

Q: So my first question is when did your fathers involvement in Vietnam start and what was he doing before then?

John Smith: Before he was involved in Vietnam, he was the White house pilot. He was the helicopter pilot that you saw taking the president from the white house to Andrews air force base, for the last year of Eisenhower's administration and the first year of Kennedy's administration. I really did not know him at that time, I was born in '61. He was still active in that duty, to my knowledge, when I was born and shortly there after he wound up assigned to a special unit in southeast Asia. He was flying helicopter obviously, that's what he did best, but he was flying helicopter into an area that we were not officially in or had any military presence within, officially.

Q: How many tours did he end up serving in Vietnam?

John Smith: 3 tours

Q: 3 tours?

Smith: The first one was as I said unofficial, that extended for eighteen months and then his last two tours in Vietnam were eighteen months each. And the spacing of those is kind of interesting but that's a story for another time.

Q: Now you were born shortly before his last tour in Vietnam, Correct?

Smith: I was born shortly before his first tour in Vietnam. And I did not know him until 1968 I think is when I met my father. Where I would know him to see him and recognize him.

Q: And what was it like meeting him for the first time, can you describe it to me? The setting, the scene.

Smith: It was incredible. I was standing in my grandmothers living room, looking out the picture window and a car pulled up in the drive way. I looked at my mom and my mom put her face in her hands and started to cry and I asked her if that was my dad, and she said yes. I ran outside and did my dog-goundest to knock him over with a hug.

Q: So what was life like while he was abroad? Can you walk me through your average day, waking up, breakfast, that sort of thing.

Smith: Oh for crying out loud. My mom did an outstanding job I think. Growing up she always made sure we were well fed. We always had breakfast. At the earliest point in time we were going to catholic school and we had the uniform we had you know the black slacks and the white shirt and the purple tie with the school emblem on it. And Ma always did an outstanding job, and we knew that Pa was there but... He wasn't there. He was ever-present in our minds, but he wasn't there. And that kinda sucked. [Laughing]. Sorry.

Q: During this time period who did you surround yourself with, your family?

Smith: Oh my gosh, my brother and I were pretty close. He kicked my ass every day as an older brother will do, but my sister and I talked. And we had tons of friends. We had friends, well that were from all over the area. You know, within reason. And we played ball, we played football, we played baseball, we played ice hockey. We were living up outside of Buffalo at the time. You know I mean it was a good childhood. Minus my father.

Q: And did you see the effects of him being gone on those around you?

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Smith: My father was no murderer, he was a warrior. He was trained to do a job and he did that job to the best of his ability. He served his country proudly. But when Vietnam vets came home, as opposed to today, they weren't greeted with applause in the airport. They were literally spit at.

Q: How did he deal with that kind of reaction?

Smith: I remember coming out of restaurants, Victor's Pizza Parlor in Springfield, Virginia was one I remember distinctly. We came out and he had a sticker on his car, that is my father had a sticker on his car, that showed a peace symbol, as we're all accustomed to seeing, and underneath of the peace symbol the sticker said, 'footprint of the American chicken'. There were a number of times, Victor's Pizza Parlor was one among them. We come outside, we had our dinner, we had our fill and we come outside and there's a nasty letter tucked under the windshield wiper saying basically 'you militaristic S.O.B.' It wasn't pretty.

Q: How did you come to learn of your father and his time in Vietnam? Was it through stories?

Smith: Oh my gosh. Most of, well all of what I learned obviously was after the fact. Most of what I learned was the same way that any industry has people that share an office at one point time and they wind up on the other coast and they wind up sharing an office again. I mean the military is no different. In fact, maybe a little bit more exclusive in that regard, but he would encounter people with whom he had served at various posts, some of which were in Vietnam, and I overheard a lot of conversations on the phone. Not that I was eavesdropping. But then too he would have a conversation on the phone and the individual in question would wind up coming by the house and I would be introduced to them. And they would sit there and recount their adventures of days of old. It was terrific, it was just terrific to listen to. Some of the things were horrifying, okay, some of the things they recounted were horrifying but... I don't know it's different when you're hearing your dad talk about it with one of his friends who's there to corroborate his story, you know.

Q: Can you tell me a little bit about Ken Ricer?

Smith: Oh my god. Growing up he was my uncle Ken. That's what he wanted me to call him, and my father wanted me to call him Colonel Ricer. He had been in World War II, which my father was too young for. He had been in the Korean War and he served in Vietnam. He was a fixed wing pilot during World War II and the Korean War. And he transitioned to helicopters during the Vietnam War. He is, if I'm not mistaken, the most decorated Marine aviator of all time. I'm pretty sure of that. He had something like four or five purple hearts, a couple of Navy crosses. I mean he's very, very highly decorated, and he was my uncle Ken. And it's hysterical because we'd be sitting there at the table eating dinner, or breakfast, or whatever the devil we were doing. And he would say something to me, and I would say 'Yes uncle Ken!' And my dad would look at me and say 'That's Colonel Ricer!' And I would say 'Yes Colonel Ricer' and then Colonel Ricer would look at me and say 'That's Uncle Ken!' [Laughing] No it's true! I mean, he was the guy that – the same way that a young boy grows up hero worshipping his father, if there was such a thing, my father had hero worship for Ken Ricer. He was, My dad was flying a mission with Colonel Ricer as his wingman, and Colonel Ricer got shot down. My dad watched him go in. The area in Vietnam in which they were flying, you had to call in and report that you were getting shot

at and request permission to return fire. My dad didn't do that. He saw Colonel Ricer's bird go down and he, according to colonel Ricer, spun it on its' butt and let loose with everything he had. The ground troops in the area went in, and they had to pull Colonel Ricer out of the bay, if you will, of the Huey. The turbine in the crash landing had come down and forward and pinned his crew chief to the floor. He [Colonel Ricer] was forcibly removed from the flaming wreck, he was put on a plane that was supposed to take him to a burn center in Texas and we wound up getting misrouted, rerouted, all the way to Bethesda. So he went another 1500 miles or so by plane. When he got to Bethesda they did a full body x-ray and they found three slugs in him that otherwise would not have been found. That saved his life.

Q: Did he visit you guys often at your house?

Smith: He was my uncle Ken for crying out loud. I think the first sip off of a beer, the first puff off of a cigar, the, and he would share my cheerios with me in the morning. He was my uncle Ken, there was no blood relation obviously, but yeah he was actually in Pappy Boyington's Black Sheep Squadron if you know what that is. And for those of you that don't well look it up.

Q: So once your father came home from the war after it had ended, how did life pick up?

Smith: He, umm, he tried his hand at a few different things in the private sector. At one point in time, he was planning on opening a motorcycle shop, that is to say a motorcycle dealership with a service branch of it. And a snowmobile dealership and service branch, and we were looking at New England. We went up there a couple of summers looking, his intent was to buy a dairy farm and convert it. What would double as a motocross track in the summer time and snowmobile track in the winter time. My Mom kind of put the kibosh on that.

Q: During this time how did you become close to him? How did you get to know him?

Smith: Oh my god. [Portion of recording lost due to device failure- Smith begins to describe being his father's helper while he worked on automobiles and motorcycles] I literally, my dad got up I was up. Okay? He would go out there and start turning a wrench on a car, and I'm standing right there going 'what do you need next' you know, screwdriver, another wrench, what do you need. Honestly, and a lot of the times it would be early on a Saturday morning. Get up early and go out there and Pa is getting ready to go somewhere and I'm like 'where ya going?' 'Oh I'm going to the hardware store' 'well I'm going with you'. You know, and I played gofer. And he's like go get me this, go get me that. Fuck yeah I'm ready [laughing] you know?

Q: So I want to backtrack just a little bit, and go back towards your early days of school. You said you had attended catholic school?

Smith: Oh Jesus Christ, yeah. [word unclear].

Q: During this time, the years in separation between your siblings – did that interfere with your schooling?

Smith: Well no! To be honest with you, in catholic school normally you were taught by Nuns. On occasion they would have a civilian, if you will, teacher. Who is regularly in scone as a teacher in the Catholic school. But normally it was Nuns. And then of course if you got into trouble, you got sent to the priest and debriefed. [laughing] whatever it was that you did. But like, I tell you what – the catholic school didn't have near as much impact on me. I say that, foolishly. After I had been through two and a

half years, including a part of kindergarten, two and a half years of catholic school, I didn't learn anything in public school for five years. The quality of the education was that much better. And I'm not kidding. I got, uh, bored. And when I got bored, well you know me.

Q: During this time were you guys still living in military housing?

Smith: We left military housing right before my father came home from his last tour. We were in military housing, on base, in camp Pendleton. Which, quite frankly, was not terrible. We had an orange grove right there. Every morning Ma would send my sister, my brother and I out to gather oranges. She would sit there and literally squeeze the orange juice. It was good stuff.

Q: what was the community there like? Was it close knit?

Smith: [sighs] We were in what is considered officers quarters, so they did not house enlisted people next door to an officer. Okay? It's just the way they did things. And I remember distinctly the first time I ever saw my father lose his temper. He had come home, and he was grilling steaks on the back porch. These were like town houses. And he was grilling steaks, the guy next door was grilling, well I don't know, hot dogs, hamburgers, something like that. Now the night before, my father had a phone call at like three o'clock in the morning. Telling him to go out and find a crashed helicopter. And it was a friend of his, a guy he knew well. We knew him, I mean as a child. Pa got the call and he went out and flew all night long and they finally found him. You know the wreckage of the helicopter, and everyone was dead and everything. That following day, well that day, Pa was out there grilling steaks on the porch. The guy next to us, he was an officer, but you get a certain amount of pay as a captain in the marine core. If you're an aviator, and if you fly so many hours per month, you get flight pay. In addition to your base pay. Well Pa always had that, he was constantly flying. And this guy stood on his back porch grilling his hotdogs and hamburgers and said, 'Gee I wish I was getting that flight pay I'd be grilling steaks too!' That's the first time I ever saw my dad lose his temper. He walked down the stairs from our porch and up the stairs of the other guys porch, and that guy was about my size he wasn't a little fella. And Pa jacked him up against the wall like this and explained to him that he had been out until three o'clock in the morning scraping the ass of one of his buddies off of the mountain side. That's the way he put it.

Q: Aside from living at that base, were there other bases you guys lived on?

Smith: My gosh, yeah, we lived in Hawaii. We had an avocado tree in the front yard, and my brother and I used to clime the avocado tree and wait for cars to come underneath, you know, on the road side. You could see the rotten avocado's hanging on the limb and you just shake the limb a little bit and errrrr bam! Just like a grenade. [laughing]

Q: was it difficult moving around a lot, moving from place to place?

Smith: [sighs] In a way, yeah, I mean I oh my gosh. Up until I was fifteen years old, I had never lived anywhere more than two and half years. So every time you felt like you had a friend, I mean that's just me, you felt like you had to say goodbye, you know? And I don't know how long it takes to make a true friend, but you know somebody for two and a half years and you're best buds, then all of a sudden it's like you know what – See ya never again. That was difficult. The plus side of it was I think, that I don't have any problem talking to people, you know, I can strike up a conversation with whomever is around. And I think that's definitely a plus.

Q: Where there any places that you thought you'd really like to go back to?

Smith: Hawaii.

Q: Hawaii?

Smith: Damn right.

Q: Just the weather?

Smith: Yup!

[laughing]

Q: So how long were you guys in Hawaii for? Two and a half years?

Smith: The first time we were there for a year and then the second time I lived there I was there for about a year and a half. I honestly, I'm sorry, it's ridiculous. If I had the money, that's where I would be right now.

Q: Other than Hawaii are there any places, on the mainland united states, that particularly spoke to you?

Smith: I like California. I absolutely did. We had one incident with an earthquake there, while we were living there, but it really, it rattled everyone in the family but me. I was like 'I don't care' you know? [laughing] But California yeah, I liked the smell and the palm trees, now mind you we weren't in the city, okay. But I like California. We were in Arizona, and that was hell. Arizona was just, terrible. It was so hot, and people say 'well it's dry heat' I don't care. If your skin is blistering up off of you, it's too hot.

Q: Growing up, how did you learn to do most things while your dad was away? Who taught you how to play ball? Who taught you? You had mentioned your uncle was the one to teach you fishing.

Smith: Yeah, and when my father came home the last time, he was standing in my sister's bedroom talking to her. And my brother and I were tossing a football back and forth. We insisted that he come out to the backyard. Which he did, he came out to the backyard and he had the football in his hand and he went to throw it to me underhand from about four or five feet away, 'okay John here it comes!'. I caught the ball and I passed it to my brother, who in turn passed it to my father. And my father looked at me and said, 'who taught you how to throw a ball like that?' I pointed at my brother. Pa asked my brother, 'who taught you how to throw a ball like that?' and he pointed at me. My father broke down crying.

Q: So despite your and your brothers conflicts you guys had become quite close?

Smith: Well hell yeah we were close. He beat the piss out of me every day, but I love my brother. But it was fun.

Q: What kind of other activities did you and your brother get into?

Smith: oh my god. We had certainly bicycles, and when we had exhausted our expertise in bicycles we got go-karts. I remember coming around he front yard in the house in Jacksonville in a go-kart and flipping the go-kart three times over. Then we got into dirt bikes, and there were like four or five

racetracks in very close proximity to where we lived. There were, well the flat track was in Wilson, the rest of them were all motocross tracks. We wound up getting into dirt bike racing. My father, when we first expressed to him that we wanted a dirt bike, he said 'save your confederate money'. And my brother and I mowed lawns and raked pine straw and cleaned gutters and washed cars. We did everything we could do to make a buck honestly. Well between the time I was ten and the time I was fifteen, we owned about a dozen different motorcycles. Some of which were bought, one of which we bought new – only one, and the rest of them we bought either in whole or in part.

Q: Who taught you how to ride them?

Smith: That was a guy named Gulick. He was a Staff Sargent in my father's squadron. He had been a desert racer, and a moto-crosser and a flat-tracker. There was nothing motorcycle that he did not know. He's the one that taught my brother and I how to ride.

Q: was your dad proud of this? Did he love watching you guys race?

Smith: Oh my god yeah. The only one that wasn't was my mom, she went and hid behind a fucking tree. Cause Pa wasn't home on time for a race on a weekend and Ma had to take us. He made arrangements, you know, she took us. She was literally hiding behind a pine tree, with her hands over her eyes behind the pine tree. The commandant of the base, Colonel Capitan, was present there because I was teaching his boy how to ride. He came over to me and he said, 'son you're scaring the hell out of your mother, you know that?'. 'Well, you know if my dad was here it wouldn't be a problem.' [laughing]

Q: It sounds to me that a lot of things that you learned while your dad was away, when he came back he was very proud of how much you had been able to accomplish.

Smith: Oh I think so. Yeah. Absolutely. Pa was a, well, he was very proud of the fact that I graduated high school, he was very proud of the fact that I made somewhat of a success of myself after graduating high school without college. I'm certain, one hundred percent, he'd rather I had gone to college. I have no doubt of that whatsoever.

Q: And where do you think the sense of proudness of your father comes about? From his military career? Or more so from the man you got to know after he had come home?

Smith: That's a good question. Okay. That's a really good question. I knew, initially, as most do, the legend. I heard from many of his friends growing up what a great pilot he was. Never flew with him, so I can't personally attest to that. But when you have a three- or four-star general in the marine core tell you 'Son your daddy's the best damn pilot the marine core has ever seen', that leaves an impression on you. Okay? Getting to know him, I remember when I was about ten or eleven years old we had a pine tree in the backyard where the height of the limb on the pine tree was perfect for doing chin-ups. You just jump up, grab a hold of it and do your chin-ups. My brother and I were out there doing chin-ups on the thing and my dad got home from work, still in his uniform, and he walked out and said 'hey guys what are you doing?' I said, 'we're doing chin-ups'. He said 'Mind if I try?' he jumped up and he grabbed the limb and he banged off fifty. Fifty, five – zero. Bang, bang, bang, no hesitation, no slowing down. Just fifty chin-ups. Dropped down. Brushed his hands off and said, 'Thanks guys that was great, let me know next time you want to do some chin-ups.' My brother and I stood there just like a couple of goats with that look like, whaaaaat? [laughing]

Q: Now you said you hadn't flown with him personally, but you had seen him fly multiple times hadn't you?

Smith: oh yeah, absolutely. We would go to Armed Forces Day at various military bases and he was almost always in the show. In one case he was flying a fifty-three, CH-53, now I think they're called CH-63 or something but that was a great big, huge helicopter and he dropped a bunch of recon marines out of the back of the thing and they parachuted in. And the way that they did it was, well right in front of everybody, but all of a sudden, they disappeared. Then my father came around later in the show in a Huey, and he came around from behind where we were, hovered and snapped the thing into a position where he could have killed everybody there, you know. Yeah plus, we got on that particular day, we got to climb into the cockpits of everything from a 46, currently called a 47-shinook, 53C-Stallion, huey cobra, a UH1 and a UH1E, the Hueys, yeah it was pretty cool.

Q: Now was it just you and your family that went to these shows or did you bring friends?

Smith: Oh no, I took all kinds of friends of mine from school because they had never believed me. We'd be standing out on the schoolyard, you know, playing or whatever and this plane would come by going, [imitating plane noises], you know, waving it's wings. And I'd go, 'you see that', 'yeah', 'that's my dad', 'right Smith'. Right. And it was. So I made a point to take some of my friends to Armed Forces Day and just go 'hey, you see that? That's my dad.' And they'd look through the canopy of the helicopter and see LTC. URC – Smith on the front of the helmet. It was kind of hard for them to deny it after that.

Q: It must have been a really proud moment to be able to show off like that.

Smith: Oh yeah god are you kidding. Your bursting with pride.

Q: Were there any other moments like that where you got to show off, you know, the skills of the family?

Smith: I don't know. I mean, every single military person with whom I interacted, from the level of a corporal or a Sargent to a General, told me the same thing. 'Your daddy was the best pilot that ever graced this Marine Core. Okay? Colonel Ricer, and my god look up his record, I think he's got like two navy crosses and five purple hearts, and two legions of merit. I mean the only thing that I'm aware of that Colonel Ricer did not win was the Congressional Medal of Honor, which who knows, it might be arguable. But that man, the guy that my own father virtually worshipped as a hero, said 'Your daddy is the best damn pilot that the Marine Core has ever seen.'

Q: Who was he to you, outside of being your dad and being the best pilot? What kind of man did you see in him?

Smith: Well, small in stature and large in heart. He was only five foot eight. But he had shoulders on him like this for Christ's sake [large]. He had a heart the size of Kansas, I mean he just, he loved his fellow man. It's kind of ironic you know.

Q: Are there any other qualities that you, or that you would think really influenced you. Becoming who you are, that you got from him?

Smith: Well you gotta be tough, I mean, by tough I mean in some cases physically you gotta be tough and in most cases mentally you gotta be tough. You have to be able to take experience and digest it and

extract from it those positive things that you can. And try as best you can to dismiss the rest. But It's not always that easy. I mean we all go through tough times, myself included.

Q: Are there any other stories or significant events that you might want to share? Anything else that you can think of that really molded you into who you are and events that really characterize what you think of your dad?

Smith: I mean not really, we don't have time enough or tape enough here. I love the fact that my dad loved my wife, the first time I heard her referred to by my father as 'Gal', I was like "I Got a winner!" [laughing] But no, I mean I, we could go on for hours. He was just a great guy, he loved everybody, and he did his job. You know? In combat, I would say that like back in the old days, World War One and World War Two, if there was an ace in a fixed wing aircraft that you didn't want to go up against, as far as a helicopter is concerned I would say that was my father. Again, I state unequivocally from a Staff Sargent to a two or three star General, I had a number of people tell me he's just the best there ever was. So I'm very, very proud of that.

Q: Well I want to thank you for sharing your story and your father's story with me, and it's been eye opening to me.

Smith: My pleasure.