

MILITARY WOMEN AVIATORS ORAL HISTORY INITIATIVE

Interview No. 7

Transcript

Interviewee: Captain Patricia McFetridge, United States Coast Guard (Retired)

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By: Monica Smith

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901 D Street SW, Suite 700

Washington, DC 20024

SMITH: My name is Monica Smith. I'm at the Smithsonian Institution's National Air and Space Museum in Washington, D.C. Today is July 29, 2019, and I have the pleasure of speaking with Captain Patricia McFetridge, 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, CAPT McFetridge.

McFETRIDGE: Thank you. Glad to be here.

SMITH: We're glad you're here, too. Would you please state your name and your occupation?

McFETRIDGE: Patricia Ann McFetridge, and I'm retired Coast Guard pilot.

SMITH: Fantastic. In what branches of the military did you serve?

McFETRIDGE: I began my service in the Army as a Warrant Officer pilot, and then once I left the Army, I joined the Utah Army National Guard, also as a helicopter pilot. And then I entered the Coast Guard and spent 30 years of my final career in the Coast Guard as a fixed wing and helicopter pilot.

SMITH: Can you tell us the dates of service from beginning to end?

McFETRIDGE: So I began with the Army as a private first class in 1982, March of '82, and graduated from their Warrant Officer Flight Training in '83 and did one tour in South Korea with the Army, and then another tour at Fort Hood in Texas. Before I left the service, after my mandatory time was up, and while I was in the Irregular Reserves — the Irregular Ready Reserves, I was lucky enough to get associated with the Utah Army National Guard, so I was able to continue time and service and joined the Utah Army National Guard in '87 and did that for two years until I was, again, [laughs] lucky enough to find a full-time job with the U.S. Coast Guard in 1989. And I've been with the Coast Guard ever since.

SMITH: And you retired this year, so —

McFETRIDGE: I retired this year with a full 30 years of Coast Guard time, and another five plus years in prior service time.

SMITH: So the date of your retirement — was it in June, or —

McFETRIDGE: 1 June.

SMITH: 1 June. Okay.

McFETRIDGE: Yes.

SMITH: Fantastic. So let's start a long career...

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: ...careers, and let's start with where you were born and about you growing up.

McFETRIDGE: Okay. I am one of five kids. I'm the only girl — family of four brothers. My dad was retired Navy, and we— I was actually born in Jacksonville, Florida, while he was still active duty. But he retired when I was 5 years old, so I really didn't grow up as much of a Navy brat. But I did grow up with a love of the military service and appreciation for what they offer. So I basically grew up in California when my dad began his second career working for Lockheed Missiles and Space Company. So we grew up in the Bay Area, and I went through high school and most of my college in the Bay Area.

SMITH: So tell me your parents' names. You told me about your dad's occupations.

McFETRIDGE: Okay.

SMITH: I still want to hear about your mom.

McFETRIDGE: My father, George William McFetridge, was a — born in Aspinwall, Pennsylvania. And he attended the Naval Academy in 1938. Was the class of 1942, so he actually graduated [laughs] right after Pearl Harbor, and was actually already headed to sea for war before his official graduation from the Academy, in 1941.

SMITH: What was his specialty?

McFETRIDGE: He was scheduled to go to flight training, but because of the war, he ended up just being ship's company, so he was just one of the many officers on board one of the aircraft carriers. The *U.S.S. Hornet* was his carrier. And so he sailed on that in the Pacific until it was sunk, and then he went through one of the recovery bases, like New Caledonia. I don't remember what the exact name was, but as they brought him back to the States, that's when they sent him to flight training. And he basically spent the majority of the war years in flight training and was scheduled to go back and fight in the Pacific, just before the Pacific war ended. So he never actually got to fly in combat, but he did serve on aircraft carriers during the war. And then he stayed in for a full 20 years with the Navy before he retired.

SMITH: And then went to civilian —

McFETRIDGE: And then went to —

SMITH: To Lockheed.

McFETRIDGE: To Lockheed as a field engineer,

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working on the Polaris missile subs initially, and then quite a bit of other field service work after that.

SMITH: And your mom?

McFETRIDGE: My mom met my dad [laughs] when he was — when she was attending his high school for last years. Mary Ann Cook McFetridge. So they became friends while they were still in high school for the last two years. She went to the University of Pittsburgh and went through the nursing program. She actually graduated from Pitt's first full four-year nursing degree program. And she went into the Army as a flight nurse and was also stationed in the Pacific during the war. And she got out right after the war — was released. And I forget exactly — oh, I know where it was. She was offered a chance to go do her doctorate in tropical medicines because of her experience overseas in the Pacific. So she was sent to

Panama and was working in one of the Panamanian hospitals. And my father was on another shakedown crew. He was going through the Panama Canal, so he invited her to one of their parties on board the ship. And it just blossomed after that, and soon after, they were married. And she came back home and never did get her doctorate.

SMITH: The tropics are in your blood. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: [laughs] Yes, they are.

SMITH: So tell me about you growing up. I mean, what were your likes, dislikes? How is that you —

McFETRIDGE: I was very much a tomboy. Probably a little bit more athletically inclined than some of my brothers, but certainly followed in their footsteps for love of sports. Did as much as I could in sports. Swimming was big in our family. Since we grew up in the Bay Area, and Santa Clara was such a huge swimming megalopolis at the time. So I really gravitated to just being another brother, [laughs] more than — because I had no sisters to emulate. And just — and we all knew that we were probably headed towards a military career, or at least desired it. Most of us also wanted to fly, so I have a — my two oldest brothers attended West Point and graduated from West Point. One went on to a Navy commission and flew for the Navy, and the other stayed in the Army and retired as a colonel. So they both have a — kind of set the path for me. And my third brother basically didn't go a military track, per se, but he worked [laughs] as a career for the Naval Criminal Investigative Service as a civilian employee. So he's been around the military in his life. And my younger brother was also an Army helicopter pilot. So he's now working at Boeing, but he did a career with the Army flying. So it's just all in our blood. We always wanted to do something in the military, because we knew it was the right thing to do, and plus it was free training. We couldn't afford to do any of the flying on our own, because it's so expensive, so...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...we got all that flying experience with — and get paid to do it. It was a great choice.

SMITH: Did you all ever have an opportunity to fly together, or be in—

McFETRIDGE: My dad was actually my private pilot instructor. [laughs] So, yes. I had my private pilot's license before I joined the Army.

SMITH: So how was that? When did you start your training?

McFETRIDGE: I started flying in 1980, when I was still in college. San Jose State has an aviation program, so I did quite a bit of flying with the club there. But I got my private pilot's license with my dad being my primary instructor.

SMITH: When did you earn that?

McFETRIDGE: It was in 1980.

SMITH: Oh, so all in one year. Good for you, because not everybody [laughs] finishes...

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, it was —

SMITH: ...in one — in the same year. But it's —

McFETRIDGE: It was a lot of work, but it was — you know, we had a plan, so we just followed a strict plan, and it worked out, especially since money was tight, so we had to kind of knock it out all at once to make sure it was done.

SMITH: Was there a goal at that point — I mean, you said that the military was always in your mind and all of your siblings' minds.

McFETRIDGE: It was, but it was — I was a latecomer to the game, because I knew growing up that women couldn't get into the military aviation. So it was never really a goal of mine until basically I graduated from high school in '75, and then in 1976 is when they said women could go into the services. So while I was going through junior college, I was applying to the academies. I was applying to any aviation programs — military aviation programs. And it — close, but of course, my grades had not been stellar, [laughs]

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because I had no goals going through high school. So I wasn't selected, and I was just fortunate enough that when I finally did get my college degree, that the — at that time, they did have women flying for the military. And so I was able to get into a — the Warrant Officer Aviation Program with the Army.

SMITH: So tell me about applying for that program and how you found out that you had been selected.

McFETRIDGE: Well, it's — I'll backtrack just a little bit. I actually applied and was — my recruiter was very hopeful, and confident actually, that I would make it into the Navy's AOCS program: Aviation Officer Candidate School, because they were taking women. They were taking a small number of women each year, but they were taking women for this program.

SMITH: Is this in 1980, or is this —

McFETRIDGE: This would have been between '80 and '82.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: So in that time frame.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So I actually got my degree in '81. So it would have been late '81 and early '82. But I was applying for the program knowing that I was — knowing that I was going to get my degree. And like I said, my recruiter was extremely confident. Like: oh, you're a shoo-in. Retired Navy commander. You've got your degree. You've got your private pilot's license. They're going to take you.

SMITH: Talking about your parents — like, your — yeah, yeah.

McFETRIDGE: Yes. And it turns out that no, they didn't take me. [laughs] So because — I don't know the real reasons, but I think it was still — they were testing out women to see how they were doing, and some of the ladies were not finishing the program or getting married and not finishing the program. So whatever the reason was, I wasn't taken. And the recruiter was so shocked by it that he actually didn't call me until after I knew the results were already out and started to bug him for an answer. And he finally admitted that for some reason, he was checking to make sure he didn't mess up the paperwork. But I didn't get selected. So, [laughs] I was so upset that I drove myself down to the strip mall where all the recruiting offices were, side by side. And I just went door to door and said: do you allow women to fly? I

knew the Marine Corps did not. And the Army was before the Air Force. So I ended up walking into the Army office. Asked them if women are allowed to fly. They said “yes.” I walked in. They offered me the Officer Candidate School paperwork and the Warrant Officer Flight Training Program at the same time. OCS required a college degree. The Warrant Officer program did not. I did all the physicals, all the paperwork for both, waiting to see which would come back first. And it turns out the Warrant Officer program came back first and was — I was in. I was — probably within two months of finishing the physicals and the paperwork, I was on a plane headed to Basic Training with the Army.

SMITH: How long were each program? I’m just curious — the training portion.

McFETRIDGE: Basic Training, if I recall, was about a 16-week program, and that was in Fort Jackson, South Carolina. All-female battalion. Women going into predominantly female ratings. A lot of clerks and such. One of the girls was going to be a — into the — for lack of a better term, the Army’s boat program [laughs] to be a coxswain...

SMITH: Really?

McFETRIDGE: ...which I was surprised to find out that the Army has more small boats than the Navy, because they use them for building bridges and things like that across rivers. So they have quite an extensive boat program for the rivers. So anyway, it was fascinating just to find out what some of the other careers were. But most of the girls were extremely young and very immature. And so I was — I had to be moving on into the flight program. But while I was in Basic Training, it was challenging to put up with some of the mentality of the girls that were going through. And without any guys there to be, you know, role models again, it was a — I was a little out of my element, but I knew — I knew I was going to be going straight from Basic Training to the Warrant Officer Flight Training. So all I had to do was get through it, survive, and then I would be off.

SMITH: What were some of the challenging —

McFETRIDGE: Just girls that had never been away from home and we’re in — living in a barracks, so it’s just open bays, bunks, bunk beds. Some of the girls had never been away from home and cried all night. One of the girls was a ROTC — at the ROTC in high school, so she was made into a leadership position, [laughs] even though she probably

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shouldn’t have had that position. A lot of lack of initiative. It was just — it was challenging to blend in, but not become wrapped up in their little world, knowing that I was going to be doing something different, which is why it was so fun to meet a woman that was going into a completely different specialty herself, because we kind of bonded then on the fact that we were a little bit — I don’t know, a higher caliber than some of our —

SMITH: How did your instructors treat you compared to the others?

McFETRIDGE: Initially, no different. And again, that was a little bit frustrating, because we were — both she and I were both college graduates, and then most of the girls in there were high-school graduates. So they treated us all the same, and the fact that we weren’t in leadership positions, it — you know, was frustrating to us, but not to them. So they didn’t change until the last week, right when we were getting ready to graduate. And then one of the drill sergeants finally came up and said, you know, wished me luck in the Warrant Officer Flight Training Program. And, apparently he knew about aviation and had flown in

the back of some helicopters in the past. So he wished me a lot of luck, and said if you ever had — he'd love to fly with me if he got a chance to.

SMITH: What a compliment.

McFETRIDGE: It was nice. But that was the — [laughs] the last week.

SMITH: [laughs] The last week of 16.

McFETRIDGE: Up to that time, I thought that everybody hated me.

SMITH: Which is what they're supposed to do, unfortunately.

McFETRIDGE: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: Okay. Well, tell me about the flight training.

McFETRIDGE: Warrant Officer Flight Training was very interesting. We were — I was sent to Fort Rucker, Alabama, for the flight training. The first few weeks were a warrant officer indoctrination, so to speak, so it was a lot of physical fitness activities. And I was the only female there. So — which was fine. I expected that, more or less. But it was — I think they were trying to test me to see how I would do. Like, some of the exercises we had would be to carry a classmate fireman-style across the field. And of course, they gave me the biggest guy that they possibly could. But you know, I had brothers, so I was used to, you know, wrestling with them and picking them up. And so I was able to do it. And after I did show them that I was dedicated to be there, they basically let up a little bit but — and treated me like everybody else. But the first few times, it was — I could tell they were trying to see if I was going to stay with the program or not.

SMITH: Did they have standards for women, or was it just...

McFETRIDGE: No.

SMITH: ...they do what they do?

McFETRIDGE: No. It was just a standard.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: They did — the barracks we lived in — so our — my flight was in the same barracks. So a two-story, wooden, old-style barracks. But in the front of the — on the second floor in the front of the barracks was a single room that actually had a door that you could close. So they let me stay in that room, and they allowed me to close the door at night, even though everybody else had to have the doors — had no doors, because the drill sergeants could walk through, or Tac officers could walk through at any time, day or night, and check on them.

SMITH: "Tac"?

McFETRIDGE: Tac. I actually don't — tactical officer.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: That's all I know. I never figured out what the — if it's an acronym or if it's just a name. But they were like the drill sergeants, but they were warrant officers that were in charge of our program.

SMITH: Okay. So they were pilots, or —

McFETRIDGE: I don't know if they were pilots, to be honest.

SMITH: Hmm, interesting.

McFETRIDGE: I honestly don't know.

SMITH: But you were with your —

McFETRIDGE: I assumed they were, but I honestly don't know if they were.

SMITH: Yeah.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: But you were with your classmates.

McFETRIDGE: But I was with my classmates, and the other — and it was a communal bathroom. And they started out with — okay, here's a male/female sign. Put it on the door. And that didn't work out, because there were way too many guys. There were 30 of them and one of me. And so they finally said: look, you need to go to the tactical officer's office, where there is a shower. And that's where you'll shower in the mornings. And everybody else then will be able to shower and run around the barracks like guys would do. So I had to get up in the morning, put my [laughs] clothes on, go to the tac officer's hooch, which was a building which was at the end of the street, and then shower, and then come on back, and then join in the formation with all the guys. Which, I did fine. And I had short enough hair that it was easy. Just like now, it was easy to take care of it. But one of the things they would try to accuse me of was constantly showing up in line with wet hair. And I'm like: [laughs] well, of course it's wet hair. I don't have time to dry it. And my hair was longer, so it stayed wet longer

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than the guys' hair, because they always had basically shaved heads. So yeah, there was a little bit of that going on, but it was — it wasn't — I don't — I didn't take it seriously, and of course, they couldn't really do anything about it, because they were the ones making me run to the showers.

SMITH: Of course. What was your class designation? Did you have any nomenclature, or —

McFETRIDGE: We — well, yes. It was a class — it was Gold Flight, and each class had a hat that they wore. And ours was colored gold, so it was Gold Flight. And it was 82-43. So "82" I know was the year. "43" I assume was the class that came through. And I think it was every two weeks that a new class started. It may have been every four weeks.

SMITH: How many people were in your class?

McFETRIDGE: There were about 30, 32 of us.

SMITH: Did everybody make it through, or —

McFETRIDGE: No. Not everybody made it through. Well, a few people had a medical reason to delay, so they would be pushed back to the next group that came through. But they wouldn't necessarily be expelled from the program. And I don't recall we had anybody actually sent home. I think everybody either made it through in our class or went to another class and then graduated with them.

SMITH: So you showed up at — in what month?

McFETRIDGE: So I showed up in — I think it was — I think actually it was the Fourth of July weekend in '82 and graduated from the flight training in May of '83.

SMITH: Did any other women show for training during the time you were there?

McFETRIDGE: I — there was one female that was in a prior class...

SMITH: Oh.

McFETRIDGE: ...that had been down for medical reasons. I don't know what they were. But anytime that they have a medical hold, their academics get on hold as well. So she was delayed. She came through my flight, and we were actually roommates for, I think, a month before she moved through [laughs] to the next flight on another medical issue, so —

SMITH: What was that like, to have a roommate for a month?

McFETRIDGE: After being by myself for so long, it was challenging, because now that — but it was also fun, because now there was somebody else to help clean the room, because I was in a two-person room by myself, and I had to have the whole room clean. So I'd have to make sure that — that any space around the other person's side was clean as well. So I didn't get it dirty. It was easier to keep clean when it was just me. When it was the two of us, it was like: oh, she doesn't clean her side. We'll both get dinged. And so it was challenging, but it was also nice to have somebody to talk to and commiserate with over some of the stuff we were going through for training. But yes, she didn't — I think it was about a month and she was gone again. I was on my own.

SMITH: Did she make it through training?

McFETRIDGE: I believe she finally did, but I lost track of her. So I'm not sure when she finally graduated. But she had some — I think just — at that time, there was so much that they didn't understand about women's physiology in the military that — I don't know what it was. It could have been simple. But they just take forever to figure out if it's to their standards acceptable.

SMITH: Well, tell me about the actual training. Classroom, flying —

McFETRIDGE: So the training was — once we got through the initial warrant officer indoctrination period and we started into academics, they pretty much left us alone. So we would go to school, and they would be all aviation-related courses, basically. Basic flight training. So a lot of it, I already knew from my private pilot's experiences. But some of it was new, so it was interesting, and then they'd teach you a little bit about the tactics and formation flying stuff.

SMITH: Was this fixed-wing first?

McFETRIDGE: No. This was all helicopters.

SMITH: All rotary?

McFETRIDGE: It's all geared towards helicopters.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: So the academic portion would pretty much be: go to classes during the day and then — but you'd start out by doing PT in the morning. You'd march to class. You'd attend the classes, and then you'd march back to your barracks, and then you'd do some more PT in the evenings. And then you had time to yourself so you could polish [laughs] your boots, and make sure your uniforms were all straight away for the next day and clean your rooms. And then it would be lights out at 10 o'clock.

SMITH: Tell me about the PT regimen, morning and afternoon.

McFETRIDGE: Pretty much the normal Army PT. We'd go out in the field and do calisthenics. So, push-ups, sit-ups. We'd run every day in formation.

SMITH: How long?

McFETRIDGE: Oh, usually just a mile and a half, two miles, would be about the most. But it was to keep us in shape, because we had to pass the Army physical fitness test. So they wanted to make sure we were able to

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complete those each time. So it was always just, you know, jumping jacks, push-ups, sit-ups, and running in formation. So nothing too strenuous but challenging.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: It took a little while for me to get the push-ups to where I could do them pretty comfortably. But not too bad.

SMITH: How long before you actually started flying?

McFETRIDGE: I think it was probably the fourth month of the — when we got through with the academics that we were actually going out to the flight line and starting to fly. And we started out — I started out in the TH-55, which is a Bell helicopter. It looks like a bubble front. Very old. Not quite the same one they flew on *M*A*S*H*, but it had that round cockpit bubble. So we started out flying those. Learned how to fly a helicopter by flying that helicopter.

SMITH: How did you find that as — I mean, you were a fixed-wing private pilot. The transition to rotary-wing isn't always smooth. So tell me —

McFETRIDGE: No. It was — we were paired up with Department of Army civilians, so basically retirees, that were still instructing for the Army. And the first day you got into the helicopter, we were on a field, and in front of us was a long building and a fire station. And the instructor said: I want you to pick it up to a hover, and I want you to point it at that building. And of course, as soon as you pick it up to hover, it's just all over the sky. There's just no control at all. [laughs]

SMITH: Had you had any simulator time before this?

McFETRIDGE: A little bit of simulator time...

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: ...ahead of time. But it wasn't the same as actually going out and doing it for real.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So this instructor would go: okay, now I want you to just try the collective. And he'd give us one control at a time. So he'd give us the collective first. See how it goes up and down? You know, lifting that. And he'd be holding the cyclic so it would be steady. And he goes: okay, now, you think you have that? Yeah. That's pretty simple. Okay, here's the pedals. See how it turns the nose? Oh, yeah. Okay, that's simple. Okay, here's the cyclic. See how easy it is? Okay. Alright, you have it.

Bouhhh. [laughs] And he —

SMITH: [laughs] So you're in the left seat as a trainee?

McFETRIDGE: Uh huh. Yes.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: And he would just reach over with a finger on top of the cyclic and steady it right down. He'd be like, ahh.

SMITH: Oh, how infuriating. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, just — I never get this. It was — it was challenging...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...because you were so concerned and so frozen on the controls that you were — I was overcorrecting constantly. And — but once you got the hang of it, it was like — it was like riding a bicycle. You're wobbly at first, and then as soon as you figure it out, it's like: why couldn't I do that from the beginning? It was just so simple. So yeah, it was — there were — I think it was like second day, because they have you go out and do it initially the first day, and they know you're not going to get it. But they at least let you feel all the controls one-on-one.

SMITH: Explain what the collective does, what the cyclic does, for the people —

McFETRIDGE: Well, the collective is basically your lift function. So it's controlling the bite, the blades, the rotor blades on top, the biting into the air to lift you off the ground. The cyclic is more like a steering wheel, so it's going to — if you bend it to the right, your aircraft's going to go to the right. And it actually tilts that rotor system, so that it bites into the air a different way. And then the pedals are your anti-torque for — to keep you from just completely spinning around. There's a rotor blade on the back — a small one — a tail rotor, and the pedals keep that so you know it stays pointed where you want it to be. So between all those [laughs] — and you have to do them all together. You can't let one go. But doing all of those, you're able to keep the helicopter pointed where you want it to and hovering if you need it to or flying left or right. So on the second day, I think it clicked for me. And I think everybody...

SMITH: That's good.

McFETRIDGE: ...was hovering by the third day of that, at least. So it didn't take long, but it was — that first day was frustrating. It was like: I'll never get it. I don't know how you can do it. But they were just wonderful. I mean, they probably had like 10,000 hours of flight time.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: And they were just amazing instructors. Just so patient. And you know, I'm sure we probably nearly killed them a dozen times. [laughs]

SMITH: Tell me about your first solo — speaking of trying to [laughs] kill the instructor.

McFETRIDGE: Well, the TH-55 had a — on the collective, it had a twist-grip throttle. So like the gas. So as you twisted it on, you'd get more power. Well, it had a spot where it would go, I think, like an overdrive. I called it "George,"

[30:00]

where it would be too much, and it would kick you to let you know you were trying to go — put on too much power. [laughs] So the first solo, you could see everybody in the traffic pattern flying, and the aircraft would be going like this constantly. [laughs] As we were hitting George, as we were going around. And all you do is release it a little bit, and then you'd be flying again. But you know, if you tried to twist it too much, it would kick the tail. [laughs] So you'd see everybody flying up, and they'd be kicking like this as they're going around the pattern. But yeah, the first solo was — you know, we would be flying with the instructor and practicing our landings and take-offs, and just staying in the pattern, practice a landing, take off. And then he'd just say: okay, stop right here. And then he'd get out. And now you're it. And he said: okay, take it around. And you're like, *Ohh*— but you'd be just so used to it by that time, it was like — you know, you're constantly — it was like he was not — he was still in the cockpit. You could just hear his voice constantly going: okay, this is what you do. This is where you go. And now pulling power. Take off. So it was like he was still sitting there with you. But yeah, it was a lot of fun. And I did hit George several times on the flight. Yeah.

SMITH: [laughs] After the TH-55, how long did you fly that before you transitioned to the UH-1?

McFETRIDGE: You know, I don't think it was that —

SMITH: Are you all right?

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, I'll take some water.

SMITH: Let's take a pause.

[TAPE PAUSED]

SMITH: So we were talking about the transition from the TH-55 to the UH-1 in training.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. I honestly don't remember how much longer we stayed in the TH-55, because it really was your initial entry helicopter. So the whole goal there was to get you to the solo stage — to where you're flying solo. But it was probably a couple months of TH-55 flying before we got into the UH-1, and then stayed in the UH-1 Huey for the rest of the flight time. And that's more when we got into how the Army flies. The map of the Earth, the tactical — the formation flying. So that was — and that was all the way up to the — till you graduate. You're still doing the Army's mission at that point.

SMITH: How many — in formation, how many aircraft in formation would you train?

McFETRIDGE: We would fly — normally in training, I think we would only fly — a lot of it was trail, so you'd fly behind the helicopter in front of you, and then they'd stack them up behind you. And normally, not more than five when we were still in the training phases. For the graduation ceremony, we actually did a flyover for the parents that came for the graduation. And that was in a formation with, I

think, one lead helicopter with two on the sides of, I guess, a V of three is what we used there. So we did practice a little bit of that as well. But a lot of it was: you would fly off of a lead helicopter, and it would just be the two of you, or maybe you'd have some helicopters behind you.

SMITH: So tell me about graduation and how your family and friends felt about it.

McFETRIDGE: So that was — my parents came out for the graduation, so they came out from California to see the graduation. And it was — because I was part of the flyover, they had — they allowed the parents to come out to the air station — or the aircraft ramp, not air station — but to the ramp where we were, and take pictures in the helicopters before we went flying. And so — so I did get to have my dad and my mom both sit in the helicopter seat that I was going to fly in, which was kind of cool. And then — and my uncle, who was in Florida at the time — my dad's brother — was also able to come out. And I think that was one of the few times I had ever seen him in my life, because he lived so far away from us. But yeah, there was — and then the rest of my family couldn't make it, because my brothers were already in the service, so they were tied up. And my little brother was still in school. So it was just my parents that were able to come out. But it was pretty neat, pretty exciting to have them there.

SMITH: Tell me about how you received your first assignment.

McFETRIDGE: Actually, I received my first assignment — well, there were so many places that the UH-1 would be stationed. And there were still limits on what women could do in the Army. So my choices were to be assigned to a medevac unit, or to be assigned to a VIP unit. And I ended up getting a chance to go to get a transition into the —

[35:00]

what was it? A Chinook.¹ And I can't even — I don't even remember what the call sign was for it. But it was a twin rotor-blade helicopter, mostly for cargo carrying. But they had an opportunity to fly a Chinook in South Korea, and I was offered that slot. And I was ready to take it. And the unit came back and said: no. We have a female here in South Korea. She's not working out like we thought. And we'd like not to have another female.

SMITH: Because they all fly the same. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: So...

SMITH: That's unfortunate.

McFETRIDGE: ...they gave the Chinook transition to my training partner, who was a male, and left me in Hueys. But they still sent me to South Korea. So I ended up going to a VIP unit in South Korea. And the unit I was sent to did the support flights for the United States — United Nations Armistice Commission. So anytime there was any kind of an incident — a shooting, an incursion, anything like that — between North and South Korea, they would — the United Nations team would go do the investigations. And so our unit would fly those individuals up to the no-fly area, have them do their investigation, and fly them back home.

SMITH: And this is the 55th Aviation Company?

¹ CH-47.

McFETRIDGE: That was the 55th Aviation Company.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: So we were in support of the VIPs in Korea. Mostly the service generals that were stationed there. We'd take them out and show them — you know, fly them out to their field units. Whatever they needed. And then the Armistice Commission did a lot of flying for them.

SMITH: Next: how did you get your assignments? Like, did you work them proactively, or —

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. I have no idea how I got South Korea, but I'm glad I did. It was a fascinating tour, because people over there were just very, very pro-military. They were very happy.

SMITH: Any resistance? I mean, especially after the one female's not working out so well. Different unit, so —

McFETRIDGE: No. They already had — there was another female in the unit when I got there, that warrant officer. She was — had proven herself, so she was well accepted. I had no problems at the unit starting up. And then as — I ended up staying there for two years, even though it was just a one-year assignment. I extended for a second year, so I was there for a full two years. And then that second year, two more females came into the unit. So it was a good mix. And the guys were all — some of them were Vietnam veterans. They were just thrilled that the Army was changing, and most of the guys that were our age, our peers, just took it in stride. So really there wasn't any — I really didn't have any problems with the 55th.

SMITH: That's great.

McFETRIDGE: They were very accommodating.

SMITH: Do you remember the name of the other woman that was there ahead of you? I know it's reaching back.

McFETRIDGE: [laughs] Yeah.

SMITH: If you think of it later, you can tell me.

McFETRIDGE: Her first name was Connie, and I'll see if I can remember what her last name was. She ended up getting married, so I don't know if I remember her maiden name, or her married name. But I'll see if I can find out.

SMITH: That happens. So from there it was on to Fort Hood.

McFETRIDGE: So I did get to pick my assignment — or at least apply for a position going out of South Korea. And so I did basically just say I wanted to go to another VIP unit. I really didn't care where, because I didn't know anything about the units. I was — so I was sent to Fort Hood, Texas, to fly with the Two-Two-Seventh Aviation Company, which again was a VIP unit. So non-medevac, but mostly just flying. At one point, I think I was technically assigned as the Division Artillery Commander's pilot. So anytime he would want to go out to the field and see what his troops were doing, we'd go — I'd go to the pad, pick him up, and fly him around, and drop him off when we were done. And that — at Fort Hood is where I had the opportunity to transition into the OH-58 Kiowa.

SMITH: Tell me about that.

McFETRIDGE: That was the smaller helicopter. And basically, I could fly it single-pilot, because a Huey was usually a two-person, crewed helicopter. We rarely flew it single-pilot. But the OH-58 was almost predominantly a single-pilot aircraft.

SMITH: Why is the Huey usually dual-crewed? Is it —

McFETRIDGE: It's not that it's that complicated, but it is a larger aircraft, and you usually have cargo or passengers is what you would carry around in that.

[40:00]

And it was just — there was no reason to fly it single-pilot unless you were doing test flights with it, in which case, you want to minimize the number of people you have on board, in case something isn't working the way it's supposed to. So for normal missions, you would fly with a pilot command and a co-pilot. And that way, you always had somebody to help you with the passengers that were coming on board. And obviously, you had a crew chief in the back as well.

SMITH: Did you ever have a situation where controls on one side of the aircraft were not working?

McFETRIDGE: Controls are on both sides of the aircraft.

SMITH: But — but like a malfunction that caught —

McFETRIDGE: No. No.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: There were rarely anything that would happen that — because the idea would be that one person would continue to fly...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...the aircraft while the other one takes care of the emergency, whatever it is, with the help of the crew chief in the back. But we really — I think I've only had one...

SMITH: Tell me about that.

McFETRIDGE: ...maintenance failure in a helicopter, and that was in Korea. And I just had a hydraulics leak. And so the only thing I could do was land the helicopter. I landed it in the field. I let the unit know what was happening by radio before we landed. And I was just sitting there, now waiting for somebody to come and fix the helicopter so you could fly home or pick you up in a truck and bring somebody out once they do fix it. So that was the — that was my only incident that I can remember flying for the Army.

SMITH: So you were able to land before complete hydraulic failure?

McFETRIDGE: Right. Right. Because as soon as you notice the leak, it's like, well, you're not going to be able to do much. So get it on the ground before it becomes a real emergency. And that's all we did, is picked a field. And when you're flying helicopters, that's one of the first things they tell you. You'd better know where your emergency landing spot is, every second. So you always knew — and you always tended to [laughs] fly over the fields and stay away from the trees. Let's fly over open fields, because

that's where I'm going to land if something goes wrong. But like I said, I only had that one emergency in the Army. The rest of it was just great maintenance, because I never had any other incidents.

SMITH: That's fantastic. So the [OH-]58, you liked. Single-pilot.

McFETRIDGE: The 58 was fun. Single-pilot, and we flew with the — normally flew with the doors off, completely off. [laughs] So it's this big, open nothing between you and the rest of the world. And it was just — it was wonderful. I mean, totally made me feel like I was really flying, like a bird. It was pretty neat. And it was fun just to have the authority to go take a helicopter out, fly it over to pick up the — your code, your general.² And we always had to be there well in advance of his time, so that he was never waiting on us. So we were usually there between an hour and 30 minutes ahead of whatever scheduled time he asked us to go pick him up. So you could fly around a little bit, and wiggle that time a little bit, and have fun on your own before you had to be, you know, professional and go pick up the general. But it was a lot of fun. And Fort Hood, Texas, is built — it's like a donut, so the reservation is a donut shape, because the outside boundaries — and then you'd come to the inside boundary, which was the impact area, where the — where they were shooting all the ordnance. So you couldn't fly in there. So you really — you were flying just inside of this donut-shaped reservation. And you couldn't get lost, so you could just have fun flying around and seeing what other people were doing. And it was a lot of fun.

SMITH: Cool. So what was next after that? You transitioned to the Guard. Is that right?

McFETRIDGE: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: How did that — how did you make that happen? [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: Well, I fell in love, and then it didn't work. So I was married to another warrant officer. He was older than I am. And he was retiring from the Army and going to Salt Lake City, Utah, to fly for a commercial company, fixed-wing, and — because he had quite a bit of fixed-wing time. He was dual qualified— fixed-wing and helicopters. So he got a job with a company in Salt Lake City. And my time — my mandatory time was up for the Army, so it was a good time for me to leave and join him in Salt Lake City. So — and we were married. So I followed him to Salt Lake City, which is not a good place for women, [laughs] which —

SMITH: So you had actually left the Army?

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. Well, I was still in the Irregular Ready Reserves.³

SMITH: Oh.

McFETRIDGE: So I was still on the books and could be recalled, but all I had to do while I was in the Ready Reserve status was maintain my physical fitness and pass the PT test.

SMITH: IRR, Immediate Regular —

McFETRIDGE: IRR, yes.

SMITH: Okay.

² VIPs are designated by different codes on a flight plan, based on military rank, civilian rating, or position; in flight operations, the VIP is often referred to as the "code."

³ Individual Ready Reserve (IRR).

McFETRIDGE: So

[45:00]

and it — and then it would have been just until my full commitment was completed.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: But during that time, I worked for — so I followed him to Salt Lake City. He'd started to fly for the — for this jet service that he was flying for. They weren't really interested in me. All they saw was helicopter flight time, and they didn't realize that I could do both...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...because I had no military fixed-wing time.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So I ended up being very disappointed. Did a little bit of that, you know, housewife work for a while, and didn't really jell with me. So I ended up finding odds-and-ends jobs that I could do, just to make sure that I was occupied, and —

SMITH: What year was this? This was —

McFETRIDGE: So this would have been between '87 and '88.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: So I worked for — I worked for a — like a — in the warehouse for like a Best Buy. Back then, it wasn't Best Buy. It was Best. But that type of warehouse company. And I worked for a candy company for a little while, which was fun, but dangerous. And then I ended up meeting a friend who said: well, why don't you just go look into the Utah Army Guard? And I did. I was like: where are they? I'll — I drove down the next week to talk to them, and they were like: yes, we have an opening. And filled out the paperwork, and in no time, I was — I was part of the Utah Army National Guard, flying Hueys again. So — and it was an engineering battalion, was — basically the company was flying for the engineers. And we would just do — fly troops back and forth out to the field, back and forth. It gave me a chance to do some more mountain experience, because Salt Lake sits so high. So I got some high-altitude and some mountain training in there. And it was fun, and I really enjoyed the folks. They were, you know, basically part-time military, but they were full-time civilian careers, so I got to meet folks that were nurses at the hospitals but, you know, flying helicopters on the side. Just really nice people, and very professional. So I enjoyed that, but I knew it couldn't be a full-time career. It was a part-time job, and I needed more than that. So that's when my dad, reading a *Navy Times* article, saw that the Coast Guard was looking for military-trained pilots to switch to the Coast Guard. So I went to the Coast Guard recruiters in Salt Lake City, which wasn't a good choice. They had no idea about any of the aviation programs. They really didn't know much. Couldn't help me with that. So I ended up heading to San Diego, where my parents were living, and going through the San Diego recruiters. They managed to get me all the paperwork done, all the physicals completed, and into the program.

SMITH: What were you promised? Like, your conversation with the recruiter went how? [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: Well, it was basically — you know, they already knew what my qualifications were, so I already made — you know, it was — they knew what the qualifications were required for the program,

and they knew what I brought into the program. So there wasn't really a big conversation. It was: okay, here's the paperwork you need to fill out. Here's the physicals we need to have you take. And once it's done, we'll send your package in, and we'll see what they say. And I did have to go through an interview board with other — with some Coast Guard pilots at the San Diego Air Station. They asked me a bunch of questions, and you know, like: you're coming from the Army. You don't know how to fly instruments. I'm like: I have plenty of simulator time. No, we don't fly actual instruments very much, but I have plenty of simulator experience, so I know how to fly instruments. I have my instrument quals. So we got through all that, and my package was put in. And I actually got a letter back from the Coast Guard saying I was an alternate. [laughs] I was like, *Ohhh*. So waited, but I think within the week, I got a call back from the Coast Guard saying: we've had people decline, and now you're a primary. So I was — I was selected.

SMITH: Alright.

McFETRIDGE: And when they gave me that call, they said: these are the air stations we have available. Where would you like to go? And one of them they listed was Alaska. And I was like,

[50:00]

I'll take Alaska. Nobody else —

SMITH: So even before training — I'm sorry to interrupt.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: But you knew before you went to training — you already knew where you would be headed.

McFETRIDGE: Yup, because they sent me then to training based on the helicopter that I was going to be flying for the Coast Guard.

SMITH: Oh, okay.

McFETRIDGE: So I knew going in, as soon as I was accepted into the Coast Guard, I knew I was going to go fly H-3s in Kodiak, Alaska for my first tour. And being a single female, it was just an 18-month tour. So like, I can do anything for 18 months.

SMITH: [laughs] So tell me about the aviation training in Mobile.

McFETRIDGE: So I went to — yeah, Aviation Training Center, Mobile, Alabama, is where the Coast Guard does its transition training. So almost all the Coast Guard pilots go through Navy Pensacola for their initial training, and they get either the fixed-wing or the helicopter training at Pensacola, and then onward for some of the fixed-wing guys. But once — when you transition to a specific Coast Guard helicopter, that training was done at ATC Mobile, so Aviation Training Center, in Mobile, Alabama. So I went there with a couple of other — I was in a class with a couple other pilots who were all former Army pilots that were transitioning to the Coast Guard. And we were all — well, let me back up. We actually had to go through an indoctrination course that was a two-week course at Yorktown, in Virginia, that taught us how to be officers in the Coast Guard, [laughs] and also taught us about — a little bit about the rank structure, a little bit about the benefits, you know, and basically an introduction to Coast Guard life as a transition from Army life. Not a big difference, but you know, they — you know, still had to teach us something. So that was just a two-week course that we went. And then from there, we went to Fort Rucker.

SMITH: Not to Mobile.

McFETRIDGE: I mean, yeah.

SMITH: That's okay.

McFETRIDGE: I'm sorry. Not Rucker.

SMITH: You had a lot of different training bases. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: Mobile, yeah. And there's — yeah, and I'm trying to think back. So Yorktown was our introduction, but from Yorktown, that's when I got the official orders that I was going to go to Kodiak, even though my...

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: ...Detailer told me to expect that. But then I had to return to San Diego to pack up my gear to go to Kodiak. And so I was actually in Kodiak waiting for the class data at ATC Mobile to start. So yeah, it's all complicated, but —

SMITH: So you got to meet your unit, which is kind of nice.

McFETRIDGE: So I got — so I was sent to my unit, yes. And so I came out of the warrant — I came out of the indoctrination as an ensign in the Coast Guard. So I had a promotion from warrant officer to an ensign. I was — it was a promotion and a pay raise, which was always good. So I showed up in Kodiak, Alaska, as a brand-new ensign, but wearing wings, because I earned military wings. So I was able to wear wings. And they were — they don't get a lot of ensigns at the air stations in Alaska, because it's usually a second tour, or a seasoned pilot that they'll send up there, just because it is high altitude and mountain flying. But I'd done all that, so it was okay. So I showed up to the unit. I was there for probably two months before I had orders to go back to ATC Mobile for my actual helicopter course.

SMITH: Did you get any flight time before then?

McFETRIDGE: No. I rode in the back once...

SMITH: No.

McFETRIDGE: ...just so they could show me the area a little bit. And you couldn't really see much. And I was like, itching to get at the controls. But I got to see the area from the air, which was nice. But mostly, they had me just help out in the Public Affairs office, and just kind of stay out of the way until I came back qualified to do something. So I spent about two months in Kodiak, just getting settled, getting into my barracks room, meeting some of the folks, and finding out, you know, pretty much where they would stuff me once I did come back trained, what job they were going to give me. And it ended up being Public Affairs [laughs] Officer of the unit, of course. So the day I was scheduled to leave Kodiak to go to Mobile, there was an earthquake in Alaska. And one of the things they do during an earthquake in Alaska is they prepare to — they get all the aircraft prepared to fly over the villages to let everybody know there's a potential tsunami coming, because they've had villages wiped out with some of the tsunamis from earthquakes before. So everybody's running around the air station,

[55:00]

getting all the aircraft prepped and taking off and flying, you know: “big tsunami” written on the bottom of the C-130s. And everybody’s doing something, and I’m standing there with my luggage, [laughs] waiting for a ride to the airport so that I could catch a flight to —

SMITH: To Mobile. [laughs] Oh, my gosh.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, and they just think I’m an idiot, because here I’m an ensign, and I’ve already got my bags, and I’m trying to leave the island. And I’m like — I’m from California. I know all about earthquakes.

SMITH: On a scheduled...Right. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: It’s not scaring me. But yeah. So it was a — so I ended up having to go to the elementary school to be, you know, declared safe and sound and accounted for, and then I had to tell them I really need to go back to the airport, because I’m — I need a flight out. So it was just —

SMITH: What month was this? Was this ’89, or —

McFETRIDGE: It was — I think it was August, either late July or early August of ’89.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: And it ended up being a one-foot swell of water that washed into the harbor. [laughs] So it was a nothing. But yeah, I looked like a complete fool to everybody there. And they mentioned it when I came back from training. It was like: oh, so you think it’s safe now? And I’m like — so I had to — I lived with that for a while, people joking about it.

SMITH: Ah, just misperceptions.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: That’s interesting.

McFETRIDGE: But anyway, the training at ATC Mobile was about a seven-week course, I believe. And that — there were four of us in the group. And so we paired up as stick buddies. And yeah, seven weeks later, we were all finished, and then we went back to —

SMITH: What’d you fly? I’m sorry.

McFETRIDGE: The HH-3F Pelican.

SMITH: So you —

McFETRIDGE: That was — yeah, ATC.

SMITH: Specific — okay.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: You said that earlier.

McFETRIDGE: Yes.

SMITH: I just needed to — okay.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. So that was my transition into the aircraft that the Coast Guard wanted me to fly, which was the HH-3 Pelican.

SMITH: Did they train in anything else at Mobile, or —

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. Mobile had the — they were still — fixed-wing. The Falcon⁴ was still one of the aircraft they were training in. The HH-3 was there, and then I think they still had H-52s, which were a single-engine amphibious helicopter that was also taught there.

SMITH: Okay. What's the difference between an HH-3 and an H-3?

McFETRIDGE: The HH-3 was a larger aircraft, heavier lift, so it could actually — I think the H-52 could sling most stuff, but it had a larger lift capability and a larger cargo capability. A little bit beefier helicopter than the H-52, and it was a twin-engine. It was also amphibious, so it could land in the water if it needed to. So, yeah. Those three were the primary ones that were being taught at Mobile when I was there. But I was specifically into the H-3.

SMITH: Other than the ribbing that you received, [laughs] how was your reception in the Coast Guard as compared to your reception in the Army?

McFETRIDGE: Really night and day difference. Because in the Army, it was always — it was never — never really aggressive, but it was always like: you really don't belong here. And if you were a female in the Army initially, in those days, you were assumed to be gay, because — I don't know why. But anyway, everybody just thought I was, you know, gay. I'm not. But that's what they assumed. So there was a lot of misperceptions and little innuendoes and, you know, like: you're not strong enough to do this or that. Just little jabs, but nothing really grossly overt. In the Coast Guard, I didn't get any of that. From day one, I didn't get any of that. It was just like: we're so glad to have you. Welcome aboard. This is what we do. This is how we do it. What can I do to help you? Even the wives and family members were just the same way. It was just like: hey, you're part of the family now. So it was a night and day difference between the two services. But then again, there were quite a few years [laughs] between when I started with the Army, and there were no women, to when I was in the Coast Guard, and the Coast Guard had women...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...from then on, so —

SMITH: Did you meet any other women flyers in the Coast Guard?

McFETRIDGE: Yes. Laura Gooth was at — stationed at Kodiak when I got up there. And she was a former Navy pilot, and she had been there — she was married, so she was there on a longer tour anyway. But she had — she was there when I got there, so she had been flying with them for several months or a year before I got there, and was quite competent, so they had no problems with her. And when I showed up and flew, I just fit in, so they didn't have any problems with me either. It was the two of us up there,

[1:00:00]

as the only women in the air station command when we were up there.

⁴ HU-25.

SMITH: So tell me about, you know, progressing through your Coast Guard career and next — was Kodiak just a — was it [emblematic] of the rest of your assignments, or what? Did it stand out in some way? Did some things happen that you might want to share? [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: Yes. So Kodiak — like I said, Kodiak, because it has — because Alaska has some pretty severe weather and a lot of mountains, it's traditionally not a first-tour air station. So they don't send — they traditionally don't send pilots straight from training up to Kodiak to fly. It's usually somebody who's been at an air station before and has become an aircraft commander or has several years under their belt, and then goes up and flies. But because of my Army background, the CO of the unit said: yeah, I'll take her. Bring her up. Because I wasn't that nugget coming straight out of flight school. I was somebody who had already proven myself in aviation, but just was new to an aircraft. So it was unusual to have an ensign there, but everybody was just super kind to me, and I was able to fly the helicopter just fine. It was just — it was fun. It was — the fact that it was amphibious, and we could land it in the water, was just fascinating to me.

SMITH: Tell me about that.

McFETRIDGE: Well, it's — you know, after flying in the Army, where you're flying around trees or landing on dirt all the time, I just never even assumed [laughs] we had helicopters that could land in the water. So I just was fascinated by the fact that it could, and you could take off again, which was keen to me, that you could take off again. But was it really special? No. Just to me, because of my Army background. I'm sure the Navy pilot didn't have any problems with it. She was probably used to it.

SMITH: I think it's pretty special. I'm just curious how you do it. I mean, as compared to a — you know, a firm landing.

McFETRIDGE: You make sure your wheels are up. [laughs]

SMITH: [laughs] Most important.

McFETRIDGE: Actually we would — actually, sometimes — most of the time, I think we left the wheels down, just because they add some stability, like little anchors to hold you. But it was no different from landing on a dirt runway, except that you just — you planned your approach to be nice and slow, so that you settled on the water without sinking in. But it really wasn't much different from what they — what you get training to land on a regular runway. So — and it's been so long now, I don't think there was anything super traumatic about it, but —

SMITH: And when would you do that? Like, what types of missions would you have to land on the water?

McFETRIDGE: Normally — you didn't do it very often. You had to have a very low sea state, so not a lot of wave action, because if it was too much wave action, you could — with that big, huge rotor system on top — it could flip. So we were restricted on basically very calm water conditions in order to land on the water. But as part of the training, you would land on the water so that you'd know how to do it in case you ever had to. The aircraft we were flying had a large cargo door that you slid open, and when you landed on the water, we actually had a platform that would go out, so that if there was somebody you were rescuing, you could pull them right onto the platform and then right into the aircraft. So we did — and that was part of the thing we had to do to practice, and then the crew had to practice that. So we would go out when it was a really nice day, and if it was a super nice day, calm seas, they would let us

land on the water. But it creates a lot of maintenance after action, so we didn't do it [laughs] every day. We would just do it on those — you know, those rare training days when it was like: have you landed on the water recently? Nope. Well, you should know how to do that in case you ever have to for real.

SMITH: Was sea rescue the primary mission?

McFETRIDGE: Yes. In Alaska, rescue was the primary mission. A lot of commercial fishermen. So we were — anytime the fishing seasons were open and the boats were out, we would get a lot of calls from the fishermen. Not really any public traffic, so it wasn't like we had a lot of sailboats or small fishing boats going on. It was — they were money-making commercial fishermen up there, and it was big business for them. And then of course we had hunters and hikers that would get lost in the mountains sometimes. But yeah, search and rescue was the main focus up there.

SMITH: Was this assignment — was this during the time that you had the mission that...

McFETRIDGE: Yes.

SMITH: ...resulted in you earning the — or being awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross?

McFETRIDGE: Yes, it was.

[1:05:00]

SMITH: Can you tell me about that mission?

McFETRIDGE: So between '89 and '91 is when I left Alaska. So between the — in those two years, that's when the *Exxon Valdez* decided to [laughs] have its little incident in Prince William Sound. So the air station had a deployment site over in Cordova, Alaska, which was near the Prince William Sound. And they would send crews over there — a helicopter and crews over there on a regular basis during their fishing season, to make sure the Prince William Sound was covered, because Kodiak Island was further down the island chain from Prince William Sound, because Prince William Sound had a lot of fishing traffic. But when the *Exxon Valdez* happened, they kept Cordova open year-round. So when I got up into Alaska and we started to fly, Cordova was a year-round deployment site now. So you'd go for two weeks at a time, and then you'd come back to the home station, and they'd send a new crew. So crews were constantly transferring in and out of Cordova, Alaska, during the Prince William Sound ordeal. And a lot of our flights there were taking the employees and the workers out to the oil beaches and letting them clean up the oil mess and do, you know, spot oil spills for them and just fly around and be support for that massive cleanup effort. So I did that quite a bit, and during one of the times when I was stationed over in Cordova is when — and I was the co-pilot at the time — but when the pilot and I were on duty — and you did a port and starboard, so you'd be on for 24 hours, and then be off for 24 hours while the other crew was on. And you'd just switch back and forth for that two-week period. You'd be on and off duty. Well, we were just coming on duty in Cordova when we got a call from the SAR center, saying — the Search and Rescue center — saying that they had an EPIRB — an Emergency Position-Indicating Radio Beacon — that was going off in the mouth of Prince William Sound from a fishing vessel, but they weren't able to contact it — get any radio communication from the vessel. So they sent us out to look for this EPIRB, so see if anybody was in distress, because it normally will go off when a boat has turned over, because it's upright, but when you turn it over, the beacon goes off. So the assumption is that somebody has sunk. So we went out looking for a vessel. We didn't really know what we were looking for, but we knew it's a vessel, and an EPIRB was going off. It was pretty severe [laughs] weather at the

time. They were having — it was an Alaskan gale, which is, I guess, similar to a tropical hurricane. So very intense winds, lots of rain, low visibility. But the H-3 could take off. You could start the rotor system with 60 knots of wind.

SMITH: Wow.

McFETRIDGE: So as long as you had the wind coming off your nose, you could start the helicopter. And after that, I mean, it was just a wonderful helicopter. It just — amazing power. And so practical. Anyway, we were able to take off in the conditions that they were flying in, and we started our search. And basically, we were just doing like a shoreline search, because we had no real idea of where this boat was. We kind of knew where the signal was coming from. They could pinpoint it so — but we really didn't know where it was coming from exactly, and where the wind was blowing it. So we started to search up and down the shoreline. And it was really at the end of our search, when we were thinking about heading back to the air station to get refueled — so we'd go out for another load — that we actually spotted a boat that had burned all the way down to the waterline, and was being battered around by the waves, but was still — you could still see it on the surface. So then we knew [laughs] that somebody had — we figured that somebody had been in the boat. We'd get the name. We'd give it to the Search and Rescue center, and they'd do some tracking to find out that — who the owner was, and they'd do all their background work. But they basically end up finding out that they suspect there were up to three crewmen on that boat, and so now we were going from a search for an EPIRB to potentially three victims. So we were flying around that area, watching our fuel gauge really close now, because we were — now it was in an area where we figured I — we were constantly minute-by-minute figuring

[1:10:00]

out: do we have enough to get back to get more gas if we needed to? But fortunately, in that time, we spotted the raft and were able to get all three of the individuals off the raft and in the helicopter and back to the base with plenty of gas left over. [laughs] So yeah, it was exciting. It was about 30-foot seas, and the raft was being battered around quite a bit. And the pilot — the pilot sits on the right-hand side in the helicopter, because that's where the hoist is located from the cabin. So the pilot in command was on the right-hand side, but the waves would wash the raft over to where it was on my side, and he couldn't see it. So I'd have to take the controls, and hover over the raft until it started to slide back to his side, so that he could see it again. So between the two of us, we were constantly flying the helicopter between us, transferring controls, until we could get all three of them hoisted up into the helicopter. And the rain — the rain was so heavy that the — it washed out the communications systems with the crew in the back, so we had — pilot and co-pilot were up front, and the flight mechanic and our avionics men were both working the hoist in the back. And their ICS system went out — Inter-Communication System in the aircraft, where we'd talk to each other. It was waterlogged, so that every time they'd try to use it, it would squeal really loudly, and you couldn't hear anything. So when the pilot was flying it and hovering, I'd be turning around and looking at the crew in the back and hearing what they would say, and then I'd relay it to the pilot. And then when I was flying, [laughs] he did the same thing. So we were just shouting commands and instructions back and forth between each other to maintain our position, because the person in—the flight mech in the back—is the one that's directing the crew, the pilot, on his position and how to hover over it. So, you know, slide to the right. Slide to the left. Go forward. Go backward. He's the one that has the visibility right on where the raft is. So it's very important you talk to him. So we're just shouting commands back and forth to each other. The rain's pouring in the cabin. We got all three of them and got them back home safe. That was —

SMITH: Amazing.

McFETRIDGE: It was amazing. It was — actually, I think, my very first SAR case with the Coast Guard. And you know, I didn't have anything to compare it with, so I just thought this was great. This is what the Coast Guard does. I'm totally in love with the Coast Guard. And I had no idea that it was anything out of the ordinary. I just thought that's what the Coast Guard does, so I'm part of it. It was fun.

SMITH: Wow. We're going to take a break, so —

[TAPE PAUSED at 1:12:51]

SMITH: So we were just talking about the mission that earned you the DFC.⁵

McFETRIDGE: Yes.

SMITH: You were the first woman in the entire military?

McFETRIDGE: First woman in the Coast Guard.

SMITH: In the Coast Guard.

McFETRIDGE: In the Coast Guard, to get a DFC. And I don't know enough about the history of it to know if I was the first in any of the other DOD services, but it was in 1990, '91. In that time frame.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: I think '90 that I was awarded the DFC, which was a complete surprise to me. I assumed — I didn't know anything really about the medal system in the Coast Guard. So I was — it was — and they kept it secret while they were — while the Awards Board was deliberating. They kept it all secret from us, so I had no idea it was coming. But — so it was quite a surprise.

SMITH: Who were the other crewmates, or at least the other —

McFETRIDGE: Our engineering officer, Commander Estes, was the pilot in command of the helicopter for the rescue, and our flight mechanic was Mike Proctor. He was an AV-2, I believe, at the time. And our avionics man was Scott Cumberland, and he was an AV-2, I believe, also, Second Class. So they had both been — they were both experienced crewmen. So really — I was probably the newest, freshest, on the crew at that point.

SMITH: Did you have any other SAR missions?

McFETRIDGE: Lots of SAR missions. Some of them were — I don't think I had any other sinkings while I was in Kodiak. Lots of overdues. A lot of flare sightings, where someone would report a flare, and you'd go out, and you'd search to see if you could find anything in the area. Some rescues — one was a quasi-sea cave rescue, where we actually had to hover the helicopter in — kind of below the cave

[1:15:00]

⁵ Distinguished Flying Cross.

in order to pick some fishermen up that — his boat had sunk, and he was kind of safe on a little sandbar within the cave, but we had to actually bring the helicopter in and kind of under it, just to pull him out and then fly away. So there were some very interesting —

SMITH: Yes.

McFETRIDGE: Interesting flights up there, but that — flying in that gale was probably the most challenging, and the most rewarding as well.

SMITH: Of course, because to rescue three lives, that's —

McFETRIDGE: Yes. Yeah, I mean—

SMITH: Who knows how long they would have lasted. They might not have lasted in time for you to go back and refuel.

McFETRIDGE: No. We would have — I don't think we would have found them if we'd had had to depart scene to go get gas and come back.

SMITH: Wow. So at the end of that tour, or at some time, did you ask for an assignment to Florida, or —

McFETRIDGE: I never asked for any specific assignment, because I didn't — really didn't care where they sent me. I figured, anywhere they send me is going to be great, and I'll enjoy it. So I did — so the detailer actually gave me a call and said—the detailer. So in aviation, we have the specific officers in Coast Guard headquarters whose job it is — is to transfer people around when it comes time for their tours to start over. So the detailer actually called me up and said: hey, would you like to go to Clearwater, Florida? And I said: sure. I'm glad to. So — and they normally keep you in the same aircraft that you're flying. So not every air station in the Coast Guard has H-3s. So we would go to whatever air station did have H-3s. Clearwater was one of them that had H-3s, so I said: yes, I'll go to Florida. So in '91, in September of '91, I went to Clearwater, Florida, and flew the H-3s there. Again, doing mostly search and rescue. But when I was in Florida is when the Coast Guard transitioned from the H-3, which was at the end of its life cycle and being basically sent to the desert and retired, and we transitioned to the H-60 Jayhawk, which is like the Army's Blackhawk, but our — Coast Guard version. So for a short time in Clearwater, I was actually dual-qual'd. So I was flying not only the H-3, but I was also learning to fly in the H-60. So I was flying both aircraft until the H-3 went away, and then I was completely into the H-60.

SMITH: Compare them: the H-3 and--

McFETRIDGE: The H-3 was — like I said, it was the amphibious aircraft. Big, huge cargo area, so — but we usually flew around with relatively no cargo in it, to be honest. So it was a big aircraft, but mostly with a hollow inside. The H-60 though was much more powerful, so it could do more heavy work than the H-3, but it has a much smaller cabin. So you couldn't pile a whole bunch of stuff in there, a whole bunch of people, but it had a lot more power. And so it was sturdier to fly, I guess, is the easiest way to say it. You felt more comfortable in it, because you could — you knew you could hover in a lot worse conditions than the H-3. The H-3 was so big that the wind would buffet it around. The H-60 was just solid. You could fly.

SMITH: But mission-wise, same sort of mission?

McFETRIDGE: Same mission, except the — we also started to test the shipboard qualities of the H-60. So our unit did quite a bit of qualifications, shipboard qualifications. So I did get qualified to put an H-60 on the back of two of our different-sized cutters, which was [laughs] quite exciting.

SMITH: Tell me about that process, to get qual'd.

McFETRIDGE: Well, you'd go out with — your initial pilots would — your senior instructors would be qualified, and then they would teach the rest of the pilots the qualifications. And so we had some experienced pilots in the unit that then took us out on ship quals and would teach us how to land on the back of the cutters. And there'd be some — obviously some classroom training as well, but basically it was “go out there and do it.” And we had our 378-foot cutters and our 270-foot cutters, are the two cutters that we were — that — the only two cutters that the aircraft would even fit on. And so I got to qualify on both different types of cutters. One cutter had a big CIWS⁶ gun

[1:20:00]

on the back of the ship, and so you couldn't land straight into the back of the boat like you would a cutter. I shouldn't say boat — back of the cutter, because you would — your tail would hit that CIWS. So we had to come in and land diagonally. And so that was a little bit tricky, because you lose sight of the boat when you're landing sideways. So, you know, one person can see everything, and one person sees ocean. So the whole crew concept of two people working together to make this happen was challenging.

SMITH: In order to be qual'd, did you have to do the approach from both seats?

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. You'd have to — you'd have to be the safety pilot for the pilot flying, and then you'd have to take your turn being the pilot flying and let somebody else be your safety pilot. So you'd switch back and forth, and then — but the training is so good that, you know, you just do it. You just — you have that somebody talking in your head the whole time when you're doing it, and it's like: okay, I've got it. I'm doing this. I'm doing this. I'm doing this. And you're on the deck. So I did that for both the 378 and the 270 while I was in Clearwater. And they basically — the whole concept was to prove that a 60 could be deployed on the back of a cutter, and we basically proved that it's not wise to put a 60 on the back of a cutter, because there was such a limited amount of space for the — between the rotor blades and the superstructure on the boat that — you know, it was just a recipe for disaster if anybody hit it. So we did some proof of concept while I was at the unit, and then my small piece was just to be one of the pilots that got qualified. Nothing special. I wasn't an instructor or anything. But we did that. So that was a little bit different from my Kodiak tour. But otherwise, it was still basically the same: flying search and rescue, overdues, flare sightings, you know, mayday calls. And then Clearwater, as well, had the narcotics mission in the Bahamas, so we would deploy crews to the Bahamas, and they would do patrols around the Bahamas, looking for smugglers, basically, that would come up from Cuba, from wherever, from anywhere in the Caribbean, and try to get into the Florida Keys or the Florida coast. So that was a big part of that mission, too — was you'd go over to the Bahamas for every two weeks, and then like Cordova, you'd rotate crews in and out. You'd be on port and starboard rotation. So I did that for a lot of that — a good portion of that tour.

SMITH: Was that an armed mission?

⁶ [Phalanx] Close-In Weapon System. “The Cutters, Boats, and Aircraft of the U.S. Coast Guard,” n.d. Accessed Nov 12, 2019, <https://www.uscg.mil/>, 131-4.

McFETRIDGE: We had a shotgun, and so we had to be qualified to fire a shotgun. But the shotgun was basically there for emergencies. If we had to land someplace and we were in hostile territory, we could use the shotgun to defend ourselves. So we weren't really armed, per se. But we carried along a DEA agent and a Bahamian — DEU, I think, is what their agency was called. So we — and they were armed. So those two on board would be armed with their own sidearms, but the aircraft itself...

SMITH: It was not.

McFETRIDGE: ...it was just that one shotgun. It was locked up. You know, different people had knowledge of where the keys were. And I mean, it was just — it was to keep us from doing anything silly.

SMITH: And I — oh, go ahead. Sorry.

McFETRIDGE: Most of our drug runners would — they knew exactly what our capabilities were, and we could spot them, and we could call in a fixed-wing asset with longer legs to stay on top, to follow them. But if they saw a helicopter come up, they'd just go dead in the water. And now all we're doing is just circling [laughs] the target, waiting to see where they're going to go. And they just wait until we need to head home for gas, and then they take off. So there wasn't a lot of action. It was very frustrating, actually, that we really couldn't do more to stop them.

SMITH: Well, one of the reasons I asked about armed, is during that time frame, the rules changed about women flying combat aircraft. And I'm curious. Did that impact the Coast Guard, to your knowledge?

McFETRIDGE: No. No. No, the Coast Guard — one of the things I loved about the Coast Guard, right from the beginning, was that the Coast Guard felt like men and women should be able to do the same job equally. So there was never a prohibition against women on cutters, firing the guns. There was just no — never a prohibition. There wasn't a prohibition in aviation for what we could fly as well. So — and we weren't — we weren't armed. The Coast Guard wasn't

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an armed service, so to speak, because we didn't want people to fear us coming out [laughs] to rescue them.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So what — but we did have, obviously, a military mission. We fall under the Department of the Navy in any time of war, so we do have a mission to be a military — an armed military service, and we do have teams that go out and do boardings that are fully armed. But aviation-wise, no. We were, generally speaking, not armed. If we were armed, it was that shotgun that was there to save our lives if we were ever in a situation where we had to defend ourselves, but not to be aggressors. So I'd never had any — I never had any problems with that, and the Coast Guard never gave me any grief over it. And I will say during the time I was in Clearwater is when Haiti exploded, and all the Haitians were trying to get out of Haiti. And there was a mission that we joined in with the DOD on to fly crews towards Haiti. And that's the one time when I was asked to fly a different mission than my peers were flying, because they were going to be headed towards Haiti and toward some of the Navy ships that were out there. And I was going to be sent to trail other aircraft that were going towards the Bahamas and to a non-threat [crosstalk].

SMITH: Non-hostile. Right.

McFETRIDGE: So that's the only time when I was in the Coast Guard that I got that little bit of a —you know: you're a woman. You can't be on the front lines, so to speak.

SMITH: Meanwhile, in the Air Force, I was on a crew to invade them, so [laughs] —

McFETRIDGE: Right. And I think that's what that was. There was — the Coast Guard was going to escort the DOD invasion force to Haiti, and I couldn't be part of that because it was combat-related. So I was the force that was supporting the rear-echelon guys that were going to go in.

SMITH: That's so interesting. We'll have to talk...

McFETRIDGE: Yes.

SMITH: ...more about that. [laughs] But — so after Clearwater, then Los Angeles?

McFETRIDGE: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: Let me — let me back up. I'm sorry.

McFETRIDGE: Okay.

SMITH: Were there any other instances that you can remember when you were asked to fly a different mission for the reason that we just —

McFETRIDGE: That was actually the only one, in the Coast Guard, where it was — you know, just — and it was because we were working with the DOD, and it was, like, their policy still was, you know, we're going to be sending all the guys forward. They're going to be living in huts together, and we don't have a space for a woman, is what it came down to.

SMITH: Oh, because you would been in-country with — which is different from —

McFETRIDGE: Yes. Yeah.

SMITH: I was trying to wrap my head around —

McFETRIDGE: Or on the ship and not able to get — yeah.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So that was — it was more — it was voiced to me as a space issue, which I just — I knew was women in combat, and they don't have — they haven't transitioned yet, so —

SMITH: It wasn't the aerial piece. It was the ground portion...

McFETRIDGE: Yes, it was the —

SMITH: ...of the quartering.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, what would they do with me once I land the helicopter?

SMITH: Interesting.

McFETRIDGE: So — and I didn't care at that point. I was still flying. I was still, you know, doing the mission.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: I knew the Bahamas very well from all my deployments over there, so there was no reason to make a big stink about it. And I didn't care. It doesn't bother me. But women were already flying at that point, so. Because I think they lifted the ban on combat when I was in Kodiak still.

SMITH: So I know things changed in the Air Force in '93, and this mission — I have to look in my log book.

McFETRIDGE: Okay, it might have been Clearwater when it happened, but it was —

SMITH: Yeah, it was actually — I think it was lifted after this mission, because I remember —

McFETRIDGE: Well, then that's why.

SMITH: Yeah.

McFETRIDGE: Then it would still have been the ban that was holding me back.

SMITH: I have to compare my logbook.

McFETRIDGE: Because that would have been somewhere in '93, '94, when we were basically a full 60 unit.

SMITH: Oh, wow. It was '94. It was '94. September of '94.⁷

McFETRIDGE: Okay. Yeah.

SMITH: If I remember it correctly.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, because they flew us all down to, I think it was Homestead, before Homestead was [laughs] wiped off the map.⁸ So I think we were all in Homestead, and that's when they divvied up the jobs and said: no, you're going to have to —you're going to have to go with the Chinooks, and they're headed towards the Bahamas to be the second wave, I guess, that would go in, once everything was tactically taken care of.

SMITH: Right.

⁷ Smith appears to merge two operations: the Haitian Refugee Crisis that began in Sept 1991, and the Sept 1994 Operation Uphold Democracy invasion of Haiti. Beginning in 1991, Haitian refugees were transported by the U.S. Coast Guard to Guantanamo Air Base, Cuba; U.S. Air Force planes delivered supplies to the base. Regarding the combat exclusion law, McFetridge is correct; the law was changed in Dec 1991, allowing women to fly combat aircraft (PL 102-190). However, DoD retained a policy of not allowing women into combat, until that policy was changed in April 1993. A planned invasion of Haiti, under Operation Uphold Democracy, was launched on September 17, 1994. Former President Jimmy Carter, CJCS General Colin Powell, and Senator Sam Nunn traveled to Haiti and negotiated a last-minute settlement, averting hostility. Accessed Nov 12, 2019, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1993-2000/haiti>.

⁸ Hurricane Andrew devastated Homestead AFB, FL in August 1992.

McFETRIDGE: So I ended up — and then it ended up that the Chinook that I was escorting to the Bahamas ended up having an in-flight emergency, so my knowledge of where

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to take them to the Bahamas was perfect. So it worked out just fine. But yeah, that was the only time that at that — that we had — was ever raised about the “you can’t fly.”

SMITH: And thankfully, former President Carter and General Powell took care of things.

McFETRIDGE: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: So it wasn’t an issue. Okay, so let’s move on to the Dolphin in Los Angeles. And tell me about —

McFETRIDGE: Okay. So while I was in Clearwater, I was selected for the Aeronautical Engineering program in the Coast Guard. So basically, the maintenance officer program in the Coast Guard. And so going to Los Angeles, I was actually going to Los Angeles as an engineering officer. So I was going to be the officer in charge of the maintenance program for the air station, which was wonderful. I mean it was — that was — you know, that made my career path, basically, for me.

SMITH: Did you know any other women in the Coast Guard who had been the engineering officer?

McFETRIDGE: I had — I knew I wanted the program, and I really didn’t know other women in it, but I was told that there were other women in the program already. But I always knew — I knew when I was flying with the Army, I was with the maintenance department quite a bit and did a lot. I was actually trying to dual-track as an instructor pilot and a maintenance officer at the same time. But I left before all that took place. But I’d worked a lot in the maintenance and did a lot of test flights when I was in the Army.

SMITH: What was the appeal? I’m sorry to interrupt.

McFETRIDGE: I have a little bit of a mechanical aptitude, and I just like [laughs] to — I like to fix things, or to understand how things work. So it was just a comfort for me.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: I felt more comfortable, and that’s where all the guys were as well, so having grown up with brothers, I felt comfortable on the hangar deck with the guys, turning wrenches. Anyway, I was picked up for the program, so I went to LA as the engineering officer, which is why I was able to go from flying H-60s to flying the H-65s, because I went to a job instead of going to an air station that had the same helicopters I was flying, if that makes sense.

SMITH: Yes. So otherwise, you would have...

McFETRIDGE: Otherwise...

SMITH: ...continued to track.

McFETRIDGE: ...I would have tracked to another air station that had H-60s.

SMITH: Ah.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: Interesting.

McFETRIDGE: So I got to LA and was the engineering officer and was able to fly the Alpha and the Bravo models of H-65. So anytime they did like an avionics upgrade, the model would change. So I started out with the Alpha model, which was very basic. And then they did an avionics change, which I can't even remember what the change was. But it turned it into the Bravo model of the aircraft. So I flew both those while I was there. Did the majority of the test flights and ground runs as the engineering officer and did deploy on the back of a ship with the 65. I did two deployments. They were each just 30-day deployments.

SMITH: Tell me about as much as you can. I don't know if you can tell me about that.

McFETRIDGE: Well, flying a 65 — landing a 65 on the back of a cutter was so much more room [laughs] than landing a 60. That was — it was easier, because you really did have a lot more room between the rotor disk and the super-structure, so the pucker factor [laughs] was much better. So it was much easier to land a 65 on the cutters. The cutters were always — there were two cutters. The first cutter was a 378.⁹ A little challenging. They didn't have a lot of — they did have women on the cutter, but they hadn't had a lot of female aviators. So it was — it was a great deployment, because I got to see a lot, experience a lot, get another side of the Coast Guard's missions that I hadn't flown. But I was glad to be off after 30 days. It was — I was like — [laughs]. I like being on firm ground.

SMITH: Where were you — where were you deployed?

McFETRIDGE: Most — the deployments, for the most part, were down off of the Mexican coast in the South — not the South Pacific. But the Pacific —

SMITH: Pacific's —

McFETRIDGE: No, it's because it was Los Angeles. It was always the Pacific coast, but down off of Baja and the parts of Mexico out on the — looking for, again, smugglers for the most part. You know, what — the first ship — actually, was it the first ship? Yeah, I think that was the first ship. The XO, the second in command, was a big fisherman. So we'd be flying back after finishing our patrol of their area, and if we spotted any fish, we'd tell him, and he'd like, you know, [laughs] bring the ship to a halt, and everybody'd throw fishing lines out. So they appreciate us, because we were offering them a service when we came back.

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We got a few — I think we busted a few drug-runners while on that patrol, but it was — but it was a lot of ocean, and not a lot of activity.

SMITH: So what happens?

McFETRIDGE: We fly a pattern. So we'll fly off the cutter, and just basically fly as far out as we can, that the cutter could get to in a day, or a day and a half. So we look at their whole patrol area, and just spot targets for them. If there's something they want to go look at, then they, you know, turn the ship that

⁹ "The Cutters, Boats, and Aircraft of the U.S. Coast Guard," n.d. Accessed Nov 12, 2019, <https://www.uscg.mil/>, 131-4.

direction and go look. So we just look for targets of interest. And then they would — and once we land, then they would go look at these targets and just determine if they were bad guys or not. Occasionally, we would find one, and then they'd go through the whole drug-seizure process. And that's all we did for those 30 days, was go out and look at targets.

SMITH: So when they're actually doing the seizure, are you airborne? Have you already come back to the ship?

McFETRIDGE: For the most part, we're already back on the ship, and they're sending out their small boats to go do the actual seizure and take-down. So, yeah.

SMITH: Wow. So — oh, go ahead.

McFETRIDGE: I was going to say, mostly they do that, because once they — they can't do a lot of maneuvering while we're trying to recover.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So if they're trying to follow somebody and speed up or catch up to them, they may be going in a completely different direction than we can land. And so — so they usually try to recover us first, so they can maneuver and do anything they want to do.

SMITH: So from Los Angeles, you left there sometime in 2000.

McFETRIDGE: I left there in 2000, yes.

SMITH: In 2000.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: And you went to Elizabeth City, North Carolina?

McFETRIDGE: Yes.

SMITH: Air Station.

McFETRIDGE: Again, I was going to a position instead of an aircraft, per se.

SMITH: Gotcha.

McFETRIDGE: So I was sent to Elizabeth City as the assistant engineering officer, because since Elizabeth City is — has two different aircraft, they have an engineering officer in charge of all the — all the aircraft. They have an assistant engineering officer who assists that officer with managing the whole program. But then they have an engineering officer for the helicopter side, and an engineering officer for the fixed-wing side. And so I was the assistant engineer overseeing those two aircraft engineers and then reporting to the engineering officer himself. So because I wasn't — again, I was going to a position and not an aircraft type, I got a fixed-wing transition. [laughs] And so I was flying C-130s out of Elizabeth City.

SMITH: So you transitioned. Tell me about that training and where you go.

McFETRIDGE: So all the helicopter transitions go back to ATC in Mobile. So when I went from the H-3 to the 60, I had to go through Mobile to learn how to fly the 60. When I went from the H-60 to the H-

65, I had to go to Mobile to learn how to fly the 65. When I went from the 65 to the C-130, I had to go to the Air Force training [laughs] at Little Rock, Arkansas.

SMITH: Big difference. No gulf shrimp. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: Big difference, yeah. No, and a completely different, you know, world, and DOD world compared to the — then, the DOT world. So I was sent to Little Rock to go through the C-130 transition. And it was —

SMITH: You solidified your choice of the Coast Guard. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: I — absolutely. I was actually kicked out of Little Rock. [laughs]

SMITH: So you know I have to ask you about that.

McFETRIDGE: Yes. So Little Rock — the Air Force was going through a transition and also basically building a — I don't know what it — a school for an aviation training command, basically, which I guess they hadn't really solidified in the past. So, different units did all their in-house training, but now they were kind of coming out with the schoolhouse that was going to standardize everything, standardize the training. The National Guard in Little Rock had been doing a lot of the training. They were going to be pulled out of the picture, and it was going to be an active-duty training command. So they were doing some transitional stuff there in Little Rock when I was there. And they'd also had a C-130 land short in the desert, during the war.¹⁰ And they blamed it all on training. So all that was going on when little me [laughs] and my stick buddy, who was another Coast Guard pilot who's going through Little Rock to the C-130 from helicopters, show up. And Little Rock considered themselves the graduate-level of flight training. So you had to go through an undergraduate fixed-wing program

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in order to be allowed to go to Little Rock for the graduate program in C-130s. Well, both of us were showing up, and we had — other than my private pilot time, I had no military fixed-wing time prior to this.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So we were told to fudge [laughs] at the end. Just tell them: yeah, we're qualified, because the Coast Guard had an agreement with the Air Force that our pilots would go through Little Rock's training. Well, needless to say, while all this is going on with the Air Force restructuring, they find out that we're not prior fixed-wing trained. They assumed we were, because we went — because most Coasties go through Pensacola, and they get some fixed-wing time. But they found out that we were prior Army, both of us, and so they asked us to leave. [laughs] So both of us — yeah. It was very —

SMITH: Did you have to go to a, like —

McFETRIDGE: No. What had ended up happening is that we were already — we had already gone through all the simulator training. We had already gone through the first flights of actual aircraft training. And they only give you like six flights. We were all, you know, like in our third flight, and they just said:

¹⁰ On Dec 10, 1999, a C-130E landed almost 3,000 feet short of the runway at Al Jaber Air Base, Kuwait, killing three and injuring 17. Accessed Nov 13, 2019, <https://aviationweek.com/awin/c-130-kuwait-incident-struck-ground-short-runway>; <http://www.c-130.net/aircraft-database/C-130/airframe-profile/6860/>.

look, you're going to need — you're going to need extra time. How come we're going to need extra time? And that's when they dug, and they found out, well, you never really did any fixed-wing flying before this. Yeah. No, not really. So we were already in the aircraft, flying, doing takeoff and landing. It wasn't like we were unable to fly. But they said: no. According to our new structure program, you don't meet the entry requirements. So, leave. So it was embarrassing for the Coast Guard. But the Coast Guard then, because they were embarrassed about it, because they had actually told us to fudge, and we were like — well, we're not —

SMITH: Oh, the Coast Guard did. Okay.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. They said, you know, just put down that you've got, you know, T-38 time, or whatever it was, from Pensacola. And I'm like, ugh, no. I don't. So I didn't put anything down. And that's when they were able to find out that — and same with my stick buddy. Anyway, they send us — the Coast Guard said: fine. We'll just train you in-house. We'll finish up your qualifications in-house. So we went back. We were both stationed in Elizabeth City. So we both went back to Elizabeth City, and one of the instructor pilots there in Elizabeth City just gave our final course flights. So we came out as co-pilots anyway, but —

SMITH: So was the Air Force going to send you to — I mean, I've heard of other people going to transition training at UPT for six weeks, but —

McFETRIDGE: Nope. They were —

SMITH: There was no —

McFETRIDGE: They were going to basically stick the Coast Guard's nose in it and say...

SMITH: Oh.

McFETRIDGE: ...you guys are not meeting our requirements. You're sending pilots who are not qualified for this program — in their eyes, meaning...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...we didn't have prior military fixed-wing training. But we — when I was sitting across from the colonel, who was telling me that, you know, [laughs] you're busted. You're going home — he was like: how many hours you have? And I'm like: 6,000. And he had like four. He's like: so you're good pilots, huh? And I'm like: yes, we're good pilots, but we just don't meet your qualifications, so —

SMITH: On paper.

McFETRIDGE: On paper.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: And we would have needed probably an extra flight or two, and they were just — they didn't want to spend the extra time on us, so — so anyway, so we went back to Elizabeth City, and both of us were qualified in Elizabeth City. And everything was just fine.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: It was like it never happened, but it was embarrassing to be — to have to admit [laughs] that we were kicked out of Little Rock. Probably the first —

SMITH: I thought you'd had a good bar story for me.

McFETRIDGE: No, no.

SMITH: But no.

McFETRIDGE: No, I was just — and part of it was I think I was a victim of circumstances...

SMITH: Yeah.

McFETRIDGE: ...because the Coast Guard had been doing this for a while.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: And apparently — apparently, a lot of the Coasties going through it had had to have extra flights, because — to get us to the standard that the Air Force wanted. So, you know, okay. Sure, it was our first time around. We didn't quite get it. You're going to need another flight. Well, I guess the Air Force pilots got it on the first time, but — so —

SMITH: Maybe. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: We were — yeah, maybe. But regardless, we were victims, and a lot of our guys had gone through the National Guard training, which was, you know, much less rigorous, and much more friendly.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So, yeah. So anyway — yeah. So I was kicked out of Little Rock.

SMITH: Then back to Elizabeth City.

McFETRIDGE: So —

SMITH: During this time, 9/11 happened.

McFETRIDGE: Elizabeth City — yeah, 9/11 happened, which really didn't affect us much. It just made us a little bit more aware of our infrastructure, because Elizabeth City is actually a Coast Guard Air Station. So it's one of the few that we, you know, need to make sure that somebody didn't attack our runway and you know, cripple one of the only air stations — only air — Coast Guard-owned airports in the — in the inventory. But other than that, our missions really didn't change. We were —

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fixed-wing was primarily besides some limited search and rescue, because the helicopters did most of that — most of our mission was to support the International Ice Patrol. So we would fly up to Canada, mostly in the Newfoundland area, and do the patrols for icebergs. So that was fun. That was interesting. Just a new area to see, a new mission to fly. Pretty boring flying, because you're straight and level, and you know, and shallow turns so that the radars can still picture the icebergs. But a neat area to fly in. And we did, on one of the flights, get to drop a wreath to mark the site of the *Titanic*. So that was kind of historic.

I mean, they do it every year, but for me, that was something that I felt was kind of historic. That was cool.

SMITH: Do you remember what year that was?

McFETRIDGE: Not exactly, but it would have been —

SMITH: Between 2000 and 2004? [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: And 2004, yeah. Somewhere in there. And it just depended on whether I was on that trip...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...when that date came up, and I could — it's April, I think. It was sometime in April.

SMITH: So when you were patrolling the ice, were you taking readings? What —

McFETRIDGE: So we went out with — the aircraft was equipped with side-looking radar.

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: And so, you would fly a very — you would fly a pattern that the radar operators would dictate to you in the beginning of the flight. And they all belonged to the International Ice Patrol team, so they knew — they knew where they wanted to search, and you would go out, get up to altitude, and then fly that search pattern, so that they could track the ice within that grid. And then you'd just do that like every day, just a new search pattern.

SMITH: How long? I mean, the missions were —

McFETRIDGE: They were like eight-hour flights.

SMITH: Yeah.

McFETRIDGE: So, long, [laughs] boring, you know. You're not doing a lot of turns. You know, you're doing gentle turns. But you know, they were getting great readings on their radar.

SMITH: And you were — were you stationed, or — I mean, you had a — like an out location?

McFETRIDGE: We actually — we would stay — in the local economy, we'd stay up there in St. John's in Newfoundland, is where we would — we would park the aircraft and use their hangar and stay in one of the local hotels. And we did that — because they were eight-hour missions, it wasn't really a port-and-starboard. You didn't have another crew up there. It was one aircraft, one crew, and you did that for, I think, a week at a time. And then they'd send up a new crew every two weeks. But yeah, it was — so it was interesting. The area was interesting. The climate was challenging, because you know, it would snow on you, and it would be sunny in the same day. And it was just like — but yeah, the — and the mission was a good mission, but it tended to be a little bit boring as far as the flying was concerned. And we really didn't do any SAR up there. It was almost all just tracking icebergs.

SMITH: For the Coast Guard overall, any changes that you noticed in terms of this — maybe that happened a little bit later — in terms of DHS involvement, and —

McFETRIDGE: No. The Coast Guard really stayed true. When we switched from the Department of Transportation to the Department of Homeland Security, there really wasn't a big turn within the Coast Guard. We still had a — we still had the missions that we were flying. We may have consolidated them into 11 core missions, but they were basically the same missions that we had been tasked with doing from the very beginning, regardless of who we belonged to. The biggest change I think I noticed was with some of the other agencies that now fell under the same Department of Homeland Security, and you know, all these concerns over budgets and whether somebody's mission is now going to be absorbed by another agency, and you know, for lack of a better word, "turf wars" with some of the agencies that now came under Department of Homeland Security. And the Coast Guard being one of the biggest of the biggest within the Department of Homeland Security, with a pretty significant budget, there was a lot of, I think, probably turned at the headquarters level over DHS, but really not at the field level. We really didn't notice much of anything as far as the change.

SMITH: So after Elizabeth City, then you get to —

McFETRIDGE: So after Elizabeth City, I was given the opportunity

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to go down to Puerto Rico and be the engineering officer, which as an engineering officer, it's unusual to get a chance to do it twice in a career. So I felt extremely lucky to be offered the chance to go back to being the engineering officer at an air station.

SMITH: What was your rank at this point?

McFETRIDGE: By this time, I was a lieutenant commander. So I was an O-4. Going down — actually, just promoted to O-5, so I was going to Borinquen as a brand-new commander, O-5, in the Coast Guard. So — and again, going to position, and not necessarily based on where the C-130s are located. So I transitioned back to flying the H-65 in Puerto Rico, because that's all they had down there. So I did that, and now they were flying the Bravo model, but transitioning into a Charlie model, which again is just another equipment upgrade. And there had been so many, I can't tell you which one of those. But so I was going back to fly a 65. Again, I went from Elizabeth City to ATC Mobile, got my transition, and then went down to Puerto Rico as a 65 pilot. After one year as the engineering officer, the executive officer was transferring, and so the CO asked if I would fleet up to be the executive officer. So I went from — I finished just one year as an EO, and then moved in to be the executive officer for the unit, and did that for two years.

SMITH: What does "fleet up" mean?

McFETRIDGE: It means — it means that I get basically — I don't have to compete for the job, because as an engineering officer, it's technically considered a pre-command position. An executive officer is basically a command position, because it's second in command to the commanding officer of the base. So as a fleet up, I basically — I'm in-house, and I changed positions from being the EO to being the XO. And so I really don't have to go for — before a full board...

SMITH: Board.

McFETRIDGE: ...and get selected for it. It happens frequently, but they don't — it happens because you're qualified, and they need a position, and you're there already. It saves money. You don't have to transfer somebody around and move all the household goods. But it is — for some people, it's their only

chance of pre-command, so a lot of people, you know, work hard to get that and get selected for it. But there's no — I take it back. There's no real board for it. It's just the detailer's putting the right people in the right place to keep them moving up in their careers. So "fleet up" is an in-house, instead of being assigned — you know, transferring and being assigned as the incoming executive officer.

SMITH: Got it. Tell me that difference — I see, you know, "HH-65s," and then there's the "MH-65-C."

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: So are you allowed to tell me the difference, [laughs] or —

McFETRIDGE: [laughs] Yeah. I was — as we were writing that down, I was like — ah, what was the — why did we go M? And to be honest, I'd have to go back and figure it out, because we did just change from being an HH helicopter to an MH designation, and I really don't know if it was a FAA requirement and we just caught up to it, or if it was the equipment we were putting on board now that made it more of a tactical bird, or if it was just time to make a change. I honestly don't know. So I'd have to do some research to figure out what that was.¹¹

SMITH: I was just curious.

McFETRIDGE: It didn't matter to me. It was a helicopter.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: You know, you'd look at it, and you couldn't tell it was an HH or an MH. But the designation changed at some point. So officially, we're an MH — and I want to say it's probably because we finally figured out that that's what the FAA would have wanted it to be designated. But I don't know.

SMITH: So what was life like as the executive officer?

McFETRIDGE: So that took me out of the cockpit more, which was — yeah, not as much fun. But the difference was, now they asked me [laughs] when it was convenient for me to fly. So I could kind of pick my missions, you know, more so than I could as a, you know — the engineering officer, which you just get assigned, just like everybody else. But yeah, it took me out of the cockpit a little more, because now I was in charge of basically managing the other officers and keeping them in line, so that the CO could manage the unit, which was more of a

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political and a public position than previous EO would have been. You know, in-chain officers all focused internally to make sure the aircraft were up and running. COs got to be out there dealing with the public and the other agencies on the island, and you know, being politically savvy. And the XO basically takes over the — running the air station so that the CO can do that comfortably. So I was a — lot of paperwork, a lot — you had to be doing all the efficiency reports, you know, and — yeah, so it was paperwork. But they asked me to fly, so I'd still get on the schedule, you know, once a week, but instead of, you know, as an EO that was on the schedule just about every single day, you'd be doing a test flight or a ground run or

¹¹ According to a Nov 2010 online USCG forum post, MH helicopters have gun mounts allowing for armed operations if necessary. The MH's were designated that way following heavy duty upgrades of the aircraft to include FLIR, weapons mounts, upgraded radios, and other things. The average person would be hard pressed to see the difference between the MH-65 and the HH-65, but the operators notice. Accessed Nov 13, 2019, <http://www.uscg.org/Forum/aft/9382.aspx>.

a mission. But so a little less flying, but a lot more responsibility and I think rewarding, more so, because now I was working with all the different departments at the air station, and not just the engineering department. So I was a — I was having some influence on folks, which was kind of rewarding.

SMITH: So that amount of paperwork prepared you to come to D.C. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: [laughs] Yes, apparently it made me proficient.

SMITH: So tell me about that.

McFETRIDGE: So —

SMITH: That was like, 2007 to 2010?

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: Deployable Ops Group.

McFETRIDGE: I was — as I was coming out of Borinquen, I was — I was eligible for an O-5 command, so I was able to screen for an O-5 command. So I did screen. That means another board sits there, and they go over everybody who's eligible, and they pick who they want based on the openings they have. So I was eligible. I successfully passed the board. But out of that many openings, they had this many people to pick from. And so I wasn't one of the ones that was actually given the opportunity to be an O-5 CO. But because I had screened so successfully, they didn't want to give me a job that wouldn't continue my forward progression towards captain. So the Deployable Operations Group was a brand-new group that they were basically building up from the ground, that was going to oversee 27 different maritime security teams. So these are guys and gals that do go out and do those boardings and seizures with guns, and do all that training, and rappel from helicopters down onto bad guys. And so these are the teams that have been out there working kind of autonomously, that are now going to become in this one major group and be given a command and control structure. So I was given the opportunity to go be the Engineering Logistics division chief for Deployable Operations Group, managing the — you know, the movement and the equipment of those units, and bringing them basically under the same kind of management practices that Aviation uses, because Aviation has a very strict inventory control process and maintenance procedures process. Very strict, and very recorded. Everything is accounted for, whereas on the ship side, it was a little bit less strict and less controlled. And so they wanted it basically all to be under an Aviation model for record-keeping. So with my experience, being in Aviation, I was a good fit to go in on this group. And again, it was basically to get those teams standardized so that you could go from team to team, just like you can go from air station to air station, and fly with anybody, and you'd do the same mission. No change. But in the ship world, it wasn't quite that way. So this was kind of to get — so that you could go from any team to any team, and the teams could work together seamlessly, because they'd know — they've got the same equipment. They'd have the same practices and procedures, so that's it.

SMITH: So how did you do that, and what kind of — how were you received [laughs] when you tried to standardize part —

McFETRIDGE: Initially, there was some pushback from the teams themselves...

SMITH: Sure.

McFETRIDGE: ...because they were basically, you know, managing themselves, and you know, it's like: oh, look at this new thing we can buy. And so it was a little bit challenging to educate them on the value that would really come out of being standardized, the fact that they could go now — because these teams were the ones that would do, like, security for the national conventions. So these teams would be

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sent all over the U.S. to provide water security and other security for, you know, national — U.N. councils, the G-8 summits, those kind of things. And they'd be called in from like Louisiana, and Washington state would be the two teams to come together. And they'd never worked with each other before. And maybe they have slightly different equipment. So the — most of the challenge was just convincing them that by being standardized, by having the same tactics and procedures, and by having the same equipment, that they could seamlessly work with all these other groups and go anywhere then, because you know, it's the same as if you were working with your own team. They know what's going on. And once they got that, it was easy. But it was challenging to get them to just understand that if it's good for them, it's good for the Coast Guard, it's good for the nation. And once we got that settled, then it was — then they started to work with us, and it really went very well. But it was challenging. They had a lot of different equipment out there. They also had to be able to deploy to the desert because they were doing the — the oil refineries in the Gulf. It was part of their mission to protect those. So they had to have a lot of the DOD-required equipment, the tents, and all that stuff. So it was challenging. But because it was building a program from the ground up, it was just — you know, you could make the rules as you go along, because you're making the rules as you go along. So it was — it was very rewarding, and I learned a lot about those teams and another aspect of the Coast Guard that I didn't know about otherwise. So yeah, it was a lot of fun. And I think — I think we did good. But then, shortly after I left the DOG is when they disbanded. [laughs] So —

SMITH: Oh, really?

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: Oh.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. It was — and I honestly don't know the reasons behind it, but it was expensive, because we were sending teams back and forth across the country. I mean, if something was happening in New York, 9 times out of 10, it would be a San Diego unit sent to New York. Like, New York has a unit.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: But the New York unit was busy in, you know, the Gulf doing something. So we were shipping boats and people and doing all the logistics work all the time. And I think it was just — became a pretty expensive proposition at that point, especially with the budgets being reduced. But it was a good experience, and I thought we did good for the Coast Guard.

SMITH: Well, hopefully they're still following the procedures that you — [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: Well, I think there's standardized equipment, at least, so at least we got something good out of it for the teams. But yeah, and it really did stop kind of that, you know, guys looking at, you know, magazines going: oh, look at all this cool stuff we can buy.

SMITH: Yeah.

McFETRIDGE: And it's like: no, no, no, no. It has to be standardization. You have to have a process.

SMITH: Yeah. So following the DOG — I mean, was that —

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, called it “the DOG.”

SMITH: The DOG—the Deployed Ops Group.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: Did you go back to — no, you stayed up here in D.C. as a project manager...

McFETRIDGE: Yes. Yes.

SMITH: ...for Rescue 21. Tell me about that.

McFETRIDGE: When I came back from Puerto Rico, my last six to eight months in Puerto Rico, I was caregiver for my dad. And so he was actually — thank the Coast Guard so much — he was actually able to stay with me in Puerto Rico for the last few months. And then when I came up to the DOG and bought a house, he lived with me in my house. So I was caregiving for my dad, and he was already now in his late 80s, early 90s, and I couldn't move him. I didn't — couldn't move him — so I looked for a job that would keep me in the Washington, D.C. area, and that's when the opportunity to go work in the Acquisitions Directorate came up. And I had no background in Acquisitions. I'd done some acquisition online training through the DOD, because that was part of the Logistics and Engineering focus at the time. And so I did it when I was with the DOG. But — and so that gave me at least a level of experience to be able to move into a project manager job and not screw it up. So they let me go to run the — to join up with the Rescue 21 project, which had been going on for several years. It was in — already its mature phase, so to speak. So I really couldn't do any damage.

SMITH: Tell me what Rescue 21 was.

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McFETRIDGE: So Rescue 21 was recapitalizing the — basically the Search and Rescue communications system, nationwide. So Rescue 21 was a new way of putting up antennas that would be able to pinpoint distress calls, so it really was taking the “search” out of Search and Rescue, and able to give us a much better idea of where we need to go to really lend a hand and rescue people. So, great program, working with a civilian employer, a manufacturing company. And so we — basically, when I came into the program, almost where we're finishing up doing the coastal sites on the U.S., so the — but we hadn't gone into Alaska yet, and we hadn't gone into the inland riverways yet. But the program was well established. I was coming into a well-established program, and it was basically getting it to the finish line, is what my tour was. So like I said, Alaska was the big hurdle to figure out, because it's — it wasn't as cut and dried with the manufacturer as it was in the United States. A lot of mountainous areas, a lot of satellite coverage that wasn't available, gaps. So that's where we — that's where I came into the picture, was figuring out Alaska — Hawaii as well, and then starting on the western rivers and the inland waterways.

SMITH: Huge project. Fantastic.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. And a lot of training, because it takes quite a bit of training and acquisition. The Department of Homeland Security was very concerned about making sure Acquisition professionals were

professional. So we did a lot of training to get up to the different levels of proficiency. So I ended up finishing Level I and Level II, and completed all the coursework for Level III, but I was transferring again [laughs] at that time, so I didn't actually get my Level III certificate. But I completed all the coursework for it. But that was it. Just working with the civilian manufacturer, and putting in these sites, and managing the budget, and managing the people as they're doing their work, and trying to be smart and not screw anything up for the Coast Guard, because it was a billion-dollar acquisition project. That was basically on its maturity phase. So again, didn't do too much to screw it up, but learned a lot about preparing briefings for not only the Coast Guard Command, but for Congress, because we had to report to them on a regular basis. Had to brief our own Commandant on the project and all the admiral staff. So it was another interesting job that gave me a lot of professional growth. So I'm glad I did it, but it was enough to tell me I didn't want to be a full-time [laughs] Acquisition professional, because it was a lot of briefings, and a lot of paperwork to build all these, you know, reports constantly, to give to Congress, or to give to the senior staff. And I wasn't flying.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: Nope. Wasn't flying at all. So yeah, after three years with the DOG of not flying, and three years of Acquisitions and not flying, it was — I didn't think I'd ever get back into the cockpit.

SMITH: During this time, I want to — I'm going to ask, because you brought your dad up. Did your dad pass away?

McFETRIDGE: So — yes, he did pass away. So he passed away in my — basically right in the middle of my tour with Rescue 21. But that — and he had a great life. He passed away at 91, so I can't say he didn't live a long, healthy life.

SMITH: Was your mom still alive?

McFETRIDGE: My mom had already passed away.

SMITH: She had already passed. Sorry.

McFETRIDGE: She had passed away during my first tour in Puerto Rico. Yeah. She passed away a couple months after I got into Puerto Rico. So — but what it did was it opened the door for me to then be able to travel, and one of the opportunities that came up was a — the commanding officer at one of our base support units got in trouble, and they needed somebody to fill in part-time until they could bring in a new base commander. And they were also switching from a base support unit to a full base construct. So a transition was taking place,

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but then they needed a gap filler while they — before they could bring in the new base commander, who had competed for it and gotten the position. So I was offered the opportunity to go up to Boston and be the interim base support officer, transitioning to a base. And again, it was mostly because I had, you know, the logistics, and engineering, and acquisition processes all rolled into one, that I could help make that happen. So I did that for just a — three or four months. Shortly after my father passed away, I was able to do that. And then — but then I went back and finished up with the Rescue 21. We got plans for Alaska started, and we had plans for the western rivers started. But I left the job with the new guy coming in, and that was going to be, you know, his — we finished Hawaii, but that was going to be his latest. He was to get those last two pieces done, and then they could wrap up the Rescue 21 project completely. But

it was going to take him another [laughs] — it was going to take another two or another three years to get all that done, because it's just — it just takes a while for it all to — and money, and briefings, and more money.

SMITH: More briefings. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: More briefings, yeah. So I walked away with Rescue 21 still not closed out, but further along, and had the opportunity to go — successfully screened for a O-6 command and had the opportunity to go back to Puerto Rico. They wanted somebody who had had previous experience in Puerto Rico to go down there, because it is a challenging area. Language barrier still, and just a different — you know, totally away from CONUS¹² support. My district commander was in Miami, so you're basically, you know, taking care of matters and then reporting back how you took care of it rather than, you know, having an issue pop up and asking others how you — how they — how to handle it. You just handle it and then tell everybody what you did. So yeah, I got to go back to Puerto Rico, and got to fly again. Six years is usually — right around the six-year mark is when they start to say: hmm, you know, you've been out of the cockpit too long. But six years is the mark. So it was like I — right at six years, so I was able to go back into the cockpit. So again, back to ATC Mobile to learn to get requalified in the 65 before going back down to Puerto Rico. And there — now it's the Charlie model and the Delta model were the two, so — and they're even in the — I'm sure right now, they're flying an Echo model. So every time they add more equipment and/or upgrade equipment to the aircraft, the model number changes, and so — yeah.

SMITH: Did you speak — do you speak Spanish?

McFETRIDGE: No. [laughs]

SMITH: No? Did you have an interpreter, when you had to go out in the —

McFETRIDGE: The secretary...

SMITH: Okay.

McFETRIDGE: ...who had been the secretary there for years and years and years, is native Puerto Rican. She's from the area. And she — so I knew her from when I was the EO and the XO. She worked for me when I was — as the XO, because she's the command staff secretary, so she worked for the CO, XO. So I knew her very well, and when I came back to Puerto Rico, she was still there, and she would — she would be my interpreter for anything I needed. But — and I needed an interpreter for just about everything. It's — anything on the base, fine, because it's English. But anything outside the gate was Spanish, and I'd get requests from the Girl Scouts for a tour of the air station. And it would be a letter in Spanish. And I'd — can you translate it for me, [laughs] because I have no idea what it says. So I got to the point where I could understand some, especially if they don't speak too rapidly. I could read some, but I could never put it into sentences. I gave up. I did try to take some language classes when I was the XO, but it didn't take. So, yeah. So I went down there as just ugly American, not speaking the language.

SMITH: Smart enough to ask for help.

McFETRIDGE: But yeah, able to get help. And a lot of the — you know, the DOD that was down there was mostly Reserves. There's not really any active duty element down there. But the Reserves would

¹² Continental United States.

speaking English, and so working with the DOD down there was — it was easy. Working with the state and federal government down there was challenging, because they were predominantly Spanish speakers.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: And so I'd go to a lot of the events—asked to go represent the Coast Guard at a lot of events—and have no idea what was said, other than “hola.” Oh, hello. But yeah, most of it was just — you know, I'd just sit there and smile. [laughs] Yeah, so it was —

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I wish I had — I wish I had known Spanish. I took German in school, so it didn't do me any good. But, yeah. So that was challenging.

SMITH: So even though — this wouldn't have happened while you were down there. I don't know. Maybe it did. 2016 there were some major changes across DOD with regard to women flying, and you might have already come back to Washington at that point as the FAA Liaison. I'm curious. Did any of those changes—combat--

McFETRIDGE: Not — it wouldn't have affected us in the Coast Guard.

SMITH: Yeah. Just —

McFETRIDGE: Again, because we don't really — we don't have really a combat mission.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: And our law enforcement mission — we have a very big law enforcement mission, but even our law enforcement mission isn't us going out in armed helicopters. We do have specially trained teams that do that, and specially trained units, but the majority of the Coast Guard, no. It doesn't matter who's in the cockpit. Male, female. It doesn't matter. As long as they're qualified.

SMITH: Just had to ask. That's something we're asking everybody.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, I'm surprised that that came up. So, yeah.

SMITH: So you came back, and you're the FAA's liaison for three years after commanding.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, it was — and I'm post command, O-6. So where are you going to stick a post-command O-6? I mean, the whole career path is to get to an O-6 command, because...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...that's basically the end of the career for all of us aviators. And because I did not retire in Puerto Rico, because I still had a couple years left, I decided not to retire. And so again, they're just like, what do you do with a post-command O-6? You've got to send them to a Headquarters job. But there aren't that many. There's always a place they can stick you in Headquarters. I mean, I can't say that [laughs] there's not, but there was no good spot for me in Headquarters, except for some of these detached duty positions, like the FAA liaison, which was perfect for a post-command O-6. So you're not looking to basically be responsible and manage a large work force, which would be what you require in order to get a command. You're just looking for somebody with experience and knowledge and awareness to be able to represent the Coast Guard properly. So it's a perfect position for an O-6 who's

already had a command. So, that's what I got. Again, I didn't specifically ask for it, but I wasn't going to turn it down. And coming back to Washington, D.C., I already knew what I was getting into. I knew the office I was working for was a good office that's the — I worked basically under the guidance of the Office of Aviation Forces, but I'm senior to him, so [laughs] my OER¹³ is going to look good, because he's not going to downgrade me, and I'm retiring eventually anyway. So it was just a fill-in job to get me those last two years so I could retire. And it was initially a two-year job, but because they were going to pull the billet and repurpose it to something else, they let me stay in a third year. And that's when they had repurposed it now. So there currently is not a Coast Guard liaison to the FAA working at Headquarters.

SMITH: Because nobody could fill your shoes. [laughs]

McFETRIDGE: Nobody could fill my shoes. [laughs] I just — I killed it.

SMITH: When you were commanding, any issues with being a woman in command? I mean, the Coast Guard just seems like it's accepting of women.

McFETRIDGE: The Coast Guard is a lot more accepting, I would say. And I know the DOD has changed some over the years, I would hope. But yes, from the very beginning, the Coast Guard was more accepting. I did have some challenges. I did have some men who had never had a female CO before, or a boss, and it was — you know, it was more of an awareness or an education for them, more than it was just the "can't do it" — it was just like, just different. But you know, we're all in the same Coast Guard.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: And it's all standardized, so what's the big deal? And so they got over it a lot quicker than my Army counterparts would have ever gotten over it.

SMITH: Did you have any issues inter-command, like dealing with your counterparts in other services, or —

McFETRIDGE: No. Actually, I found everybody I dealt with — they were either very respectful of the rank and the position, or they were just over it. But no, I didn't. In Puerto Rico, I didn't find anybody that was like: ooh, you're a woman in command?

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For the most part, it was still a novelty. I was the first female CO of Puerto Rico, of Air Station Borinquen. So a little bit of a novelty, but one of the contacts that I made as XO was with the mayor of Aguadilla, who was an amazing person in his own right. He'd be another great story someday for the Smithsonian. But he had been basically a self-made millionaire after doing a stint in the Army. Just an incredible story. But anyway, long story short, he was the mayor of Aguadilla, had been the mayor of Aguadilla, I don't know, for years and years. He was like, almost like king of Aguadilla. But such a great businessman that Aguadilla, which is a very relatively small city in Puerto Rico, was actually one of three moneymakers that actually had a positive outflow, just because he's a businessman. He knew how to do, you know — he knew how to work. So anyway, made a great contact with him. He was best friends with the CO I worked for when I was XO. And so when I came back as CO, he was still there, and still very welcoming. And I'm sure he opened a lot of doors for me with the local populace. So I really didn't have

¹³ Officer Evaluation Report.

any problems dealing with anybody while I was down there. And the DOD by that point was deploying a lot of the Puerto Rican troops. So we were a good support for the DOD. A lot of their troops would use the Guard facility that was co-located with our facility, and we'd do a lot of the base support functions that they wouldn't get otherwise. So I had a really good relationship with all the DOD folks. And the only other — the only — I guess I don't know what the local guys would say, because they would speak Spanish. [laughs] So maybe they thought I was weird. Maybe they had some issues, but it never got back to me. And we were very welcoming down there. I mean, we — if anybody needed something from us, we were always there to help them out. So I think we had a very good reputation, which helps. Make sure people like you.

SMITH: I'm sure — well, you were up — you were in D.C. during Hurricane Maria, but...

McFETRIDGE: Yes, thank goodness.

SMITH: ...is that the kind of support that you would have provided as the commander?

McFETRIDGE: We had, you know, hurricanes come through or come by the area every year I was down there. I mean, it was always — we'd go through the hurricane drill, and because we shelter in place, we also provide shelter for a lot of the other state and federal agencies that have aircraft that need to shelter in place. So we would bring — we would stack our hangar with all the different aircraft from all the different agencies, to include Puerto Rico power and electric. I mean, you name it, we would — if we could fit them in our hangars, which were solid cement hangars built in the '40s, you know, basically for bombers. So we were very supportive of the island, and we did a lot of the search and rescue when anything did come through. But with Maria — Maria, I'm not sure how they — we sheltered in place. I mean, I wasn't there, but the new CO had to shelter in place. There was some damage to the actual facilities in Aguadilla, but yeah, the aircraft were still huge in doing that initial assessment of the island and getting people to some of the areas that were blocked by all the roads — damage and trees and all that. It was a real mess, but yeah.

SMITH: So I'm going to ask you a few advice questions.

McFETRIDGE: Okay.

SMITH: Like, what kind of advice would you give anyone — a coastie about to go to flight school?

McFETRIDGE: Well, I'd tell them they made the right decision, for one, because aviation is just a wonderful — it's a wonderful section of the Coast Guard that has a unique mission as well as supporting all the Coast Guard's missions. But aviation is just fun. I mean, we — not that, you know, ships and cutters aren't fun in their own right. But I'm just not a sea person. I get seasick. So for me, being able to fly above all of that but still do the same missions is just wonderful. So I would tell them that they're on the right track, and that — to take their knowledge and, you know, grab every mission they can, learn everything they can about the Coast Guard and what it does, because it's a great service. And we have great aircraft. And we have great

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mechanics. And we have great programs that support our aviation program. Yeah, it's just — enjoy it and, you know, try and make it better by figuring out what's wrong and fixing it so we can make it better.

SMITH: What about heading into command?

McFETRIDGE: Everybody that — you know, they tell you right from the beginning. Everybody should be striving for command. And there's very few opportunities, because there are only 26 air stations in the Coast Guard. So that means only 26 captains, or potentially, an O-5. But there are some O-5 commands. But for the most part, it's like only 26 pilots are ever going to get a command at a time. So I would just tell them, you know, strive for it. Do everything they can to prepare themselves for it, and — but if it doesn't happen, it doesn't mean your career is over. You know, there's still lots to do to support aviation in other aspects, but to strive for command and do what's needed to be a good manager of people. That's really what you are at that level. You're not flying as much, but you're making sure that the ones that are flying are getting the support they need, and you're taking care of all the stuff that would normally fall down on a unit and putting it on your shoulders. So I tell them, you know: go for it, but don't be a — you know, don't be devastated if it doesn't happen, because it's challenging. Guys on cutters maybe have a command as a lieutenant, and then as an O-4, O-5, and O-6. So they'll have had several cutter commands, because they get commands based on the sizes they go up. The bigger the ship, the more responsibility. So, you know, they progress up on all the different sizes of cutters that we have. But we just get basically one shot at it, as maybe an O-5 and otherwise, as an O-6, you know, you're competing against everybody else who's been successful all the way up to that level. So it's challenging.

SMITH: I normally would have asked this question sooner, but I forgot it. So pardon the jumping back. This is a sexual harassment, assault — is that a problem in the Coast Guard, and...

McFETRIDGE: It is.

SMITH: ...what's your take on —

McFETRIDGE: It's obviously not as — we don't have the numbers for it to be as widespread probably as it is, but I would say probably, percentage-wise, yeah. We're probably on par with our DOD counterparts. It's certainly something that we try to stamp out completely, and I think maybe we eventually will get to that point. But it's also society. We're fighting, you know, years and years and years of sexes having differences. So — and people treating people differently based on their sex. So it hasn't gone away yet. We're working on it. We do a lot of training to alleviate it, but yeah, I had a case that I had to — we had to take a pilot to Admiral's Mast for a sexual assault, while I was in Puerto Rico. And it ate up months and months of my time, putting together that investigation, because of all the privacy issues and you know, the legal ramifications if we did anything. So it's very much a problem still, but only in that — we can't figure out how to eliminate it completely. We're working on it, but it hasn't gone away yet. For the most part though, we do have women and — I mean, every time I've deployed in a helicopter crew, I've usually been the only woman, and I haven't had any problems. I haven't had anybody trying to molest me or take advantage of me, and I haven't had any of the men — I haven't had any of their wives, you know, claim that I'm a troublemaker, you know, and enticing their husband. So it's a much better — Coast Guard, I think, is good about trying to make sure that everybody's safe and everybody is professional. But we do have those cases where it just destroys the whole unit when it happens. And I know in the — from talking to some of the enlisted women, when I was a CO, that some of them had wanted to go into small boats and wanted to be coxswains eventually as part of their career, and the atmosphere was just so male locker-room, that they ended up switching rates¹⁴ and going to be, for the most part, either yeomen or storekeepers,

¹⁴ Coast Guard ratings or rates specify occupations with specific skills.

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or health service technicians, going into the medical field. So there's still some educating and training. But I would say the Coast Guard's probably — I think the Coast Guard's doing a good job on trying to get rid of it — trying to stop it. And for the most part, I think it's successful. But I can't say it's wiped out completely.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: There's still a lot of incidences of it.

SMITH: Especially — just the way we're socialized. So there — it's going to take a long time.

McFETRIDGE: It's going to take a long time.

SMITH: Yeah.

McFETRIDGE: But you know, I think we're ahead of the curve when it comes to at least getting the education and training out there and making it easier for cases to be recognized. ___ automatically, you know — it's "he said, she said" — now it's like, okay. We've got to take care of this, and there's a process now in place. So it's — you know, it's pretty well scripted, and I think that helps. Whereas before, you know, there was too much unknown. Like, I'm not going to say anything, because everybody will hate me, and...

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: ...now it's fairly well known, and it's scripted, and it's trained. So I think we're getting — numbers probably look worse, because more people are talking about it.

SMITH: Exactly. More people think...

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: ...the system is finally working.

McFETRIDGE: Right.

SMITH: So [crosstalk] —

McFETRIDGE: Which means it's good that —

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: But now the numbers look horrible.

SMITH: Right.

McFETRIDGE: So, yeah.

SMITH: Yeah. But I — I'm actually one of those that's like: oh, well, that's great. More people are...

McFETRIDGE: Yeah, that's a good thing.

SMITH: ...trusting the system.

McFETRIDGE: But it's also a bad thing...

SMITH: Yeah, right.

McFETRIDGE: ...thinking on it.

SMITH: Right. What about mentors? Who have been some of your mentors along the way?

McFETRIDGE: I've had a lot of folks that I've tried to emulate, I think. You know, I don't — I don't really know that I can say I ever had a "sea daddy," you know, somebody that would be the person I would call up on a moment's notice and say: hey, I've got a problem. Can you help me? But I had a lot of folks that I definitely considered role models that I would think: okay, what would that person do? And I —

SMITH: Can you name some of them?

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. Admiral Ray. He was my CO. Well, I actually met him in Kodiak. He was — he was the EO of the 65 aircraft when I was — when I reported in. And you know, then he was the CO in Puerto Rico when I flected up to XO. And now he's a four-star admiral. He did my retirement ceremony.

SMITH: Oh, fantastic.

McFETRIDGE: So he is one of those just — I can't say enough good things about him. He is just such an amazing individual. Very professional, excellent pilot, and just a great person, and knows everybody and everything. I mean, he has an incredible memory. He'll know your name. He'll know your husband's name. He'll know your kid's name. He'll know their — you know, if their kids are married. He's just incredible, but as down-to-earth as you could ever ask somebody to be, and willing to, you know, stop whatever he's doing to help you out if you have a question. So he was one of those that I don't think I ever gave him a call to ask him a question, but I would think in the back of my head, "What would Charlie Ray do if this was happening?" That would give me at least a good direction to take my issue through and get that resolved. And mostly, I would say it would be the more experienced pilots and COs, XOs, that I worked with — worked for that would be those role models that would, you know — hey, they gave me a break, because I did something stupid. So I'm going to give this guy a break, because that's how you learn. And those experience — you know, were what let me mentor other people or be a role model for some other people. But basically, the Mott Smiths,¹⁵ the — he was the CO in Kodiak. Vivien Crea was my CO in Clearwater, and she went on to be a three-star admiral, Vice Commandant. Just really successful people in what they would do, and those ended up being the ones I would try to emulate and follow in their footsteps.

SMITH: What about support network? How was yours formed, or —

McFETRIDGE: You know, it's a — I would say my peers were supportive, but I think mostly I relied on my family to be my support pieces, because they knew me the best, and they had had military experience, so they could be there

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to kind of guide me. And I really didn't want to — you know, not — I was more introverted, so I don't really put myself out there with a lot of other people. I do have a good friend that I met when I was in

¹⁵ Spelling Unconfirmed

Clearwater, that we've stayed in touch with all these years. But everybody else, I would say probably I'm more of a casual acquaintance than a true bonded friend. But yeah, I think my family has been the ones I've fallen back on, or else just kept it internally and figured out what my role model would do.

SMITH: [laughs] There you go. Speaking of family, did you ever remarry, or —

McFETRIDGE: No. I was — so I went through two marriages while I was in the Army. The first one while I was in Korea, he was — somebody I had dated — well, it was kind of — not really — we weren't in college together. I was in college. He was not. But we were part of the same flying club that was associated with the college. So when I was in Korea, we decided to get married. He was really anti me being in the military. He didn't want that at all. But he kind of got over it a little bit. So we decided to go ahead and push forward anyway. By that time, I was like in mid-20s, and I felt like my life was coming to an end if I wasn't married already. So rushed into it, and long story short, it wasn't a good fit. We basically annulled, because he was still in the States. I was overseas, so it was kind of that Soldier Sailor's Act thing.¹⁶ So we basically annulled that one. So I don't even think we were married a total of 18 months. The second marriage again was a short one, and it was —

SMITH: That's in Utah.

McFETRIDGE: He's — it was in Utah, yeah. And he basically was struggling a lot with his previous marriage, because they had been high school sweethearts. So he eventually went back to her. And so that one, I got served, which — [laughs]

SMITH: Oh.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah.

SMITH: I'm sorry.

McFETRIDGE: And again, that was great. So that one was a bit of a surprise, but looking back on it, I can totally understand it and see his side of it. But that was a surprise. And again, it only lasted about 18 months. But that one left me with a "I'm not going for the third strike." So my entire Coast Guard career has been as a single, divorced woman. And I have — didn't have any desire to go back and try for a third time.

SMITH: What kind of advice would you give someone struggling with their career/life balance?

McFETRIDGE: I think the Coast Guard does a lot better at balancing, because our deployments are short. So it's not like you're, you know, sent to the desert for a year at a time, and you know, after just being married. It's easier, because the deployments are so short. It's still challenging, but I would tell them, you know, whatever it takes: counseling, you know, mixing things up. You know, backing out of deployments. Whatever it takes. Find out what the balance is you need to get over the hump, and then everything works its way out. But yeah, I would say: don't just assume a divorce is going to be an easy answer, and you're going to move on. You know, if there's any love there, do everything you can to make it work. And yeah. To many of my friends who did go through divorces, it was just painful. Just ego-crushing, morale-crushing. Just painful. So I don't want to see anybody get hurt like that.

¹⁶ The Soldiers' and Sailors' Civil Relief Act of 1940 (SSCRA) was a law designed to ease financial burdens on servicemembers. It was revised, expanded, and replaced by the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act (SCRA) in 2003, <https://www.justice.gov/servicemembers/servicemembers-civil-relief-act-scra>.

SMITH: Well, Captain McFetridge, we're getting — we're well over [laughs] the time...

McFETRIDGE: [laughs] I know. I know.

SMITH: ...that you agreed to. So thank you for your time. But I want to ask: is there anything else about your career or about the military that you'd like to share, or about aviation in general, that you would like included in your oral history?

McFETRIDGE: I would just like to give praise to the Coast Guard for being such a great service, because it really allowed me — I mean, the Army gave me the opportunity to fly, but the Coast Guard gave me the opportunity to make a career of flying. And that's — I couldn't ask for anything more. Great people. Great missions, and a real heartfelt desire to serve the nation and be, you know — be always ready to help. So I just want to — that's why I'm wearing my Coast Guard Camp Shirt. [laughs]

SMITH: I like that.

McFETRIDGE: Yeah. But yeah, I love the Coast Guard. The Army was great for training me, but the Coast Guard, like I said, gave me

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a career and a purpose, and no complaints. I love the Coast Guard. Recommend the Coast Guard to anybody.

SMITH: Well, on behalf of the Smithsonian, I'd just like to thank you, CAPT McFetridge, for your service...

McFETRIDGE: Thank you.

SMITH: ...for agreeing to record your oral history with the National Air and Space Museum and thank you so much for your time.

McFETRIDGE: Thank you. I appreciate it.

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