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Oral History Interview
TAPE LOG

Please note that this is not a literal transcript. Many of the questions and answers are paraphrased and abridged.

Interviewee: Charles McCann, Class of 1949
Interviewer: Anna Dahlstein
Date: September 2, 2003
Location: McCann residence in Charlotte, NC
Length: 30 min.

Side A

000 Introductory information (same as above)

011 When and where were you born?

I was born in Charlotte, North Carolina on October 16, 1922.

015 Where were your parents from?

Both of my parents were from Philadelphia, both of Irish descent.

019 Please describe their educational background and occupations.

My father completed high school. My mother was pulled out of school I think around the 7th or 8th grade to go to work to help support the family. My father worked for the Hajoca Corporation, a plumbing supply outfit out of Philadelphia, and was transferred to Charlotte.

027 What were their names?

My father's name was Edward A. McCann. My mother's name was Anna Marie Fraim (McCann).

034 Any brothers or sisters?

No, I'm an only child.

035 Why did you choose to join the service? Because you mentioned that you went into the service right after high school.

At that time, I was very much interested in flying. I wanted to go into Flying Cadets and all my training in high school – mathematics, physics, etc. – [was aimed at being] prepared to take the competitive exam. I enlisted right out of high school. Of course, I couldn't take the competitive exam because I wasn't old enough. You had to be at least 20 years old and have had two years of college. I was 18 when I enlisted.

052 What year was this?

1941.

055 Where were you sent for your training?

After enlisting at the post office here in Charlotte, I was sent to Fort Bragg and we got our clothes and shots. Then they sent us to Houston, Texas, to Ellington Field, for some basic training, and from there to Mather Field, Sacramento, California.

066 When did you ship out and where did you serve?

Well, we enlisted on July 24, 1941. Fort Bragg was around two weeks and Ellington Field about three weeks. In Sacramento they gave us the opportunity to go to various schools like mechanic or radio. I picked radio and went to Scott Field, Illinois, for radio training. From there, back to Williams Field in Phoenix, Arizona. I guess that was March, and in June of 1942, I got my appointment to Cadets. I went to Santa Ana, California, around June of 1942. That's where we qualified for navigator, bombardier or pilot. Of course, I wanted to fly, and fortunately, I was classified as a pilot.

094 Which military unit did you serve in?

After graduating from flying school, I went to Muroc, California, which is now Edwards Air Force Base, and checked out on a P-38. I was stationed on North Island, San Diego, California for some training, nothing real serious. We were primarily flying and doing navigation over the water, to see if there were any submarines or Japanese ships. Of course, we didn't have any of that. From there, we went to Florida, boarded on an airplane, and went from South America over to Africa and got off at Casablanca. I went to a training outfit and then was moved up to the front to join the 71st Fighter Squadron, 1st Fighter Group in Matur, Tunisia.

118 How long were you stationed there and how many missions did you fly on?

I was there from about May to December 1943 and finished 50 missions. At that time, shipping back to the States there was a shortage of ships so I didn't move out until June. In fact, I went through the Straits of Gibraltar coming home on June 6, the invasion of France. I was home for one month and then went back to Italy.

133 When were you able to get back to the United States and get discharged?

I came back to the United States because there was a mix-up. They were supposed to stop us at Atlantic City where we were being interviewed and went back to Italy and then about October I came back to the States and was assigned to the training command. I was finally the Operations Officer at Craig Field, Selma, Alabama. In September of 1945, I had enough points to get out of the service, and went to North Carolina State to enroll.

147 Could you please describe where you met your wife? Had you already met her by then?

Oh, yes. My wife and I met in high school. It was nothing really serious, but then I became more and more interested in her. It wasn't until I finally came back from overseas that I talked her into marrying me. We were married in "5-5-45" – that's a good way to remember your anniversary. [...]

165 You mentioned earlier, when we were looking at a family portrait, that she "put you through college." Could you please explain what you meant by that?

Well, you've got to understand, from a personal standpoint: This is September of '45. She had found work with the Treasury Dept. of North Carolina State (the gov., not the college). And in November or December, she found out she was pregnant. She broke out crying, and I felt like a dog when that happened, but I said, "Don't worry, I'll get out and get a job," and she said, "No, you're going to stay in there. We'll make it somehow." So she worked for [Roy B.] Clogston, the Athletic Director of NC State while I was going to school. The neighbors looked after the child while I was in school, until I got back, while she was working. I scheduled all my classes in the morning so the afternoons were free and I could take care of my son.

189 This was "Mac", that is, Charles Jr., is that right?

That's correct.

190 Could you please tell us when he was born?

September 4, 1946.

192 Where had you managed to find housing?

While I was taking the [admissions tests] at State, [my wife] was out looking for a place. NC State had a list of people offering housing to students and she got the name of Mrs. Brooks. Mr. Brooks was a Seaboard Railroad engineer. [Mrs. Brooks] got pretty upset about the fact that my wife was approaching her about renting a room. She wanted to know where my wife got her name and when she replied NC State, she said, "They should stop that," that she didn't want that. My wife insisted and said, "Maybe you won't mind – I would love for you to see my husband." So I came parading up to see Mrs. Brooks and I had my uniform on with my battle ribbons and wings. And I don't know, she finally said "OK." Now you asked me why I said [my wife] put me through college. If you look up here on the wall, there's a Certificate of a Good Housewife that the College gave my wife, next to my Certificate of Graduation.

218 You had a total of four children. Could you give all of their birth dates?

Sure: "Mac" was born September 4, 1946; Mark was born January 1950; Tim was born July 21, 1951; and Ann was born May 28, 1957.

226 And what year did you graduate?

1949.

228 So while in college, you had one child?

(Yes.)

230 Could you please explain how you found out about the GI Bill: Where were you, when did you hear about it, and when did you decide to use it?

I was at Selma, Alabama [when the war officially ended, when Japan surrendered]. I heard about the GI Bill and they said it was available to veterans; it didn't matter if you were an officer or an enlisted man. I talked to my wife and told her that I thought it was a wonderful opportunity and I wanted to take advantage of it. Because I didn't have the ways or means, being the son of a widow. You've got to understand: my parents were in very bad shape as a result of The Depression. My father was in business for himself when The Depression hit and of course he lost that and any savings he had.

250 So you found out as you were about to leave the service?

No, I hadn't decided to leave the service until I found out this was available. Because I didn't realize at the time that you could have gone to college [while] in the service. In fact, I met a man who was taking aeronautical engineering who was an officer. He was in civilian clothes, but talking to him I found out he was a pilot. I found out after the fact that it was available – I could have gone to college [while remaining in the service]. But I jumped at the opportunity of the GI Bill because I wanted to get an education.

263 Other people have told me that the GI Bill covered all of their tuition, books and supplies, and also a provided a \$75 stipend

It was ninety. [*Because he had dependents.*]

267 Were you satisfied with the benefits; did you feel that they covered most of your needs?

Well, what little savings I had had to be used. I was grateful for everything. I wasn't complaining about a thing... We used [our savings] very carefully – I think it was about \$3,000 – to try to make it through. [Most of the savings went to food.] I remember one thing that may be of some interest. We had nothing but an ice box when we first moved into Vetville so we spent some of the money in 1946 to get a refrigerator – which, I might add, I still have; it still operates.

285 That's incredible – they don't make things like that anymore, that will last for 60 years... Let's go back a little. You explained how you got your first room with Mrs. Brooks. How long did you rent from her and how did you find out about [Vetville]?

Like I told you, my wife found out that she was pregnant in December. We went home for Christmas break and she stayed there. I came back and lived with Mrs. Brooks from January to June of 1946 and worked during the summer and went back to school September through December. During that period, I found out about Vetville going up and got on the list to get a room and brought my wife and baby up in January of 1947... and moved into Vetville.

308 What did it look like then? Because this was fairly early on, soon after the residential project had been inaugurated. Could you describe the physical surroundings? Was there much vegetation? Were the housing units well equipped?

It was in the rough stages. There wasn't any vegetation around. Being in 4B, we were among the first, I guess. We were at the top of the hill and the train made a turn just slightly ahead of where we were living and invariably when it came

around, it always tooted the horn. That woke us up in the mornings at around four o'clock. It was extremely cold that January, about nineteen degrees, I think it was. My wife stayed up all night washing dishes, pots and pans, and because she did that, she kept the water running and we were the only ones in that whole group of six apartments that didn't have pipes frozen and broken. Now, the condition of the house... We were grateful for anything, but number one, they didn't have any "skirts" – The houses were up on piles of bricks and there wasn't any wood around the house to cut the draft out. Plus there wasn't anything to shield the cracks in the floor and the breeze would come up through the floor. I finally had to get some tarp and roll that out on the floor and bought some linoleum and covered the whole place. The other thing that I found deficient... They had oil stoves located in the center of the house, basically between the two bedrooms, and a wall between that and the kitchen/living room. After the first year, I went out and bought a coal stove and put it in there so it would heat the house. ... They came around and finally put the "skirts" on. [...]

- 354 Now, you pointed out what type of unit you lived in, in the pictures that we have in "The History of Vetville." Do you recall if it was called an A-B-C unit or a "barracks type" unit or a U.K. unit?

I don't know the title of it. I thought they were barracks. They were one story high and divided up into six units – I counted the chimneys on the picture.

- 363 And you had a two-bedroom unit, is that right?

That's right.

- 364 Did you stay in the same unit for the rest of your college career?

Yes.

- 365 So it became a first home?

A permanent home, that's right.

- 368 I understand there were a lot of improvements made to Vetville during those years. Many of those came thanks to the efforts of the Vetville Council. I read that you served on that Council as an Alderman for Ward #3 from October of 1947 to March or April of 1948. Could you please tell me about that experience?

I can't remember too much about that. We were discussing various things and I think it was presented to the school. But I can't remember.

- 378 Were there any particular issues that you felt strongly about, like improving recreational opportunities or improving the garbage removal, or any other particular living conditions that you cared about?

I can't recall anything. I'm sure we had some proposals, but this is something that wasn't as impressive to me as [other] stuff that I've lived through... But I'm sure there were some important things that were taken up. The only thing that I do remember: We had a general meeting and some North Carolina representative came out there and we kept asking when they were going to take away the three-cent sales tax. He dodged that one.

- 394 The YMCA built a community center which opened in 1948 and there was a co-operative grocery store in that same building. Could you please describe that grocery store? – how it was run, how people invested in it, etc.

I don't remember that. We weren't a part of that. I hauled a wagon that I had had as a kid and went across the tracks over to Hillsborough, to a grocery store. [...] I tried to shop enough to last us a week. I didn't have a car.

- 411 Was that a problem? It was very close to campus, if I've understood correctly.

Oh, yes. I walked to school. My wife, when she worked for Clogston the Athletic Director at the Field House, at the old football fields, she would walk up there. She had to cross the railroad tracks to get to it but that was alright. I did have a bicycle – I did ride that to school some of the time. We used public transportation any place we went. We'd go to church downtown – We'd ride a bus.

- 421 Did you participate in any of the YMCA activities at Verville? Could you describe some of the social activities that went on there? Did you know your neighbors very well?

Oh yes, we knew our neighbors very well. There was one party that I can recall attending and it was very nice and very enjoyable. As far as the YMCA, I didn't participate. Most of my time was [spent] trying to study and just do the things I had to do around the house to make things a little bit better. As far as our activities – I can't remember much except this one party. We didn't have the money to go to shows and stuff like that. We just stayed together, that's all. We didn't have a car to run around in. The only thing that I took time to do, and this was to make some money: When basketball started and coach Case came – of course he opened up basketball to the Atlantic Coast Conference like it had never been opened up before. They hadn't built the new basketball court... so all the games were conducted down in Raleigh, the civic auditorium [Municipal Auditorium], and I would work to take the bleachers down after the game. And I got to see the basketball games. My wife couldn't come because she was taking care of the baby. But I was making \$15, so it was big money.

- 454 A lot of your neighbors were also raising young children, is that right?

Yes. [...]

471 So you went to college between 1945 and 1949, full-time?

Yes.

472 What did you major in?

I started in Electrical [Engineering] and [switched to] Mechanical.

476 Were you satisfied with your educational experience? Are there any particular professors that you remember fondly?

Well, the Physics professor, whose name I can't remember, he was fantastic. I thoroughly enjoyed his classes. When I saw his exams, I thought I'd just better quit right there. But fortunately, a classmate of mine who was a year ahead of me told me, "When you see his exams, do the best you can, because he grades on a curve." And I learned a lot from him. He was terrific.

489 Could you describe life on campus in the late 1940s? Did the vets mingle much with the younger students?

Well, I can't speak for everyone, but I didn't associate with them. I was a Treasurer of the Junior or the Senior Class and the other officers were the students who were younger than I was. They were dating, and they had cars, and I seemed to be out of step with them. It didn't bother me. I think the vets saw to it that I got voted in as Treasurer! And they didn't like it, I didn't think, the other guys. But anyway, it worked all right. It gave me a lot of drive to try to do as well as they did in their [studies].

509 Do you think that your experience in the war increased your motivation?

Oh, no question about that. I was giving up something that I loved to do without thinking about going back, about all I was losing, the possibilities that I could have moved up in rank... At that time, being in the service was a place to raise a family. I wanted a family, and I wanted an education, and this was something that was given to me and I was going to take advantage of it.

515 Were you the first member of your extended family to go to college?

Yes. My father was from a poor Irish family, living in Philadelphia, and they didn't offer this after World War One... I'm sure he would have taken it up. But it was a golden opportunity for me to get an education.

521 What was your first job after graduating?

I got an interview [offer] from the Seaboard Railroad. I think that of the 1,500 who graduated, only 500 had job offers. I don't know if that was right or not, but that was the conversation that was going around. And I had a job offer and reported to Norfolk. And you have to understand – maybe you know this, or not, but in 1949 we had a recession. I went to work on Monday and was fired on Wednesday – “last in, first out.” So I came back to Charlotte and finally landed a job building trucks. A friend of mine, who worked at the Ford Motor Company, told me they were looking for somebody. Having an engineering background, I was going to go into the Service Department [and earn a higher salary than at the truck company]. So I went to work for Ford Motor Company on October 1, 1950.

542 Did you remain with Ford for the rest of your career?

I retired on April 30, 1981, so it was just a little over thirty years.

545 Did you find it satisfying to work in engineering?

I didn't really get into engineering. The Service Department was mainly about assisting dealers with problems with the products they were selling. The first thing I did was teach the automatic transmission which came in the Ford car in the 1950 models – training the mechanics how to service the automatic transmission. Then I later moved to Sales, and stayed in sales and management from then on.

555 Did you find your career gratifying, personally satisfying?

Yes, I did. I think I would've been better in the engineering mode, but you work where you go, and try to excel.

559 Do you think that the training that you received under the GI Bill was useful for your career?

Oh, yes. I was able to write; I was able to speak at meetings... [and used common sense when working in management].

571 You mentioned that your two older sons went to NC State?

Yes, “Mac” went to State, mechanical engineer, and Mark Edward went to State, mechanical engineer.

575 So they both followed your footsteps?

Yes. State didn't think that Mark's SAT was enough for him to be an engineer, and they feared that if he didn't excel, he could be pulled out and put in the draft and go overseas to Vietnam or some of these other places. I laid the picture down to my son, and he excelled...

589 Which career choices did Tim and Beverly Ann make?

Tim went to University of Georgia and Ann went to Sheperd College in Sheperdstown, West Virginia.

596 How useful a policy do you think the GI Bill can be in the years ahead?

Well, I think it's very helpful to those who do not have the wherewithal to go to college. College is so expensive. It's something to help those who want an education and have earned it by being in the service. I think it would be a terrible thing to do away with. Especially those who have served, it gives them an opportunity to advance themselves that otherwise they [wouldn't have]. I've been there and I knew I couldn't do it. I couldn't fork up the money so that I could go to college. I don't know if they're thinking about doing away with it; I think it would be a terrible thing if they did. We could spend a lot of money, but it's well worth [it]. Knowing that my income tax money was going to help that... I wouldn't be a bit jealous of that money.

End