

SMITH: So it was actually court martial offense...

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah.

SMITH: ...to be gay and commit--

MCKNIGHT: And when I was in Germany, I hung out with mostly the gay people, who — most of them were enlisted, so that was, you know, a little dicey at times. But I had people who would bring someone to me who was like, considering suicide, and you know —

SMITH: Because they were struggling with...

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah.

SMITH: ...trying to navigate being gay in the military.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: And so I took a few chances, you know, kind of like that. So people probably suspected or knew, which is why this, you know, story, you know, came to his attention, and he brought me in.

[50:00]

But then, fast-forward to Fort Rucker.

SMITH: Wait a minute.

MCKNIGHT: Okay.

SMITH: So there was an investigation?

MCKNIGHT: It wasn't by CID, the Criminal Investigative Division. It was just — he brought me into the office, said: I heard this.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: And I said: well, it's not true. And he said: well, don't let me hear it again, you know, and —

SMITH: That was it.

MCKNIGHT: So that was pretty much it.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: I don't know if it went in my record. I don't know. But I just — I kind of had that in the back of my head that, you know, this is one strike, or you know, something that could come up later.

SMITH: Any issues with the person that made the allegation? Did you ever —

MCKNIGHT: I never knew exactly who it was. I was pretty sure I knew who it was. It was a female. You know, I don't know. Yeah. I try not to dwell...

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: ...on that kind of stuff.

SMITH: On to Rucker.

MCKNIGHT: So on to Rucker. Great time. Again, especially at that time, being gay, you kind of hung out with gay people. But you were either in the military or out of the military. So I then had a person who was involved with a friend of my roommate's. Alright, that's complicated. [laughs] I had a roommate. We were just roommates. Okay. A female. She happened to be gay. I was gay. But we were just roommates. Her girlfriend had an ex-girlfriend who was, you know, kind of a little psycho and wrote a letter to the commanding general —

SMITH: All military? Are these all military?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, except the psycho girlfriend was not military.

SMITH: Was not. Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So she wrote a letter to the commanding general of the whole base and put it like, in his mailbox, saying, you know: these three captains are lesbians, and they're, you know — blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So —

SMITH: Still before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

MCKNIGHT: Still before "Don't Ask, Don't Tell."

SMITH: You could have gotten kicked out of the military.

MCKNIGHT: We happened to have a big party at my house during this weekend. And then the letter went in like, you know, the day or two after that. So I did get called in my CID, and they wanted to — you know, they — we all three got called in at different times, and you know, couldn't really talk to each other in between. They wanted to come over to my house, and they wanted to search, because they heard I had "lesbian paraphernalia," which I didn't know what that was. [laughs]

SMITH: What is that? Yeah. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Still not sure. Yeah, I was saying: no, thank you. You know. So it didn't go anywhere.

SMITH: So you refused the search.

MCKNIGHT: I did.

SMITH: And there was — there were no —

MCKNIGHT: Oh, I'm sorry.

SMITH: I'm sorry. No repercussions? What was the result of the investigation?

MCKNIGHT: No, but I mean — because they couldn't prove anything. It just so happened I met someone at that party. So I had been like, single for months, you know? [laughs] And you know, so I was like: oh, great. Right after I meet someone, now they're investigating me.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. It just so happens that I'm still with that person.

SMITH: Oh.

MCKNIGHT: 32 years later.

SMITH: Yeah, I see the ring, so — [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. [laughs] But yeah, that was — you know, that was just another, like, "I don't know what kind of future I have in the Army" moment.

SMITH: So the year is —

MCKNIGHT: 1988.

SMITH: '88 for this investigation.

MCKNIGHT: 1988.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Party was August 13.

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: So yeah, so it was shortly after that. So I went through the next year. I mean, I loved being an IP. That was — to this day, if I could go back and do any job, it would be that one. Yeah, I just really, really loved it. I taught tactics. So low-level, Nap-of-the-Earth flight with your maps out. No GPS, right? You're actually looking at a map. And yeah, it was great. It was great.

SMITH: How were you received by your students?

[55:00]

MCKNIGHT: I think fine. Yeah, you know, I never — I never really thought about it.

SMITH: Well, that's good.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: I just have to ask. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: I know. I know.

SMITH: Because —

MCKNIGHT: It's like, I never thought like, ooh, I'm the only — not ever. I mean, occasionally...

SMITH: Sure.

MCKNIGHT: ...you know, I'd be like, okay. And then sometimes, if people are not reacting to you well, it's like: do they just not like me? Is it because I'm a female? Is it because I'm this? That? You know, a Californian? You know, whatever. Yeah. So anyway, I really was — have been lucky in not having a lot of negative kind of vibes from people. Yeah.

SMITH: So you make this decision that — a couple of years later.

MCKNIGHT: So yeah. After that, I looked, and I'm like: well, I'm not supposed to be an aviator anyway, and they're going to send me to all these assignments that aren't really flying. And I think the straw that broke the camel's back is I had the results of a Pap smear that were bad that — it was from a year ago.

SMITH: What?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Exactly. I was like: alright. Army is not for me [laughs] right now.

SMITH: Oh. Wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. It was just kind of — that was just — I heard that, and I was just like: alright, forget this. We've got to start looking for other things.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: I actually called the Air Force, and they weren't looking for anybody. So then I found out about the Coast Guard. I kind of had that — oh, yeah, there's that Coast Guard program. I actually had to resign my commission. This was a little scary. I had to resign my commission before applying to the Coast Guard.

SMITH: And this is — you're like, seven years in?

MCKNIGHT: Six. Six years in.

SMITH: Six.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. But I got accepted to the Coast Guard.

SMITH: And this might be a good place to take a break.

MCKNIGHT: Yes, it would. [laughs]

SMITH: And then we'll start with your Coast Guard career when we come back.

MCKNIGHT: Okay.

[TAPE PAUSED]

MCKNIGHT: The red light is on. [laughs]

SMITH: So before the break, we were talking about your decision to leave the Army and go into the Coast Guard.

MCKNIGHT: Into the Coast Guard.

SMITH: And you were — you applied for the Direct Commission Program?

MCKNIGHT: Mm hmm.

SMITH: So tell me about that. What does that mean?

MCKNIGHT: So like I said, the Coast Guard gets about almost half their pilots from the other services. A lot from the Army, because the Coast Guard flies a lot of helicopters. It's just a, you know, good old drill — paperwork drill, but part of the process is having to do an interview, a face-to-face interview with a panel of Coast Guard officers.

SMITH: Where did you do that?

MCKNIGHT: I did that — so I was at Fort Rucker in Ozark, Alabama. I went to the Aviation Training Center in Mobile, Alabama. So I'll tell you just a quick little funny story, okay? Army uniforms — the Army green uniforms, whatever they — Class Bravos, or whatever they're called — you know, that green shirt?

SMITH: Fatigue, and olive drab—

MCKNIGHT: No, no, no, no. This is like in the office uniform.

SMITH: Oh, yes. Right.

MCKNIGHT: Where you've got your green pants, and you've got your, you know, green shirt. Well, like most of the women's clothes, you know, you can't move — you get the size, and you can't move your arms, right? So I hardly ever wore that uniform. So I bought like a size 18, just so I could move my arms, you know? I usually wore a sweater over it or something like that, if I was in the office. So I've got to wear this uniform to my interview, right? Mobile, Alabama, in the middle of the summer. I have two choices: I can put on my black sweater, and they're going to think, not only will I probably pass out, but they're going to be — what is her problem, right? Or — and I've got this shirt that's all baggy. So I took two pairs of tube socks [laughs] and I had a pretty big shirt. Let's just put it that way.

SMITH: That is hilarious.

MCKNIGHT: Because it was size 18, you know? I did the whole interview like that, so —

SMITH: You borrow somebody's bra? I mean —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah, and —

SMITH: [laughs] That's hilarious.

MCKNIGHT: Matter of fact, it was my roommate's bra, because — yeah. And so I don't know if I got accepted to the Coast Guard on merit, or... [laughs]

SMITH: On appearance. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: ...on appearance.

SMITH: But you were accepted.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: But I was accepted.

SMITH: How did they notify you? Just call, a letter, or something?

MCKNIGHT: Probably.

[1:00:00]

SMITH: And then what was next?

MCKNIGHT: I think it probably was a call. Yeah, so — okay, so they said: you're accepted. It's going to be — my date out of the Army was September 30, so — and I didn't want to have a break in service, so I could just — I had

to swear in on that date. I could swear in anywhere. So first of all, I'm out-processing at Fort Rucker. This was in 1990, so what's going on in 1990?

SMITH: Desert Storm.¹⁵

MCKNIGHT: Desert Storm.

SMITH: Well, the build-up.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Since August.

MCKNIGHT: So I was out-processing with another guy, who was getting out like, three days after me. And he got yanked back in. I just missed the — you know, they put that line in the sand, and I was just, you know — so

SMITH: Line in the sand. Very good. [laughs] Sorry.

MCKNIGHT: [laughs] Yeah. So you know, a lot of people got sucked back in and couldn't get out for at least a year or so. I wouldn't have gone to Desert Storm. I would have probably stayed there at Rucker and just taught flight school and sent people on. But — so in my DCA class, which started that October, there were — all of us had just come out of the Marines, the Navy, you know, the Air Force, the Army. And we all felt like guilty, kind of, you know? I mean, here — everything we've trained to do was now happening, and now we're like, in this little Coast Guard thing. So that was kind of weird, but we all had that, you know, common feeling to talk about.

SMITH: DCA stands for Direct Commission —

MCKNIGHT: Aviator.

SMITH: Aviator. Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Alright. And then tell me about Mobile. How was the training? What aircraft did you fly?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, so when I was accepted in, they told me the aircraft. They actually asked me where I wanted to go, and what aircraft I wanted to fly. Yeah. I know. The Army didn't do that. [laughs] I didn't have a choice of anywhere, but I had some choice. And I said I wanted to fly the 65, which is the smaller aircraft, because it was at a lot more air stations than the Blackhawk. You would think: oh, I might finally get to fly the Blackhawk, you know, but to me, it was more about location. The Blackhawk was only at like, seven air stations, and the 65 was like, at 15 or so. So I chose the 65, and I chose North Bend, Oregon. So it was on the Oregon coast. And got to my unit, settled in a little bit, and then they sent me back to Mobile for my transition course. I think it was three weeks long. Some of the guys I'd just gone through the four-week sort of knife-and-fork school with in Yorktown were also at that training. And it was great. It was just learning to fly a new aircraft. It was kind of — I think of — you know, if the TH-55 is a lawnmower, then the Huey was kind of like a VW Bug, and then the 65 was like a Ferrari or something. All these gauges. I remember looking in the first time at that thing and thinking: wow, am I ever going to know what all those things are? You know, it just seemed so overwhelming. But —

SMITH: Speed —

MCKNIGHT: Three weeks, and they tell you what they all are. [laughs]

¹⁵ Desert Shield started in Aug 1990; it was the build-up to what became Desert Storm in Jan 1991.

SMITH: Which one was easiest to hover, then easiest to fly?

MCKNIGHT: Well, the 65 had some automation on it, so you could actually couple it up and take your hands off.¹⁶ You couldn't do that in the Huey or the TH-55. The TH-55 is just fun, you know? The Huey was pretty fun, too. Well, they were all fun. [laughs] They really were. Yeah. The 65 was a great helicopter though, especially for the mission you had to do, flying in bad weather, landing on ships. It had wheels and gear that came up as opposed to skids, so that was quite different.

SMITH: What was —

MCKNIGHT: And it — because it was made in France, instead of rotating this way, it rotated that way, or — and vice-versa.

SMITH: Did that impact anything?

MCKNIGHT: Hm?

SMITH: Did that impact anything? What did you notice about the change in rotation?

MCKNIGHT: Well, because you've got to — when you're pulling power, you've got to put in, you know, the opposite pedal. You know, so that was a little — took a little getting used to. It was just counter-intuitive to what, you know — what I'd been used to.

[1:05:00]

But you know, if the nose starts going one way, you just do whatever you have to do to make it go the other way. Yeah. So North Bend was a great unit. I got to go on one deployment. Alright, so I was the second woman at North Bend. I don't think I'm the first of anything. [laughs] I'm second of a lot of things, mainly because I kept following this other woman around.

SMITH: Who was that?

MCKNIGHT: Alda Siebrands.¹⁷ She was also former Army. Yeah. She was great. And we went to a lot of the same places. But she was a very good aviator, very professional, very great person to follow, you know? It's always nice to follow somebody good, and she was very, very good. So — but there had not been a female at the unit for at least a year, so — and I did feel a little — when I first came in, because we stood duty, you know, every few days, and we'd sleep overnight at the station, right? And they couldn't put the women in with — right where the guys were sleeping, so they had to make a separate room for me, which encroached on the enlisted chief's storage room, and they weren't — I could tell they weren't happy, because they left like, a giant turd in the toilet, you know? I mean, the little things like that, just [laughs] little passive-aggressive stuff. But that was just a minor blip. It was a good unit. It was — coming in as an aviator with a lot of flight experience, but I didn't have the Coast Guard experience. So a common thing for DCAs is like, I should be the aircraft commander. You know, I'm ready. I've got all this time. I know how to fly. But you don't know how to do the mission, and you do have to take the time to learn how to do that.

¹⁶ Couple means to connect the aircraft controls to the auto-pilot.

¹⁷ Alda Siebrands was from George, IA. Her name is misspelled in the third article. Accessed Nov 24 and Dec 9, 2019, <https://medium.com/@ABorderLife/shes-got-grit-leadership-with-retired-coast-guard-commander-alda-siebrands-feb06f9b8db5>; <http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=19941112&slug=1941389>; <https://www.blueplanettimes.com/under-sail-on-the-eagleall-22000-square-feet-of-it/>.

SMITH: What was the mission?

MCKNIGHT: So the mission is a lot of search and rescue, and on the Oregon coast, that was fishing vessels. That was — we also had — because there's a lot of logging in that area, a lot of what we call "inland SAR," so we would go — and unfortunately, loggers who would have a mishap with a — you know —

SMITH: Chainsaw?

MCKNIGHT: Thank you. Chainsaw, yeah. [laughs] Had a couple of those. We would do fisheries enforcement, so make sure that the fishing boats are fishing in the right area, not overfishing in areas. We would do port — I don't even think it was called "port security" at that time. After 9/11, it was called port security. It was mostly marine environmental protection. So we'd be looking for any oil spills, you know, just kind of standing watch over our area, and —

SMITH: What's an encounter with a fisherman, you know, overstepping his bounds, but he was fishing for his livelihood? How does that encounter go?

MCKNIGHT: Well, it goes just fine for us, because we don't have to talk to him.

SMITH: Oh, don't. You just...

MCKNIGHT: No.

SMITH: ...report it.

MCKNIGHT: No, we're not like: you, fishing! [laughs] You know, step away. No. We write it down, and then if there's a cutter out there, they'll go and they'll board certain vessels, and we let them know who to board.

SMITH: Tell me about some of your search and rescue missions. Any recoveries that you —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Yeah. We had — I mean, there's a couple that stand out. One fishing vessel had gone down way offshore. They have an ELT — you know, a locator beacon. We were able to finally home in on it. By the time we got out there, these three guys were in a raft that was half-filled with water. And there were definitely sharks all around them. So they were, needless to say, very happy to get inside that helicopter. Yeah. It's amazing though, just looking down and just seeing a boat just, you know, going down or whatever. It's — yeah. The ocean is — I have great respect for the ocean. Yeah.

SMITH: Tell me about the crew of the 65.

MCKNIGHT: So that's one thing I really love about the 65, is it's such a small cabin that we are a crew together. There's a four-person crew: two pilots, a flight mech, who is sitting in the seat right between us, basically. He's, you know,

[1:10:00]

just behind the pilot seats, but he's on a rail that he can slide back and forth. Not only does he or she work on the aircraft and do the maintenance on it, but then when it's time to go, they also run the hoist and operate the hoist. And then we normally flew with a rescue swimmer, so that person would get hoisted down and, you know, either put people into the basket or, you know, help out the people who get themselves in a bit of a bad situation.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: One case that we did have down there, I'll talk about really quickly, is — because it turned into kind of a landmark case in a way, because it changed the way that we did some of our procedures with the rescue

swimmer. We had a hiker that had climbed up Humbug Mountain, I think it was. Got, you know, 150 feet up, and you know, couldn't go up, couldn't go down. It was like, stuck there. So we got called, we got there, and we see this guy on the cliff, and we're like: I don't know. You know? What do we do? So we all talked about it, and the rescue swimmer, Patrick Chick. He said: we all decided we were going to put him out. He would get over to the guy. We would back off, and then we would come over with the basket, he'd get him in the basket, and we'd, you know, hoist him down. Well, we put Patrick on the side of the hill, backed off, and as soon as we did, we all three were like: oh, my God. Now we have two people to rescue. Yeah, it was bad, because you — I mean, the stuff was crumbling, you know. He was doing a great job. He told the guy, just — you know, we've got it. And he was explaining to him what to do. And we also didn't have comms with the swimmer at that time. So we moved in, put the basket down, and when it got close, the guy panicked and jumped for the basket.

SMITH: Oh, no.

MCKNIGHT: Patrick got knocked off and went like a ragdoll, 150 feet down the cliff.¹⁸ There's a videotape of it, too. Yeah. It was — I'm so glad I couldn't see that from where I was sitting. I can still hear the flight mech saying: man down. Man down. Sorry.

SMITH: Don't be sorry. That was your crewmate.

MCKNIGHT: Don't know where that came from. Anyway, the guy — the mech did a great job. He was able to pay out slack, so the guy holding onto the basket just kind of rappelled down the mountain. We medevac'd the crewman out. He ended up being okay, but yeah. Every time I —

SMITH: Terrifying moments.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. It was. Because of that, they changed the way that we do cliff rescues, and they completely redid it. The swimmer now stays attached to the aircraft. They have all sorts of hand signals and different ways of doing it. They have a whole rescue swimmer — Advanced Rescue Swimmer School that you can go to now down in Astoria, and I was able to go to that, also.

SMITH: Were you involved in any of the creation of some of those procedures?

MCKNIGHT: No, not really. I was junior — you know, I was a brand new lieutenant JG. But I'm sure they came up with that at Headquarters, you know, in the safety office. But yeah, that got a lot of people's attention — and that we couldn't put our swimmers in that situation.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So you were in the left seat? Or were you — you were in the right seat.

MCKNIGHT: I was in the — no, no. The right seat in the helicopter is the pilot in command, and yeah, that was Rick Gromlich,¹⁹ who went on to be an admiral. But yeah. It was a good crew. Just an unfortunate situation.

SMITH: But fortunately, everyone survived.

¹⁸ A video of the rescue is available on [YouTube](#).

¹⁹ Richard T. Gromlich retired from the USCG in 2016 after serving as the Commander, USCG District Thirteen. Accessed Nov 24, 2019, <https://www.idb.org/team-member/rear-admiral-richard-t-gromlich-uscg-ret/>; <https://www.dcms.uscg.mil/Portals/10/DOL/BaseSeattle/HSWL/WelcomeAboardDigital.pdf?ver=2017-03-24-184858-517>.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, definitely.

SMITH: So that's the most important thing.

MCKNIGHT: Definitely.

SMITH: So was that — let's see. You had a deployment to Alaska during that time...

MCKNIGHT: I did.

SMITH: ...in September of '92.

MCKNIGHT: I did, yeah.

SMITH: Did you want to mention —

MCKNIGHT: It was a — like I said, not — it was hard to get on a deployment as a female, because most of these little ships, that was a 210-foot patrol boat.²⁰ I don't know. It's not called a — it's a cutter. I don't remember what class.

SMITH: That's okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, sorry. [laughs]

SMITH: Do you pilot a cutter?

[1:15:00]

No, so—

MCKNIGHT: No, but I should know what it is.

SMITH: Yeah, but you're not in anymore.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, I know. But anyway, that one had berthing for another female, because they had a female officer on board, so I, you know, racked with her in the room. And it was great. We got to fly up there, and just that was incredible in and of itself, flying all the way up the Oregon and Alaska coast. We got on in Kodiak, went out the Aleutian chain. We did have a medevac early one morning that we had to do, and it — the Bering Sea gets pretty — can get pretty rocking and rolling sometimes. As a matter of fact, we weren't able to land back on the ship after that medevac for a couple days, because it was just too rough. We couldn't — they weren't within limits for landing.

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, which didn't break my heart too much, but [laughs] yeah, so that was a really good experience. I did upgrade to Aircraft First Pilot then Aircraft Commander there. And I applied — in the Coast Guard, you know, you've got a few career tracks. They don't have branches like the Army does, but you can either go Operations, you can go Safety, or you can go Engineering. I applied for Engineering, and that's basically like a maintenance officer — and kind of a competitive program. Again, I don't remember if I was an alternate or whatever. I was number 10. I made the list. [laughs] You know?

SMITH: Right.

²⁰ USCG Medium Endurance Cutter (WMEC) 210-foot Reliance-class cutters.

MCKNIGHT: That's all that matters. And so that's kind of a year of — well, it's not kind of a year. It's a year of on-the-job training, pretty much. So you — some people stayed at the unit they were at. I happened to go to Mobile, to the training center in Mobile, and was assigned to the Engineering department. And I went to several classes. They had classes at the — Coast Guard does most of its maintenance, including depot-level maintenance, where they strip the whole aircraft down and redo everything, from engines to air frame, painting, I mean, wiring, everything gets redone. And that's in Elizabeth City, North Carolina. So we had classes down there. There were 10 of us — maybe 10 of us in that engineering class. Maybe 12. And Patti McFetridge²¹ was in that class. That's where we met.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So we were engineering buddies. Yeah.

SMITH: How did you pick engineering?

MCKNIGHT: Because I wanted to — I really liked being with the guys on the hangar deck. You know? It's really what it was about. In Operations, you get to be the ops boss. You get to make the calls on whether to launch, and you know, you get to run the flight program. It's a great job, but you're not working with the guys — directly with the guys on the hangar deck. And I just enjoyed that. Plus, you get to do all the test flights and everything. You get to fly alone. You know, the 65 is — we fly it probably 90 percent of the time with two pilots, but it is a single-pilot aircraft. So the days when you can go out and fly it alone is usually pretty fun.

SMITH: And the test flights were solos.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, the test flights were almost always alone. Yeah, you'd put a mech²² in the other seat and go out and do track and balance or, you know, whatever they had to test out. Just do it. Let them fly a little bit, too.

SMITH: Okay, we talked about Humbug Mountain. And tell me anything else about the '90 to '95 North Bend, Oregon that you want to include before we move on. Well, we're already in Engineering.

MCKNIGHT: We are.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: But I'll just — one little tie-back to the whole little gay story, okay... [laughs]

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: ...is —

SMITH: It's not the "little gay story," I mean, this is your life.

MCKNIGHT: Okay.

SMITH: So you know, I don't want you to feel like you need to apologize for bringing this. It's perfect.

MCKNIGHT: Okay. Alright. Which — it's a big gay story then. [laughs] Carrie, who's now my wife, and was my — I met at that party, and you know, we've been together ever since — in North Bend, we came up with the bright idea to say that we were sisters. Because in Alabama, everyone kept saying: are y'all sisters? You know, just because we both had blonde hair or light-colored hair. We really don't look that much alike. But close enough.

²¹ CAPT Patricia A. McFetridge, MWAOHI Interviewee No. 7.

²² Mechanic.

SMITH: And now, we're into "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." Almost?

MCKNIGHT: We are, because that was —

[1:20:00]

SMITH: Like, after Desert—in the 90s —

MCKNIGHT: '90, wasn't it? '91? Or, yeah.

SMITH: I don't remember if that was General Powell's —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: --guidance. CJCS Directive...

MCKNIGHT: Anyway, the whole gay thing in the Coast Guard was way more low-key. I never had anybody — it just like, didn't come up, really. You know, all these air stations — not all of them, but most of the ones I was at — were very small. We had a ward room of 20 pilots at the most.

SMITH: What's a "ward room"?

MCKNIGHT: [laughs] Okay. It's — now I'm into the Naval nomenclature. That's where the officers — in this case, pilots — hang out. It's just a collection of pilots. I think if you go on an aircraft carrier, they talk about the ward room.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: So we had I think maybe 18 pilots, so it's a pretty small unit, is what I'm saying. On the hangar deck, there was probably 40, maybe 50, people. Mechanics. We had five aircraft. That sounds about right. Yeah. All I'm going to say is: don't fact-check me. [laughs] Or do fact-check me, alright? Because half of these facts are probably wrong.

SMITH: It's a historian's job.

MCKNIGHT: Historian's job.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: Okay. Quickly then. So we went — we said we were sisters, which actually worked out great, because she was allowed — everybody loved her, and she was allowed to come to a lot of the functions, and so we had a great time. You know, it wasn't — I didn't have to hide anything. It was just like: yeah, that's my sister. Yeah, she's going to live with me while I'm here. You know?

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: So I'll continue that thread as we...

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: ...move along.

SMITH: Okay. So tell me about — there's a picture here on a deployment where you are...

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: ...really — well, this one —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So...

SMITH: Was that before?

MCKNIGHT: ...I went to Mobile to do my engineering, and that's also where the Polar Operations Division was...

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: ...located, even though they deploy on the polar ice breakers, which are stationed in Seattle, Washington, that — the Aviation detachment is out of Mobile, Alabama.

SMITH: Okay. So describe what's in the photo, because I can't see.

MCKNIGHT: So during that tour — it's a two-year tour — it's considered a hardship tour. You normally do two deployments, and generally they — in the summertime, they go up to the Arctic, and they do two- to three-month deployment. They take scientists from the National Science Foundation and do all kinds of different science experiments up there. And the ice breaker is able to break through the ice and get way up past the — I guess that's the Arctic Circle, 60 degrees latitude.²³

SMITH: 70.

MCKNIGHT: 70? Okay, whatever. [laughs] I told you my facts weren't good.

SMITH: [laughs] It's okay. I think I remember that one, but —

MCKNIGHT: Okay. Well, I did the crossing ceremony, wherever it was, I did it. And then they also go down to Antarctica during the — our winter, which is their summer...

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: ...which is in — we went, I think, from October to April, somewhere around in there.

SMITH: How did they compare?

MCKNIGHT: Boy. Both awesome. If I could go back to one, I'd go back to Antarctica. Yeah, because that was just like, really, really awesome.

SMITH: How was the flying in each location?

MCKNIGHT: Awesome. [laughs] So —

SMITH: In what way? Weather-wise—

MCKNIGHT: So I'm going to tell you — so flying helicopters in the Army and in the Coast Guard, we're down low a lot, right? I know if you're flying for the news or something, you're probably up a little higher, but lots of times, we are down searching really low. It can be foggy, overcast, whatever. You can get into a lot of not-so-fun situations where you're almost IMC, but you're not quite in the clouds, and things can pop up out of nowhere, like towers and wires and things that will reach out and get you. And you're constantly, you know — you get in that kind of weather, at least for me, my adrenaline goes up, and you know, I'm just hoping that one of those things doesn't pop up. When I went to the Arctic, we were out flying one

²³ 66°34'N, <https://nsidc.org/cryosphere/arctic-meteorology/arctic.html>.

[1:25:00]

time. The fog just rolled in. I was fine. There's nothing to run into. There's no other aircraft. There's nothing.

SMITH: That's true.

MCKNIGHT: And I was just like: oh, my God. I'm flying in the clouds. And I'm fine, you know? [laughs] Yeah. One time — that one time that we actually did go in the clouds, I mean, we couldn't see a thing. We had to find the ship on radar and just shoot a manual approach, just to a hover, like...

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: ...50 feet right behind the ship. And they were like, you know: okay, there it is, you know, and then we just went in and just, you know, set down on it. But yeah, it — but —

SMITH: Any issues with, you know, having such a white field, low visibility wise, or the horizon blending in —

MCKNIGHT: It can be. It can be. You've got to make sure when you take off that you normally just lift straight up and go, because you can get into a whiteout situation. And same with landing, if you can. You've just got to either just bring it right down or outrun the cloud that's coming up behind you. But that's why the flight mech is there with the door open, saying: the cloud's at your tail. The clouds are coming up. Like, you'd better set it down or take off. And so we flew with skis. Of course, it's just ice up there. I know it's not as much ice now as there used to be.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: But we would — anytime we set down, we would just sit down very light on the skids, and the flight mech would get out, and he had a big like, corkscrew kind of thing. And he'd see how thick the ice was, and it had to be — another one of my facts here — 12 inches. I don't know. 10, 12, somewhere around there — to know that we could set down and not worry about, you know, having it, you know, break through.

SMITH: So he did that after you landed, or as you're hovering?

MCKNIGHT: No, we would be — just light. We were very light, yeah.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: And because we'd set down, and he'd go to do this and punch right through, and we'd be like: oh, no, no, no, no. You know, [laughs] over here. And then in this picture, we had to — before we left Mobile, we had to qualify with this giant — I don't know what, millimeter or magnum, or whatever it was — but it was big, and it was for polar bears. Because we could see polar bears, flying around. They were definitely —

SMITH: You're talking about the weapon.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, the weapon. Yeah.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: So while the scientists did their thing, drilling ice cores and you know, taking samples — they were looking for dirty ice from Russia, I think — we had to stand watch for polar bears. I honestly don't know what I would have done if I saw a polar bear.

SMITH: That was my next question. Did you see one? But apparently not.

MCKNIGHT: Not that close.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: And that was again the H-65?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, H-65. Yeah.

SMITH: So then you — oh, I didn't mean to interrupt.

MCKNIGHT: No, no, no. Came back, and I was home for about a year. And then I adopted my first child, and just a few months after adopting her, then I had to leave for like five months, which really sucked. But you know, that's part of the deal. And that deployment was to Antarctica.

SMITH: That was a five-month deployment?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. You know, what I found deploying is that leading up to it is like, way worse than the actual deployment, you know? [whines] You know? And the second you fly away, it's like: oh. [laughs] This is awesome, you know? So yeah, we — part of the fun thing is you're stationed in Alabama, and you have to go cross-country all the way out to Seattle. So this is the best kind of cross-country trip you can do, I think, you know, in a helicopter, because we're — half the time, we were down around 500 feet, just flying over the desert or whatever. You can only go two hours in this thing, so you've got to stop, fuel up, go to the bathroom. You know, we'd hop from place to place. And so getting there was half the fun.

SMITH: And how did you get to Antarctica?

MCKNIGHT: So then you get on the polar ice breaker. In this case, it was the *Polar Star*. And the first thing they do is go to Hawaii, because they're doing their REFTRA,²⁴ which is their — all their drills, and they get graded by — I think Navy comes on and grades them on all these things they have to do. It takes like, a week. Well, we don't have any part in that, so —

[1:30:00]

SMITH: [laughs] Hello, Waikiki.

MCKNIGHT: Hello, Waikiki. Yeah. We actually did morale flights, where we'd take some of the crew and just fly them around Hawaii...

SMITH: Nice.

MCKNIGHT: ...around the island. So yeah, that was really great. Then you go down to Australia. We had a port call in Sydney. Awesome. And then we'd go to Hobart, Tasmania, to resupply. That's where the ship resupplies. And then — so the mission of the icebreaker is to break a channel into McMurdo Station²⁵ so that the resupply ships can come in there. And I think I read this year they broke through 16 miles of ice. I think when we were there, it was more like 39.

²⁴ Refresher Training.

²⁵ Established in 1955, McMurdo Station is the logistics hub of the U.S. Antarctic Program. Accessed 12/2/2019, <https://www.nsf.gov/geo/opp/support/mcmurdo.jsp>.

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. But that would be another fact to check. But also had scientists. As we got closer to McMurdo, we actually then started doing some flights. And you know, we actually did — because you can't go that long without doing, you know, landings. So we had to do it at night, too. That's not fun. Out in the middle of the ocean, pitch black, no horizon, no goggles. We didn't have goggles at that time. And we actually took people on morale flights for that. Yeah. And we're — you know, it's like we're landing on this thing, and I'm like leaning — I'm like, leaning this way, because I'm afraid we're going to tip over, you know. Which, that does no good, but you know — and these people in the back are like: oh, that was awesome. You know — [laughs] both the pilots are getting out, going: whew, I hope we don't have to do that again.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: You know?

SMITH: What were they thinking?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. I also got to fly around — so the ship crossed right at the Prime Meridian and the Equator. Yeah, and we got to do a flight there, too. It was really crazy to see the compass was like: where am I, you know?

SMITH: So this picture, you're at the —

MCKNIGHT: So, yeah.

SMITH: South Pole?

MCKNIGHT: So you get — once the ship breaks in, the flight crew gets off, and while the ship is doing their ship duties for a couple months, the AvDet is actually stationed on McMurdo for two months. So we were there. There's no hangar. We had two pads out there, and we had like a maintenance — one of those big, giant boxes on the back of a truck, you know — it's just with a little heater in it, and all of the tools and paperwork and everything. I was the engineering officer, so you know, I was still responsible for the maintenance and everything.

SMITH: You said "AvDet." Is that —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So there was four pilots, two aircraft, and I think we had 10 guys.

SMITH: Is that a detachment? An aviation detachment?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, aviation detachment.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: That's alright.

MCKNIGHT: Sorry.

SMITH: That's alright.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, and so we were there in McMurdo for almost two months, and just doing flights. And the best flight of my life was actually down there. I flew — I was single-pilot. I flew for seven and a half hours...

SMITH: What?

MCKNIGHT: ...that day. I did all kinds of missions.

SMITH: How many sorties was that?

MCKNIGHT: I —

SMITH: More than two?

MCKNIGHT: I'm trying to think if I actually went to the bathroom or not.

SMITH: [laughs] That's why I was — that is why I was asking.

MCKNIGHT: I don't think I did. But I just — I was probably — because I hot-refueled. I don't know how many sorties there were. We were flying all over. Flying scientists here, out to the — dropping off people at the refueling station over here. We drove — we flew all through the dry valleys, which are just incredible. It's just barren mountains with glaciers coming down the center of them. Yeah. It's just unbelievable. You know, at this time, we barely had GPS. We had a handheld GPS. So, GPS was just coming on, right? We'd stick it in the — you know, in the wind screen, and hopefully get some satellites, because the compasses at that area were like, 60 degrees off or whatever, just totally crazy. Most of the time, you could see where you were going, but if the weather did come in, you know, that was bad. Which is why you had to go to Arctic Survival School before you had this assignment.

SMITH: It makes sense. This is May through July of '96? Is that correct?

MCKNIGHT: That was the Arctic West Summer.

SMITH: That's the Arctic. Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Deep Freeze, '98 was October through February.

SMITH: Got it. October '97 through February '98.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Wow. That's fantastic. Anything else about that deployment that you want to share?

MCKNIGHT: Just that it was so awesome. If I couldn't go back to being IP, I'd go back and do that. You know? I mean, it's just — the things you get to see, you know — I've had — I thought about this the other night. I've had like six flights where I thought I might die. You know? Like, just scary flights where you're like: wow, glad to be on the ground. You know? Other than that, it's fun.

SMITH: So let's pick a couple of those, at least. Sorry to take you back there, but since you brought it up —

MCKNIGHT: [laughs] I'm going to start crying again. No.

SMITH: Oh, well, we have tissues. [laughs] We can pause.

MCKNIGHT: I had one — actually, I had two on that Alaska deployment.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Going home from Kodiak, we decided instead of flying along the chain and sticking along the land that we would just fly right across the Bering Sea, which was — I mean, we checked weather and everything, but you know, we got like partway there, and we were at maybe 1,000 feet, and we were taking on ice. Like, pretty serious ice. We dropped down. We couldn't talk to anybody.

SMITH: Wait a minute. What kind of anti-icing?

MCKNIGHT: We had pitot-tube anti-icing and windscreen anti-icing. No anti-icing on the blades or anything like that. Yeah. You know, and you could see it building up. You know, and here we are, down a couple hundred feet, off the seas, which are, you know, these — big, gray, mass just doing this. Just looks like: I don't want to be down there. You know?

SMITH: Tell me what the controls felt like as you were taking on ice, like —

MCKNIGHT: So I wasn't flying. The aircraft commander was flying, and this person started yelling at everyone. It was the most tense cockpit I've ever been in, ever. Because I have to say, he was really just kind of losing it, which was not giving the rest of us, you know, much confidence. We finally got ahold of a C-130. We were calling Mayday, really, because we couldn't tell where we were. We needed a steer towards something, you know?²⁶ We just — we couldn't — because we were so low, we weren't picking up anything.

SMITH: Were you in the clouds? Were you —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, and we were just below the clouds, you know, but we were down at like, 200 feet. So thankfully, we got ahold of this C-130. He was relaying from ATC. They couldn't see us on radar — anything — they were hopefully — but we were kind of dead reckoning towards Seward. And it was so foggy, but we were starting finally to paint it on radar. And we were going probably 30, 40 knots, just going super slow. The guys had the doors open. There was one on each side, and we were saying: alright, there should be a rock, you know. Because these blips, you don't know. Are they little blips, or tall blips, or what is it? You know, so they'd say: okay, I see that one up on the right, you know? Okay. Well, I see that one. You know? And then — and what you're coming into on the coast of Alaska there is just like a — you know, big mountain. It's not, you know — so we came in and just set that sucker down, and all got out, and we're very happy. And then those three guys had decided to do another leg. [laughs] I know. I was like: are you kidding me? So that was really probably my worst flight ever. The other ones weren't — the other one was actually going up there. It was just — you know, up in Alaska — I tell you, these people that fly up there, my hat's off to them, because it's crap weather and you know, we had — we were going in somewhere. Port Hardy, I think it was. And all they had was an NDB, you know.²⁷ And you know, you think you're on the needle, and then all of a sudden, it goes over this way. And oh, [laughs] what was that? And I'm looking on the approach plate. We're in the clouds. You know, we're getting low on fuel, so we have to shoot this NDB. I mean, we have to make it in there. But there's mountains everywhere. And we are lower than the minimum descent altitude, in the clouds. And I'm just like, you know — I don't know, to this day, if we came

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within 50 feet of hitting something, or you know, never got close. I don't know. But it was, you know —

SMITH: Harrowing.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. It was — yeah, so those few days are not the kind you want to repeat.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: But generally, they're very satisfying and fun.

SMITH: Wow. Well, thank you for sharing those missions. Sorry to take you back there.

MCKNIGHT: No, no.

²⁶ They needed someone to give them a heading to follow, a steer.

²⁷ A non-directional beacon is an inexpensive navigational aid that emits an imprecise 360-degree radio signal to craft with compatible equipment.

SMITH: But I felt it was good...

MCKNIGHT: It was fine.

SMITH: ...to have in your record too —

MCKNIGHT: Okay, so we did that. I think we can wrap this up here. [laughs] I'll try and move it on a little longer.

SMITH: Yeah. No, no. I was just going to say: did you want to talk about any of the medevacs? Or, you already talked about your best flight ever at the South Pole. And then we can move onto your Port Angeles [missions?]

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So, leaving that assignment, I got an engineering officer job, which was good as an O-3, as a lieutenant. Excuse me. Smaller air station, and then they had no assistant, so it was just — I had three aircraft and, I think, 32 or 38 guys on the hangar deck. And it was a great unit, there in Port Angeles, Washington, where the whole Puget Sound is your area that you're responsible for. So just a beautiful area to fly in, a great ward room of people, great group of guys. Okay. I'm thinking about the women I've been stationed with. I should have said at North Bend, I was the only female for three years. And then finally, Polly Bartz showed up. And we — you know, we just hit it off like this. So we had a — we just had a blast being there together. We had a lot of fun. So she's been a really great person for me to have as a friend in my career. In POPDIV, I was the only female for both those deployments. But Alda Siebrands, who I mentioned before, had been to Antarctica before me, so I wasn't the first woman there. [laughs] Then —

SMITH: "POPDIV" is the —

MCKNIGHT: POPDIV. Polar operations division.

SMITH: Okay.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. Then at Port Angeles — gosh, I cannot think right now. Who was there? That's awful. I know somebody was there. There had to be another woman there. Well —

SMITH: Not the only one. [laughs] You don't have to remember all of this. Just, if you — if it comes to —

MCKNIGHT: It's shocking how much I don't remember though.

SMITH: If it comes to you, great.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: But tell me about Central America deployment during that time.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. So we went on the Coast Guard cutter *Mellon*. Once again, got to actually fly down and — where did we meet them? We met them — we didn't meet them up in Seattle. We met them somewhere south. So we got to fly down at least to L.A., I think, before hopping on. The mission down there is drug interdiction. And so the cutter goes down off of Central America, and then the — they launch the helo whenever they want, a couple times a day sometimes. And we go out and fly. Either they send us in a certain direction they want us to go, or we'll fly a radius around the ship. And any — you know, we're just looking for targets, and especially fast-moving targets. So if you see any kind of wake or anything, we go. If we spot anything, you know, we radio it back to the ship, and then they start heading at, you know, 10 knots, [laughs] in that direction. But they did do some good boardings where they, you know, did get some contraband. It's just fun. I really enjoyed deploying. That's another reason I'm really glad I went with the 65. The 60, they tried deploying it for a while, on a few of the cutters — the larger cutters, but I'm pretty sure that didn't last that long.

SMITH: That's a big craft. You know, it's a huge craft.

MCKNIGHT: It's a bigger aircraft. That whole community just wasn't really into the whole ship board thing.

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I think I left with about nine months of sea time.²⁸ And I just enjoyed it. I like being on a ship, which is surprising to me, because I was always kind of afraid of the ocean growing up. I didn't think I'd want to be out there in the middle of the ocean like that, but the things you get to do. I mean, when they'll have — on the weekend, like on Sunday, they have the steel beach, where everyone puts their towels out and... [laughs]

SMITH: Suns on the deck.

MCKNIGHT: Suns. And then if they have a swim call, the ship actually stops. They'll put out the small boat to be on shark patrol. There are a couple guys out there with, you know, guns who can, if they need to, you know, get a shark. And then people are just jumping off the side of the ship and climbing up the ladder, you know? And being a little bobbing head, you know, looking up at that giant thing is pretty interesting. Yeah.

SMITH: Yeah.

MCKNIGHT: But that's —

SMITH: I didn't know that happened. That's so cool. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: Oh, it's fun. And it's a great way to come into a city, too. I'll never forget coming into Sydney like that. It's just like — and then you just park right there, you know, and like the Opera House was right there. It was just a — it's a fun way to travel.

SMITH: How long did you spend in Sydney?

MCKNIGHT: I think we were there five days. Yeah.

SMITH: That's a good amount of time. That's cool. So after —

MCKNIGHT: So I'm in Port Angeles, right?

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: I did that deployment.

SMITH: And I see port calls in Guatemala, Nicaragua, some night-boat operations in Marshall? Where's that?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. That was one of my almost biffed it — yeah. I had two guys really save my bacon. And Marshall Branch was one of them. We were just doing night touch-and-go's, and I think — at that time, I think we did have goggles. But the lighting — you know, this was when the Coast Guard was just getting goggles, and the ships weren't completely — you know, they still had some red lights, which really impact the goggles. All the lights need to be green or, you know, blue. And I was coming in, and I just started getting low and slow, and you know, if he hadn't have been there, I probably would have gone [squish noise]. But he definitely saved my bacon on that one. It's always nice to have someone. [laughs]

SMITH: Good that you remember him. It's nice to —

MCKNIGHT: Oh, yeah.

²⁸ Eight months and one day, McKnight, 12/9/2019.

SMITH: Yeah, nice to shout out someone that did that.

MCKNIGHT: Absolutely. Absolutely.

SMITH: Then you talk about a medevac in the snow in Puget Sound?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. That was another one of those kind of scary ones.

SMITH: I'm sorry. [laughs] You —

MCKNIGHT: No, it's — I mean, it was a — so we had a young girl on one of the islands in Puget Sound who needed to be medevac'd. It was in December. It happened to be snowing, which it doesn't do that often up there. You know, we launched. We actually, you know, made it to the island. You know, they loaded her in, got everything, and then it was like, snow, snow, snow, snow. And we had to take off and just go IMC right away. But you know, we're not at an airport. Don't completely know what's out, you know, ahead of us. Couldn't talk to air traffic control until we got up a little bit. So it was just one of those, you know, kind of uncomfortable, you know — you had to transition to instruments right away. I was very aware that I had this young girl in the back. But it worked out. We got her there, so —

SMITH: That's great.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: That's a cool rescue.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So following that — oh, go ahead.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, so from Port Angeles, I got — my next assignment was as the fixed-wing assistant engineering officer in Cape Cod, which meant I had to transition to fixed-wing, which was the Falcon, which was — yeah. That was —

SMITH: Where'd you transition-train?

MCKNIGHT: Mobile.

SMITH: Mobile. Everything's in Mobile, right?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. And I went through with another guy who was also a former Army aviator, and you know, they — I think it was a three-week course, and about — everything's in the simulator until you finally go out like in the last week and actually start flying the plane. And I think about a week in, both of us were just like: hang on. Time out. We need a basic aerodynamics class...

SMITH: I was going to ask you. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: ...because, what are these aileron

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things? And what do these do? And what is that? You know.

SMITH: Right.

MCKNIGHT: It just — we didn't have the basic —

SMITH: I was in shock when you said “three weeks.” I’m like, what?

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: So —

MCKNIGHT: Maybe it was five.²⁹

SMITH: Still.

MCKNIGHT: I’m really unreliable on my facts, but —

SMITH: Five is a little bit more what I would consider reasonable. But yeah, that’s a lot to learn.

MCKNIGHT: All I know is the first time I ever took off in a fixed-wing aircraft, it was in the Falcon, going down the runway, and it was like: whoa. It doesn’t feel like that in the simulator. You know? It was fun. I was never a very good fixed-wing pilot.

SMITH: That’s a big transition from rotary to fixed wing.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, and —

SMITH: Did you feel like your instrument time at the poles actually helped?

MCKNIGHT: It’s just, everything went so fast.

SMITH: Well, that — yeah.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. And I kept wanting to slow down on my, you know, approach. [laughs] And they were like: no, no, no, no, no. You have to keep going forward. As a helicopter pilot, you kind of hear all the time: oh, helicopters are so much harder than fixed wing. And I mean, people say that all the time. And I’m like: oh, I don’t know. You know? I’ve never flown fixed wing. But I definitely discovered that it’s whatever you learn on is easiest, and probably most people learn on fixed wing. Fixed wing is not easy, I don’t think, for most helicopter pilots to transition over to. But I did it. It was fun. You know, that’s a — it’s a fast aircraft. We — the mission on that — it’s like a business aircraft, but it’s outfitted with a hatch, so we can drop pumps and data marker buoys...

SMITH: Oh, how nice.

MCKNIGHT: ...and things like that. You know, in the helicopter, you go out and you rescue the people. In the Falcon, you go out and you find the people so the helicopter can go out and rescue them.

SMITH: Got it.

MCKNIGHT: But in the meantime, you can throw them a raft, or if they need a dewatering pump, if they’re taking on water, you know, throw out a marker buoy so we can find them again later. Yeah, it was a fun mission. I mean, to be flying that aircraft so fast and low over the water and then to drop stuff, you know, that was kind of fun.

SMITH: Crew of that aircraft —

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, so that’s two pilots, and then just a guy in the back, a dropmaster. And then sometimes, you had a guy on the — like, the radar and the infrared FLIR thing. Did two deployments down to Borinquen for — it was mostly migrant — it was drugs if we, you know, happened to see them, but it was mostly migrant interdiction.

²⁹ McKnight’s first training course in the Falcon jet was seven weeks. The HU-25 First Pilot course was three weeks, McKnight, 12/9/2019.

All the people coming over from the Dominican Republic or wherever trying to land. They had those yolas, little boats that they'd come over on. And yeah. So that was — it's always fun going on deployment, right?

SMITH: Was Patti³⁰ in Borinquen when you were down there?

MCKNIGHT: She wasn't.

SMITH: She was probably back here...

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: ...by that point.

MCKNIGHT: She wasn't. But I got to fly with the — down at the air station, the Customs and Border Protection had a little helicopter there that the customs agent would fly around the island every day. And he let me go with him one day...

SMITH: Cool.

MCKNIGHT: ...and like, fly. And I was so jonesing to fly a helicopter, you know? That was a lot of fun.

SMITH: So after Cape Cod, then you had your more headquarters-y tours...

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: ...doing policies and studies.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. You know, if I had it to do over again, I would have gotten a mentor. I didn't have a mentor. I didn't have someone that I could reach out to, someone who was kind of looking out for me. And I — there's a lot of stuff that — you think you know things, but you don't really know until afterwards. And I didn't realize that that would be my last flying job. I thought: oh, I'll go to Headquarters, and then I'll go back to an air station. Well, that's true, but it depends on what job you get at Headquarters, you know? You have to have these specific jobs that set you up for command or being an EO of a larger air station or something like that. And I had a very fun job. I enjoyed it a lot, but it wasn't a high-profile, going to move you up in the world job. I was at the Pentagon for two years. Once again, worked with great people. Enjoyed it.

SMITH: What were you doing?

MCKNIGHT: I was in Personnel and Readiness, and I was in charge of actually the flight pay program, and BAS, and family separation,

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or something like that. I would just —

SMITH: Specifically for the Coast Guard, or for all services?

MCKNIGHT: No, for all DOD. Yeah. And it's not like I, you know, [laughs] set the policy or the numbers. I just had to go — you know, I had to go occasionally up to Congress and interface with, you know, some office up there and say: this is what the number should be. I don't know. It was like an office job. But working in the Pentagon is kind of like working in a museum. I mean, I really enjoyed it. And then — so I thought I was only going to be in the area for two years, but after that time, then they moved me over. I decided to stay for another two years, because I

³⁰ CAPT Patricia McFetridge was the first woman commander of CGAS Borinquen.

didn't like any job that they were going to send me to. So I went into — the Coast Guard had a huge acquisition program called the Deepwater program, where they were buying new cutters and all kinds of stuff — retrofitting aircraft. And I was the sponsor's liaison or something. I, you know, learned some of that acquisition stuff. I did have an opportunity to go be the engineering officer in Atlantic City, but at that point, I had three kids. I thought: you know, do I really want to uproot everybody just so Mommy can go fly again, you know? So at that point, I was like: eh, 24 years. I hadn't gone up for O-6, for captain. I'd like to think I would have made it, but I don't know. And I think there was a part of me that didn't want to not make it. [laughs]

SMITH: Right. Right.

MCKNIGHT: So — and I was able to find this job with MITRE, which I've been in ever since, which has been — it was a very easy transition. MITRE works in the public interest, very similar to Coast Guard. So yeah, it was a great career.

SMITH: Fantastic. I want to ask you, too. At the Pentagon, how were you received by the other services? Your interaction — you know, at that time, we're talking early 2000s.

MCKNIGHT: Oh, Coasties, or like the anomaly? Yeah. Totally. But everybody usually likes them. And I took everyone in my — in that office, you had some civilians that had been working in there for 30 years, right? And they get a new Coastie every two years, and a new Army guy. And you know, there's the civilians that are the mainstay of the office, and then the rotating military people. But I took them all. I think the *Eagle* — no, it wasn't the *Eagle*. One of the Coast Guard cutters was down in Alexandria, and I took them all on one lunch and gave them a tour of the ship and had a great time.

SMITH: Well, is there anything else that you wanted to share about your career? I didn't ask you about your support system. You kind of — you, of course, talked about your wife. But who would you have considered your support system throughout your career?

MCKNIGHT: So in North Bend, where everybody thought she was my sister, I chose to tell like three different people who I considered my closest friends. It was even hard to tell them, because friends can come and go, and you know, my dad was like: mmm, no. They can hold that over you later, you know? But the three people I chose to tell were true friends. And two of those three went to Mobile the following year, the same time we did. So that was a great support system there, because they knew Carrie, and when I went on deployment, she had, you know, a little bit of a support system there.

SMITH: Good.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah, which was very helpful. The sister story got a little old. [laughs] Because they're like: yeah, you're still living with your sister? So pretty soon, it was just like — just didn't really talk about it. And people just don't — I will say, in the Coast Guard, no one ever bothered me or pushed anything or anything like that. So I'm sure "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" helped, but yeah. And then after I got out of the Coast Guard, and then when they changed the

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policy, the Commandant at the time brought in some of us who had recently retired to kind of talk to him about our experiences and what the Coast Guard could do to make it a good transition, so —

SMITH: Wow.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah. It was great. I think they've done a great job at just — I think really, the whole military's done a pretty good job in so quickly kind of embracing that.

SMITH: Yes.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: Well, I have a couple of questions about advice you would give others, like someone bound for flight school or bound for Army flight training or Coast Guard training, or perhaps bound for their first deployment. What kind of advice you would give.

MCKNIGHT: Well, I'd tell you, I'm all about mentoring and networking. I mean, and those are kind of buzzwords, but I don't care what form it takes. Find someone you can talk to and get to know people wherever you go, because everything happens through those kind of connections. It really does. So that's just kind of setting up a support, making sure people know you, who you are, not to be big — you know, "look at me," but just — you know, so they just kind of know you and are familiar, and they're more apt to reach out to you. And then things always seem overwhelming, but they're way — they seem way more overwhelming than they really are, you know? Like, give it a week [laughs] or — and especially with military flight school. They do such a good job at training. They know how to do it. They know — you know — really, I think if you're at all cut out for it, you can get through. And if you're not, then that's a good time to find out. I had probably a handful of guys that dropped out in my initial flight training class. A couple of them just didn't like it. You know? It just wasn't for them. But that's a good time to — much better to say that than to go off and do it and not be the right person for it. So I would say: listen to your gut on that one. But that's my advice. [laughs]

SMITH: Alright. Is there anything else you want to share about your career before we close? We're getting towards the end of the interview.

MCKNIGHT: I would do all of it again in a minute. I really wish that retired people could still like — I wish I could be in the Reserves or something, you know? I'd do it for free. [laughs] I mean, I'd take MAC flights, occasionally, on Space A. And I'm like: I'd be a crew chief back here in a heartbeat, you know? It's just — it's fun. It's such a great job. And I don't think any of my kids are going to do it, which saddens me a little bit. I mean, they need to follow their own — you know, their own thing. But I just think it's such a great life to live. I'm not — you know, I could die tomorrow, and I'd be fine. I mean, I've done — I don't want to die tomorrow. [laughs] But —

SMITH: We don't want you to, either. [laughs]

MCKNIGHT: No, but you know, I mean, I've had a great time. And the job I'm in, I love it now, but I could not do that for 30, 40 years — sit at a desk and do that. As interesting as it is, I mean, I'm just — I'm glad I happened into my — something that fit me so well. I was lucky.

SMITH: Well, Commander Claudia McKnight, I am — on behalf of the Smithsonian, I just want to thank you for taking the time to record your oral history with us.

MCKNIGHT: Yeah.

SMITH: And thank you for your service to the nation and —

MCKNIGHT: Well, it's my pleasure. And you know, whoever has to transcribe this, I pity you. Good luck. I mean, sorry it went so long.

SMITH: No, you're fine. Thank you so much.

MCKNIGHT: Alright, thank you. And thank you. You had to listen to it, too.

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[2:09:44]

[END]