**Ok, today is June 25, 2014. This is Patrick Callaghan with the Westchester Public Library in Westchester, Illinois. Also present is Sara Scodius, a reference librarian here at Westchester, and today we will be talking with Mr. James McCraven who served in both the U.S. Army and the U.S. Navy for a total of 20 years. Jim was born in North Tonawanda, New York on December 11, 1948. This interview is being conducted for the Veteran’s History Project at the Library of Congress. Ok, let’s go ahead and get started. Why don’t you tell us a little bit about when and where you were born, and a little bit about your family growing up.**

Ok, North Tonawanda is a suburb of Buffalo. I was born there, however, I was raised in the Chicago area. My stepfather was a steel worker. My grandfather was retired from the Coast Guard. My father spent 12 years in the Navy during World War II and Korea. And I spent 8 years active Army, 2 years Reserve, and 12 years in the Navy.

**Oh, ok. How old were you when you came to Chicago?**

I was about 3 years old.

**Oh, ok.**

Ok, this is the time we had apparently moved to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and I remember the Amico fire because it suddenly became midnight in the middle of the day. That is one of my earliest memories.

**Wow. Ok, before the interview we were talking a little bit about the tradition of service in your family. It sounds like you have quite an extensive tradition on both sides. Could you go into that a little bit?**

Well, part of my family, the McCraven side, came from Highpoint, Florida, and they owned slaves, and they fought in the Civil War. My grandfather married my grandmother \_\_\_\_ly and guess what, she was born in Goshen, Indiana, and guess where her family fought on in the Civil War. I have a grandfather on my mother’s side that escaped from Russia during the Russia Revolution, came to the United States with his brother, and they fought in World War I.

**Ok. Anybody else or then are you next in line in the tradition of service?**

My daughter thought about going in, but no, she didn’t. I got a grandson, who knows, and a granddaughter. They might choose it. You never know.

**Ok. Now I know that you were in the military, 8 years in the U.S. Army and 12 in the Navy, and things started for you in the Army during the Vietnam War, is that right?**

Correct.

**Ok. Now did you enlist or were you drafted?**

Ok, I enlisted. There are four reasons why people join the military, went into the military, during the Vietnam War. One, they were patriotic because of everything that had been going on. Two, they didn’t want to get drafted into the infantry. Three, they ran away from home. My grandmother signed for me when I was 17. My parents did not want it, but did not have the best of childhood memories and so I went into the military. And the fourth reason, of course, is being the fact that in those days the judge said, “Military or jail?”

**Oh, ok. Can’t argue with that. Ok, so did you know in… was it 1966, is that right?**

1966, but I was 17 and I didn’t go until 1967.

**Ok, now before we started the interview we were talking a little bit about what Vietnam was. Did you know what Vietnam was when you enlisted when you were 17?**

Oh, yeah. I was the only guy on the plane actually reading the little booklet they gave you. But the Vietnam War was all about the domino theory. We had gone through McCarthy, we had gone through the Red Scare, we had gone through Korea, through Lebanon, and the great Cuban crisis, and now here we are. The French lost in Vietnam and now we pick up the pieces because everyone is afraid of the great domino theory, which really never happened.

**Hm, ok. Now at the time were you scared of the domino theory or were you kind of drinking the Kool-Aid like everybody else?**

I was a history buff, but I was kind of drinking the Kool-Aid like everyone else because I had not received the wake-up call at that time.

**Ok, ok. And I put it into those terms because some of the other Vietnam vets we’ve done interviews with have put it in those terms. Now you had such an extensive career in the Army and the Navy that we could talk all day, so there are a couple things here that you wanted specifically to talk about during this interview, so why don’t I get to that.**

We discussed the first one already.

**Ok, right. So what goes through your head while… well you did two tours in Vietnam.**

Two tours in Vietnam and one in the Persian Gulf.

**Ok, now what goes through your head when you’re stationed or posted in a combat zone?**

Ok, you first get there, you drank the Kool-Aid, ok, big deal. My first day in \_\_\_\_ Bay was burning the waste left over from the outhouses, but my second day was a wake-up because on my second day I was posted at guard duty in a hanger full of coffins.

**Oh my.**

That smell will never leave my senses. That was my wake-up call. That’s when suddenly I kind of realizes people are dying, you know? Before that point, no, I didn’t know that. Ok. And, like I said, I said, I went there after AIT to be a supply clerk. They had supply clerks coming out of their ears.

**AIT. Is that Advanced…**

Advanced Individual Training. Right. I’m sorry.

**No, no, that’s ok.**

 Ok, so they had nothing to do with me, so they sent me for a month? I was with the Pipeline Company, the 643rd Engineers and I had no knowledge of welding or anything. So there I am on point duty, ok, all by my lonesome. First time I got shot at. I’m glad the guy missed. Believe me, you never seen somebody clean their rifle so good after that, and they kept sticking me on point duty, you know. But I was always very polite to the people that went by and everything else, you know, and I saw the kids, you know, and everything else, and I would give the kids candy or a couple of bucks or something. To me it was no big thing, but apparently to the parents were because the group of parents comes up with me and they’re giving me food and telling me, you know, you’re safe, don’t worry, you know, because I made a rapport with the people. Well, they finished their pipeline from An Khe to Dak To, so they leave me with the battalion headquarters. They didn’t know what to do with me either, so they me the kind of run around postal clerk. They go to every place they were building a fire base. A fire base is where they would set up 105mm’s, cannons in groups to where they can control certain areas. And one of the things I got used to was watching, they were called M40s, but we called them, nickname, Dusters, watching them sweep the mountains because sometimes there would be explosions because, yes, they get the guys. Well, this is the beginning of Tet too. And second time I got shot at I was sitting in an outhouse right by the airfield and, needless to say, I knew what was going on, you know. Got out there, you know, got my flak vest on and everything else and got to my position that I was going to be at and three times while I was there, once in the mess tent – got out just before it blew up – and twice in the tent we lived in blew up so I had very few photos left from that area. The only interesting thing about that was, is the second time, well there were four of us lived in the tent, the second time there was a rat we were trying to get rid of. Couldn’t get rid of him. Well, the rocket killed him. Being jokers the way we were and the way we thought we had a military funeral for the rat. Put him in a cigar box and buried him. But my mind was different now. I was always being observant because the simple fact was here I was going to these different places, and I had all this mail, and I was usually in the middle of the convoy. No machine gun. Now my second tour in Vietnam was a lot easier. This was in 1972. We were starting to break down and I was what was called the Advanced Overseas Return Clerk – I’d get everybody ready to go back home. My drill sergeant, Sergeant Ziegler, he didn’t remember me, but I remembered him. He was surprised, but that was my first two combat tours.

**If you don’t mind, if I could digress really quickly before we go to the next thing, do you feel like that your – we didn’t talk about your basic training – did you feel like your basic training adequately prepared you for Vietnam, or no?**

Ok, times are different in different periods.

**Ok.**

Alright. We came up the baby-boomers, but that was the thing. So somebody yelling at me didn’t bother me.

**Ok.**

Ok. Now Sergeant Ziegler grabbing my rifle and finding it so clean he was mad he crammed it into the ground and said, “That’s dirty,” didn’t bother me. Ok. [Laughs] You see what I’m saying? But, yes, it adequately prepared me. I saw things change as I went through, and I feel that sometimes they’re not preparing the men and the young ladies the way they should.

**Nowadays?**

Nowadays.

**Ok. Alright, so the next thing you wanted to discuss here was, now you had mentioned before the interview about the PTSD.**

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

**Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, right. What are the ways you deal with PTSD while not admitting to yourself or others that you have it?**

Well there are various ways of dealing with it and I chose both right and wrong ways. After my first tour in Vietnam I didn’t handle it very well. When I was in Germany I was laying in the rack one night – that’s the bed you sleep in – and suddenly I jumped up, threw my boot out the window, and was ready to go out the third floor window when two guys grabbed me. That’s the wrong way. I refused to admit it. I started getting a handle on it because while they had me in therapy I got involved in stamps and I’m a big time philatelist because of it. Another way that people handle it is drugs and alcohol or they don’t handle it at all, and the problem being is the military and society as a whole did not accept the fact that military people, for lack of a better word, are damaged goods. Post-traumatic stress does mean you’ve been shot at, ok? It means you’ve experienced something so horrific. If a young woman is raped, she is suffering post-traumatic stress, ok? If you’re battering somebody, they’re suffering post-traumatic stress. If a person who was physically fit suddenly loses a limb, they’re suffering post-traumatic stress. So it’s a broad thing and the part being is a lot of places never worked with it properly. Today is different and of course we’ll get into that.

**Ok. So, in what ways did you learn not to let PTSD – Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder – control your life?**

Two. The first step is to admit to yourself you have it. Until you’ve done that it’s going to be there. It will be there the rest of your life. There’s nothing anybody can do. If you were battered as a child you have post-traumatic stress. And a lot of times the military just makes it worse. I said 11 September 1966 was when I joined the military. On the day that it happened in New York, what they did in New York, that came back to me in every memory that I tried to suppress came back to me.

**You’re talking about 9/11?**

9/11.

**Ok.**

When 9/11 happened it brought everything back.

**Because it coincided with the date of your enlistment.**

With my enlistment and a lot of things I’d tried to bury, they flew back in my face, and I had a little hard time for a while. It was causing me to get sick. I ended up retiring early. Good thing I could retire at 62 because I was retired. But it wasn’t until once again I admitted to myself that I was suffering from post-traumatic stress that I went from almost dying to being a physically fit person that’s not in a walker anymore. The people at the gym at Loyola, they’re just amazed at two different people that came in. So in other words, just because you got it under control once doesn’t mean it’s not going to happen again. You have to forgive me if I’m getting a little choked up.

**No, that’s ok. Understandable. Now you work now in the capacity of helping other veterans in different ways, right?**

The term I put down there is to overcome barriers to employability.

**Ok.**

When you’re looking at this veteran, you’re looking at their family, not just the veteran. When I would go to sea, my daughter, Jamie, would be sick for 3 or 4 days. I never knew this. The first thing is is a lot of times barriers can be a lot of things. I came out of the Army, I went right back in. Why? Because I couldn’t keep a job. When I retired from the Navy that’s what I was afraid of, the same thing, but it didn’t happen. I went to the Field Museum. People all over the place wanting to be a security guard in this field museum. I impressed these people so much they hired me on the spot. Not as a security guard, but as a supervisor in visitor service. They were totally amazed at how much I knew about the museum. I was there for five years until I got my dream job. Well I got laid off, then got my dream job, which was becoming a disabled veteran representative. The reason I did this, the VA has a bad look right now, and, guess what, that wasn’t just now. When I would walk into an unemployment office and there’s a VA representative there and their only thing is going out to the VFD so they can bullshit. Excuse me, sometimes I use colorful metaphors.

**It’s ok.**

And get drunk. Uh, uh. Wrong answer. So I really studied my job and I really begin to study people and I begin to understand the people because I’ve been in the same place. My thing was that, well as you saw from the certification as a distinguished Hoosier from Governor Daniel – that’s from the state of Indiana – because of the compassion I had for the veterans. I could pick out the ones that were serious and the ones that were joking. My first interview was just to talk to you. Second interview, would you come back. Third interview, your family. We go from there. I worked at the homeless shelter. I got… I was there when they were ready. They all knew me. There in Hammond, the homeless people, but when they were ready they came and saw me. I saw people that were at the end of their rope. Yeah, I got chewed out for calling the suicide helpline, but, guess what? I got the person there help. I had one gentleman, he wanted to become a truck driver. He had two boys in Wisconsin. They dropped him off at the homeless shelter and left him be. He had no way of getting to his sons. The truck company that was training him because he failed. That was the first time I called the suicide helpline and discovered that’s how I get them in there. The bad thing was is what really bothered me, to get into the homeless program you have to either be on drugs or alcohol. Good Lord! There are people who were ready to come back into society. These individuals had dropped out of society. When they’re ready to come back, they’re ready. I’ve seen people that didn’t know what skills they had. America’s Career Information Net had a correlation to military skills to civilian skills. When it brings it up on the screen what you see is a list of bullets, which has your primary and your minor functions. Also, it tells you what jobs correlate to that, where can you go to school for that. This is what you are there for. The family, hey, if they’re having a problem with they’re heat and it’s wintertime, you know the right person to call to get them on circuit breaker. Do you see what I mean, family? And if I sound agitated, I am because the VA, it’s too bureaucratic. We were just over here at the Loyola Visitor’s Center and I just ran into a guy. The VA, the only thing… they didn’t want me to be a disabled veteran representative. I just got through talking to this gentleman here who runs a program out of, was it Rush, Rush Hospital – me and him are gonna get together. I have the health now.

**The Road Home Program?**

Mm hm. This is for veterans. They need somebody in their corner. They need somebody that really cares about them and their family that can show them things.

**Yeah, it says the Road Home Program – the Center for Veterans and Families.**

You know, I told you about America’s Career Info Net. It’s .org. You know, you type that in, it will show you… you can write the best resume in the world. That was what… I never wrote a resume for anybody, but I taught them this – 60 to 70% of what the employer is looking for, if you meet that, you’re resume goes to the next criteria. I see you writing it down. We’ll look it up. I’ll show you that site. But that’s what it’s all about. It’s not about just this individual, it’s their family. The barriers are there. I’ve been through all this baloney. I’m trying not to use colorful metaphors. My wife has a sailor’s mouth.

**[Laughs]**

But, basically that’s what I wanted to say. That’s what I found important.

**Ok.**

You know, everything about me is not important. What’s important is our veterans.

**So, when you refer to your dream job, you were talking about being a disabled veteran representative. Right? Earlier?**

Yes.

**I’m just curious. May I ask you, how did they prepare you? How were you prepared to do that? Did you go through any kind of training?**

Yes you did. You did, you went through a lot of training. Basically, it’s the only job in the country where the first criteria is to have a service connected disability. Second thing, which they help you on, is getting a couple little letters put on your ID called MSW – Master Social Worker. You got a psychiatrist and you got a psychologist. Psychiatrist, their function… we have the POW right now that’s five years. The first thing was to get him sort of stabilized. I’m not going to say if he’s done something right or wrong, but I’m going to tell you this much that they need to look at, was he physically and mentally abused by his team members. They got the… I hate it when my mind goes blank… psychiatrist? Psychologist. Alright that individual person, their purpose is to, the individual has now admitted they have a problem, they help them deal with it. Every office in the unemployment office throughout the country has a disabled veteran specialist. You are a Master Social Worker. Your job now is to help them overcome their barriers to employability. Assistant Secretary to Veteran Affairs Taylor, which was, he was Assistant Secretary for the state of Indiana when I retired in 2010. Then they brought this down to me, they said that the job description for DVOP was being rewritten by the VA because of how I did my job.

**Wow.**

And I have people right now that are… they will… when I talk to this guy some people are going to be sending him referrals on me because I’m ready. When I talked to the VA all they wanted me to do was be a patient transport. I have more skills than that. I mean I got grandchildren, I was almost there dying and suddenly I became better because a doctor saw what was going on with me. I’ve gotten better and I’m ready to get back out there, even though it’ll be volunteer work. Me and you going to look up that website afterwards, ok? Even though it’d be volunteer work, I’m there for that. And anybody can use that website, not just veterans. It’s good for anybody. Basically, unless you have any questions, I have gone off the deep end.

**Oh, no. No.**

I’m joking.

**I did have sort of two final questions. One is just generally speaking, and obviously dealing with PTSD yourself and helping other people with it is like a huge part of your life…**

Mm hm.

 **Do you think the military experience was beneficial in any ways? Just like the regimented life and the routine and just the camaraderie.**

Yes, yes.

**So it was in some ways.**

Yes, even for them today. We have to remember, we live in a world in which there are people that exist that think we do not have a right to live in this, we \_\_\_\_\_\_ like them. I am not saying, that is a very broad term. I’ve run into Muslims that would give you the shirt off their back. And there is a great misconception – being Muslim doesn’t necessarily mean you’re Arab. Look at Malaysia, look at Burma, look at Indonesia, look at North Africa, look at what’s happening in Mali right now, and so forth. As long as we have existed we have had people that feel that unless you are the supermodel of what they think, you have no right to live. I feel that policemen and firemen should have veteran benefits. Who went into the Twin Towers?

**Oh, right. That’s a very good point.**

Who puts their life on the line for us every day? And people don’t think about this. I’m sorry.

**No, that’s ok.**

You’re getting me on my…

**It’s ok. I guess my final question would be, if we’ve covered everything, is just to ask if you have any final thoughts at all.**

We got one world. Love your neighbor.

**Ok, well thank you very much for sharing your experiences with us today.**

Ok. You’re welcome.