

## McGill, William Wesley Interview pt 2 2-28-90

[Speaker 1]

I didn't really choose to be decommissioned that way. I didn't really feel, if we went to Caiusio, that we had much chance to, as individuals, to plan on coming home. I think for the first time I really realized the Lord has really stood by you, Janelle, and you've been through a lot.

There's a lot of other guys that have to land on that beach. You're going to have to do your part to face it. We just took for granted that we were going to be sacrificed.

[Speaker 2]

You were in the process of getting ready.

[Speaker 1]

Yes, and mentally you had to get prepared, and he said, I remember he said, the shore battery will be firing almost straight at us because we're going to be in that close. The main battery will be dealing with those guns higher up on the elevation there, but 5 inch is going to have to take care of the shore battery. We'll be able to reach us.

We figure we'll be in 800 or 1,000 yards. That don't give you much chance to get away. So we know we're going.

So when the atomic bomb did fall on Dr. Johnson, I would admit that I was glad, but if I had it to do with the terror and the awesome devastation that could bring to our earth, I've wished many times that it had never been developed. Really, I have, although I was relieved when it dropped. I haven't changed my feeling about this.

In college I said the same thing. I was asked by a philosophy professor here when I was a student, do you believe that America will use the atomic bomb to save our allies in Europe? And I was the only one in the class that said we will.

We have to. We can't shirk duty. We promised.

And as we left the room, he put his arm around my shoulder. He says, I thank you for your thoughts on this because I didn't know how the class would go. All the class said, no, we wouldn't.

But you see in war, the military and the Navy, I think it was Abraham Lincoln that says, a country that has no regard for its past will do little to be remembered in the future. An army or a Navy that doesn't accomplish its goals and has no traditional values in order to do that, you're not going to be remembered. That's why when I teach history, I feel like I'm passing on not about me, but about my forefathers, my fellow man.

It's like this honor for Uncle Troy. I'm not really pushing Uncle Troy, although he's the man that died. He deserves the honor.

But we're talking about many just like him. We don't even know how they died. America right now needs a leader.

I think maybe our president is a great leader that we have right now. Let's hope he is because the world looks like we might have some peace and liberty for all men. I'm for that.

I know you're for that.

[Speaker 2]

What happened to the Colorado? You heard that the bomb bombs had gone off.

[Speaker 1]

Yes. Okay. When they went off, quite soon, all capital ships in the Navy must provide a landing force.

The Colorado, being one of those capital ships in Okinawa, was told to prepare a landing force to land at Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan. I was just one of the few E-6s in the Navy on that ship that I had 160 men. My division was 160.

I was the boss under a commission officer. I dashed right back and volunteered to check the platoon of men ashore. It was part of my qualifications.

Do you know that my best buddy was ready to kill me? He said, you idiot. You get through the war alive and now you volunteer to go on there.

You don't know if there's going to be resistance. I'll never see you again. I said, well, I volunteered.

Now I thought you would. I thought he would be the first one back there. He was a big old boy from Missouri, strong as an ox.

But he didn't. So here I have the third platoon of the landing force of the USS Colorado to land. I know they call it Yokosuka now, but they called it Yokosuka then.

That's where I was going to land with my platoon. So MacArthur, that brave man, flew in there on his plane. I think they called it a baton.

Landed in there unarmed. Winston Churchill says that's the bravest deed he'd ever known a flag officer to perform. We didn't have to land.

They didn't resist. But let me tell you, when those Japanese destroyers steamed at us with muzzles depressed, breach mechanisms removed, we were fully at general quarters, ammunition, powder, the whole works. I'll tell you, the Navy figured they could.

We were standing at the ready. And I was real glad that the Japanese didn't fight us. Because we're the thing.

The Navy's in that harbor. And that Japanese destroyer steamed right up to us and let a person off on our ship. I don't know what his purpose was, or if he was American or what.

We didn't get to see everything. But we were standing ready on those guns. You hear about Fujiyama there?

Must have been something for him. Really was. So we got to go ashore one time.

I would have got ashore twice, but I'll say this for me. They put out the order here that any officers can go ashore as long as we're here two sections. But that wasn't going to let the non-rated men go at all.

In the 5th Division, I said, every man in this division is going ashore. I don't care if he's a boot. He has as much right to go ashore.

Hey, those petty officers hated me. How can you do this when every other division just said, that's because they fought in World War II. So I only got ashore one time.

And I could have went several times. Three times. Well, that's where I stood.

And I'll stand right there again. Those kids loved me. Whether the petty officer did or not.

When I left that ship, I'll tell you this. I had a plan one. Zero.

You can't wake a man up in the middle of the night, two or three times, and send him on a working party. Working all night when he's been on the gun crew. No sleep.

You can't do that job and make a guy like you. Somebody has to do it. I wasn't really physically man enough to back up those orders.

But nobody knew that. I knew that. See, I went in the ring there with three of those guys.

I found out. Just because you're from Tennessee. I wasn't a native from Tennessee.

Everybody would set up and take notice. They don't. They don't.

I really had that idea. Hey, man, I'll work right up there. Hey, I have guys from Tennessee.

Actually, I'll tell you something. They didn't tell all that, did they?

[Speaker 2]

They didn't tell them much.

[Speaker 1]

No, really. Golly, my dad must have been proud of me. He must be responsible for that.

I really thought the whole world would think, oh, you're from Tennessee, man. You're really tough. Not so.

What did you see when you went ashore? Oh, Dr. Johnson Matthews, something I never told a soul. I saw such devastation.

This isn't really atomic bombing. This is firebombing or something. Devastating.

Absolutely devastating. But, you know, I went ashore with soap and cigarettes. I treated the Japanese so gently and so fairly that, you know, we were really scolded by the command for fraternization with an enemy.

I mean, no peace had been, you know, they've surrendered, but it's not in writing yet. They're strong enough to start blowing up a bunch of people. You should see us.

I even have a picture taken. My second wife's gone. First wife's gone.

Hey, where is Buddy Buddy? Isn't that terrible? Why are we like that?

I had no, of all of our managers, Dan Eddard and everything, I didn't even remember that.

[Speaker 2]

Well, the people you saw weren't the people who had done that.

[Speaker 1]

And I wrote this story here in Dr. Howell's class. He had me write on something about the Chinese display in the World's Fair. And I remember something that happened.

It was a man coming up the road there. We were in Yokohama or Liberty. And I guess he thought the Americans would attack him.

We were just there on Liberty. And he was coming up the road saying, Me Chinese! Me Chinese!

Me not fight you! And Dr. Howell got such a kick out of that. That's really right.

That's what he said. I wasn't going to fight anybody. One Japanese man took me in his, it was covered with tin.

He just made it out of scraps you could pick up. And he invited me in and wanted me to make myself at home. Do I say everything on this tape?

He wanted to share his body. So he sent his beautiful young daughter away. And he offered to, and I said no, I couldn't do that.

I could do that with your daughter, but I couldn't with your wife. So I just gave him soap and cigarettes. You see, I never felt in all of my time that you should compromise a man's castle.

Or forcibly inflict two ways on another person. And I still feel that way. And that's why I'm a believer in the right to tell their arms.

There are much arms in my house. But they're not to bother people. They are to bother people if they should attack me.

They're there for sporting. All my kids shoot guns. My daughter shoots .357s. How long were you ashore in Japan? I only got ashore there that one time. And I believed Dr. Johnson that we were over there that day. From probably around 10 o'clock to around 5.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, just part of one day?

[Speaker 1]

Yes, that's all. Not overnight. Now, the geisha girls that we'd always heard about were locked up.

My father had ordered them locked up due to an idea that was prevalent that they were diseased. Some of them, at least. So we observed geisha girls behind bars.

We gave them soap and cigarettes to prove to us that they were the same as the Caucasian women. Isn't that crazy? We did it.

Some of them might as well tell you. Turned out they were. The same.

Big lie. We made them all the same. Oh, golly, I felt all those lies.

And, you know, they were, we had no hard feelings towards them. I sent the rest of my division, mostly non-rated, shortly the next day. Every one of my division, 160 men, every one of them got on the beach.

So they could say they had been to Japan. It cost me and my petty officers time over there. Hey, let's do it again.

You see, when you're in, you see everybody does something that's going to be criticized. And I don't think I did everything right. I did everything the way I felt was right.

[Speaker 2]

Did you happen to see any of the American prisoners who had been captured by the Japanese?

[Speaker 1]

Okay, that's, I passed that up completely. We took on many, many prisoners. And transferred some of our guys to other ships who didn't have enough time to go back to the States.

And the prisoners, oh, it stands out. In my division, as the division petty officer, I had to give a report to the executive officer of how many I could sleep. I had a lot of prisoners.

That's the most pathetic thing I've ever seen. Now, if you thought you wanted to be friendly to the Japanese, as soon as those prisoners come aboard, you didn't want to be friendly anymore. You'd starve to death.

Skin and bone. And those men were so humble. They had Japanese money and they wanted to give you something.

I think I only had about one piece of that left. I'd give it to people. They were so thankful to be alive.

And there was so much on the birdship diet. They can't eat much because they've been starved so long. That was pathetic.

You know, I haven't remembered that until you brought it up. Did you lose any of them? Not while I was there.

Before long, I had enough time over there to be transferred back to the United States. And somebody who hadn't been there was sent aboard a boatswain made first class. That's what I was.

By the name of Yukon Abbott. A real professional sailor. I mean, by that, he was real sharp at tying knots and stuff.

But apparently he hadn't been in combat because he was going to have to stay there. And I was transferred to the USS West Virginia.

[Speaker 2]

Oh, so you had to say goodbye to the car.

[Speaker 1]

I had to say goodbye after I had it all made. You know, I had to get my stuff ready and get over there. And I heard, gosh, I went over there leaving all my souvenirs.

And asking guys to mail it to me. You know, they never do. They will, but they won't see.

So I got off with nothing. No souvenirs. Got on the West Virginia.

Sat there a few days. Let me back down. They made a steam out in the water and transferred to a destroyer and then to the West Virginia.

That's the Navy way. You get a little more sea time that way. I transferred on the destroyer on to the West Virginia.

We're still in the area, see. Why we did that, I don't know. We could have done it by motor launch.

But my gunnery officer came to me, Lieutenant Mute. He had gone to Lieutenant Commander and was now gunnery officer, USS Colorado. So having been my 5th Division officer, he knew me.

He knew me good. And he come down as I left the young destroyer to leave the Colorado. And he says, McGill, you have done so good in the Navy.

You should stay. You'll be a chief in no time. I had a good record.

My record was clean. And I says, Commander, there isn't enough money in the Treasury Department to keep me in the Navy. That is my quote.

Word for word. And golly, I thought about that many times. I'll get back to Knoxville here in a minute.

While I was aboard the Colorado, I was summonsed to the executive officer's stateroom. Just about the time I made E-4, that's the coxswain. Boats are made zurd now, but it's coxswain then.

That's E-4, that's your first step to the officer. The executive officer said to me, Hey, executive officers don't have you in their stateroom. What have I done?

You know, you can wear a hat in the presence of an officer in the stateroom if you have a duty belt on. And you don't salute with a hat off in the Navy ever. That's why you have a duty belt on and a hat on.

You can salute in the stateroom. I didn't have a duty belt on, so I had to have my hat off. And there's Bowers.

Commander Bowers. He said, there it is. I had to stay standing.

He's got my record. I see you're from Knoxville, Tennessee. Yes, sir.

Where's your dad from? Chevierville, Tennessee. What area there?

That's where it's valid? Yes, so am I. I know your dad.

He says, McGill, you've got a very fine record. If I ever talk to you again, I will deal with you severely. In other words, he gave me a strict warning.

Because he knew my dad. That's true. If I talk to you again, I'll deal with you severely.

So the executive officer I'm fighting with knew my dad all this time. So see, everybody don't play politics. That didn't help me any.

He just happened to find out I was from Tennessee. We had Otis Columbus Reed on the Maryland. He was a good buddy of mine.

He ended up on the Maryland from Lake City. I can't find anybody ever heard of him. So I had to give him up.

Anyway, now, we arrived at West Virginia. I'm on to West Virginia, leaving Japan. I'm glad the war is over.

I'm looking forward to getting home, really. And just came into Pearl Harbor on to West Virginia. I'm a West Virginia man now.

Wasn't a big difference. West Virginia had gone through that modernization. She was a beautiful ship.

She really looked good. She had the dual-purpose 538s. And the old caged mast was gone.

She's our sister. Ride that baby out of Pearl Harbor then and run on to San Diego. And from San Diego, they didn't give us time to do anything.

I had friends there I wanted to call up, didn't have time. If you're going to accept government transportation, you've got to go straight home. No breaks.

No taking a side trip. I had to go straight home. I had a girlfriend in Fort Worth who went through there on a train.

Couldn't even call her up. Didn't have time. So we just went straight to her.

But in all the war, and it was a lot of it, and a lot of things happened. You know, you've heard me say this before. I feel like I was very fortunate.

I saw guys that were just great young men. Christian men. And that means a lot because the guy that says he don't believe, I won't spend much time talking to him.

I'm not going to tell him how to believe. But if you've really been in the thick of it, you'll start believing if you don't believe. I see a lot of guys change their mind when the bombs start falling.

So you see, why even put on that phony front? When I see you stand up there and teach a class, and some of your young people really are interested, it really does me good. That pays for the whole thing.

It does for me. You know what? And when you allow participation, it's really good, Dr. Johnson. I would give anything in the world to be teaching.

[Speaker 2]

Yeah, I understand that. So you're not right now. I could do such a good job.

Oh, I know that. I was talking with John Finger about that not too long ago.

[Speaker 1]

Bless his heart. He didn't give me a good grade either. But I love him.

He's a great professor.

[Speaker 2]

When you got home, what was it like coming back home?

[Speaker 1]

Unbelievable. Everybody's gone. The guys that were here, the guys who were your best buddies, you don't even know where they are.

Some of them met girls and gone. Everybody seemed to be different. I know in myself, I went from a young man.

I thought more like a middle-aged man. I was very mature. You had 160 people, and you were what, 23 years old?

I told them everything to do. When to eat, when to go potty. Everything was made up.

The Watts Quarter and Station Bill told them every place to be at all times. I wouldn't play politics. When I took over that division from a real prostitute, he wasn't a very good man.

Nobody felt I could handle it. So my first, I've still got the notes at home, my first quarters for mustard, I says, as I run this division, you will never hear me curse you. I don't use that language.

I have, but I don't want to base my directions on what happened. And I says, from now on, everybody will come to the quarters in the uniform of the day, regulation closed. That's real touchy with these guys.

They've got a lot more time than I have, but they aren't the boss. If the men who are E2s and E3s have to wear regulation clothes, everybody will wear them. Well, some of those guys who thought they were senior to me, been on there a lot longer than me, come with non-regulation.

I didn't even look at them. Anybody coming with non-regulation clothes tomorrow will be put on his porch. And that terminated all that.

We all had everybody in those clothes that don't fit. See, the captain didn't like those cut-in clothes. And I know what it is to wear tight-fitting, beautiful.

I had a nice figure too. I had my bell-bottoms made special in Hawaii, but the captain said no, non-regulation. So we had these first-class petty officers who figured it didn't apply to them.

They got away with it, with my predecessor, because he played politics for power. Not me. I don't play politics.

Everybody's going to do the same. I did those things and just made myself a bunch of enemies that would have thrown me over the side probably. I never thought about that, but I guess it's been done.

[Speaker 2]

It's happened. When you came back, though, you were different, they were different.

[Speaker 1]

Oh, really different, Dr. Johnson. I remember getting together with John Grigsby and Bill Chone. And John and I went dancing quite a bit.

And we, of course, had developed a taste for beer. I wasn't a smoker or a drinker when I left. I don't say, my dad bought me a beer the day I left.

You know, we weren't allowed to do that. And I tried to keep myself in good physical shape in order to be able to fight. How about that?

Long-winded. I was no great football player, but I was rugged. And I made the team.

But these guys, gradually we started going different ways. And the girl I wanted to marry was the daughter of Baptist minister. So she went to Carson Newman.

And then when my buddy went to Carson Newman without checking it out with me, then I went to Maryville. And the only reason I went to Maryville, I wanted to be up there. But he didn't stick to his agreement.

So I went to Maryville, played football over there. Played fullback for Boyd Hunter. And his son was my competition.

So I got up. Going to school was one of my... When I quit school at Creston, he says, You'll never go back.

You'll never go back to quit. Well, many years later, after I retired from the Navy, that was still ringing in my ears, you know that his statement, each time I got discouraged at the University of Tennessee, I thought, you'll never go back. I'm going to do it for you, buddy.

And I did. What made you go back to the Navy again? Okay, that's a good one.

I said I would never go back. All right. I went to Boeing.

I left here in August of 1946. And I went out there and stayed with my buddy, my best buddy in the Navy. He was wounded the same day.

They had to take him off, so I lost track of him. But he was living in Everett, Washington. I went out there and lived with him, worked in his service station.

It was a family business. Worked in the cabinet shop. No pay.

Just a place to live. And I got tired of that. I went to work for Boeing.

And then, by golly, would you know, I got laid off in that big stripe of Boeing. Then I took a temporary job. And then I married.

I moved to Montana. My wife got pregnant. I said, my child, my boy has got to be born in Tennessee.

Oh, her folks were crushed. They were relieved to the Braggs. Her name was Bragg.

I said, he's got to be right there where Bragg and Longstreet. They said, hey. Boy, they cried, you know.

And I took my wife to the doctor, and he says, Bill's out. He's a smart guy. You'll make it to Tennessee, all right.

But we almost had that baby in a Teton. So we hit bad roads in my brand-new Mercury, and she was having her thing. I had to stop.

All I could find was a building with no heat in it, no nothing. I built a fire in there, and she was in there laying on the bed. I was afraid that baby was going to come.

And I was out there gathering wood. I think there's a big bear out there handing me sticks. Really, it was scary out there.

Well, anyway, we're heading to Tennessee from where I went out west to work for Boeing. Coming here, a baby is born right here at Port Silence, the most beautiful girl I've ever seen. And so I didn't name her Braxton Bragg McGill.

That wasn't going to be the name. I named her Elizabeth Earl McGill. And that kid was beautiful.

By the time she was six weeks old, her mother was giving me so much anti-Tennessee static, I had to take her right home. I took her home to give her back to her mother. Anyway, I was just...

I was just so happy.