

Flourney, John USMC

[00:00:14.13] JOHN FLOURNOY: I was born and raised here in Columbus, Georgia, along with my seven brothers and sisters and my mom and dad and great granddad and great mother. We've been around here a long time. And my dad was in the Marine Corps and served in the Pacific. And he told me not to go in the Marines, which was a sure way to get me to go in the Marines.

[00:00:36.39] I told my son Jake, you might ought to go in the Navy. But anyway, he went in the Marine Corps. So we're kind of a Marine family here around Columbus, Georgia, which is obviously an Army town. JOHN FLOURNOY: Since the Vietnam War?

[00:00:54.76] MARK FRANKLIN: Yes, sir.

[00:00:58.45] JOHN FLOURNOY: I was really unsure of what the ultimate goal was other than the fact that we were fighting a communist takeover, and communism was, at that point in the '50s and '60s, that was something terrible. I'm a graduate of Columbus High School here in Columbus and of the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, North Carolina.

[00:01:23.77] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you say you received an ROTC commission before you joined the Marine Corps?

[00:01:27.46] JOHN FLOURNOY: I did not. No. I went to the platoon leaders command and went through OCS before my last year there, which was-- I went back to play-- I'd promised them I'd play a final year of football. I was on the football team up there.

[00:01:49.40] JOHN FLOURNOY: Well, I began in 1958 when I went to OCS at Quantico. And then when I graduated in January, I got my second lieutenant commission and almost immediately went on to Pensacola for flight training. They were running short at that time, I think, of pilots in Vietnam.

[00:02:13.31] MARK FRANKLIN: And you wanted to be a pilot? Or did they ask you? Did they see something and decided that you'd make a good pilot?

[00:02:17.93] JOHN FLOURNOY: No. I wanted to be a pilot.

[00:02:19.07] MARK FRANKLIN: You wanted to be a pilot. Describe that training.

[00:02:21.02] JOHN FLOURNOY: I felt like the training was very good. There was no-- at that point in time, it was supposed to be an 18 month program, the Navy flight training program. And they pushed me through in 13 months. And I enjoyed it.

[00:02:38.54] It was fantastic training. It was in Pensacola and in Kingsville, Texas, and different locations. And we went all the way through our carrier qualifications and did that before I went to the fleet. I left the flight school and was assigned to an attack squadron in Cherry Point, North Carolina. And we trained there for a year and a half or two years almost, I believe it was, before we were sent to-- the whole squadron was basically sent to Vietnam.

[00:03:11.28] And while I was over there, we did an awful lot of work. In fact, I was trained and qualified for nuclear delivery and all sorts of things. But we did a lot of very, very close work with targets on the ground that were-- and that was our main mission is close air support. Well, that's what we did in Vietnam mostly. We did a lot of other things but--

[00:03:43.96] JOHN FLOURNOY: I don't remember exactly what the year was. I can guess that it would have been in-- I would have been assigned in late 1965, but I went over in the spring of 1966 and was assigned to a squadron. Our squadron didn't go as a whole. We were-- the squadron pilots were shipped, and we went into Marine Air Group 12, which was based in Chu Lai. Chu Lai, as you may know, is south of Da Nang. And it is fortunately on the South China Sea, which was the only good thing about Chu Lai.

[00:04:20.46] MARK FRANKLIN: What was your first impression when you got off the aircraft and--

[00:04:25.36] JOHN FLOURNOY: I think the first thing was I looked out there, and the runway that we would be using was a steel mat. It was not a concrete runway. And I looked at the mat, and I thought, that is not a very-- it was pretty slick-looking even when it wasn't wet. So that was my first thought. And then I guess my next memory was the smell of the way they were burning the cisterns where the bathrooms were.

[00:04:53.54] And so they burned that with jet fuel and that put an odor over the place. It was not very pleasant. And then there were jet fumes from the aircraft, and we lived in tents just over the sand dune. And I mean, every time an engine cranked up, you could hear it. But anyway, it was-- the nice thing about it was you had a beach out there that you could run on and you could go swimming in. And it wasn't-- you weren't out in a jungle with mosquitoes.

[00:05:29.12] JOHN FLOURNOY: Well, the living conditions were pretty hot because we lived in tents. And then after about six or eight months, we had some tin roofed sheds that were built. And as I recall, they had screened in part of it. They weren't air conditioned or anything, but at that point in time, I was very busy. And so I didn't have a lot of time for recreation or-- the only thing I did do is when I had a free hour, I would put on a little skimpy bathing suit and barefooted run down the beach. And then I'd come back and do pull ups on the bar in the hooch or in the tent.

[00:06:14.03] And I would do a lot of pull ups because I was always fearful that I would get shot down in North Vietnam and not be able to hold on to the line coming from the helicopter. So I wanted to be able to do that with one arm, and I was able to do that with one arm. And the other thing was is being able to run like I did without shoes on or boots or anything is being-- if you had to escape through the jungle or whatever. But I was pretty fit then.

[00:06:42.72] MARK FRANKLIN: Your area of operations, you provided close air support to the Marines that were-- just Marines? or did you provide-- ?

[00:06:50.04] JOHN FLOURNOY: Marines and Army and the NVA-- I mean, not the NVA, but the ARVN. Yeah, ARVN.

[00:06:57.93] MARK FRANKLIN: What was your-- the area of operations was strictly around Chu Lai? or did you-- ?

[00:07:01.76] JOHN FLOURNOY: No. Believe it or not, we would often fly three missions a day and the first one right at daylight. And it might be up into the DMZ or it might be up into North Vietnam reconnoitering and trying to knock out any movement of ordnance coming south by barges or trucks or whatever.

[00:07:26.16] And then we did close air support whenever it was needed. But we also worked in Laos and on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And we did a lot of night work on the Ho Chi Minh Trail when we would have Air Force guys coming over from Thailand that had sensors and could tell where these trucks were moving down the trail. And they would direct us in there, and we would try to knock them out. And we could do that.

[00:08:00.70] JOHN FLOURNOY: You would have a flight leader on the flight line and-- on the steel matted flight line and then you would start your aircraft and then check in on the frequency. And you would all-- they would generally we would go in groups of three. Four, it would be a division. But we found that was more awkward to rendezvous and especially to rendezvous at night coming off of targets to come home. Because it wasn't infrequently that somebody had either taken some anti-aircraft fire or they had lost their one single UHF radio.

[00:08:37.42] And so we always were working to make sure we took care of each other, and we rendezvoused out from the target and then tried to get on home before we ran out of fuel.

[00:08:48.52] MARK FRANKLIN: But you typically flew in aircraft, three in a group.

[00:08:52.24] JOHN FLOURNOY: Three different aircraft. Right. These were Skyhawks, which is an A-4. And we had the latest version, which was an A-4 Echo. And it was a superb close air support airplane. It was far better than an F-4, which had a pilot and a radar intercept officer and weighed about four times the weight of an A-4.

[00:09:17.80] In an A-4 you could feel comfortable. It was like driving a small sports car. You could get in and out. And you could deliver a lot of ordnance, and you could put it close to your troops, which is what we needed to do oftentimes when proximity of the enemy. But it was a wonderful plane for that mission.

[00:09:38.83] MARK FRANKLIN: Do any of these missions stand out as significant from your time, for one reason or another?

[00:09:43.99] JOHN FLOURNOY: Well, there are several. I mean, when you-- I flew 226 missions and there were several in all of that, that you would remember. I mean, I think one of the worst was a night when I was up with one other person, and we had Marines up in the-- around Hue I think it was. And we rendezvoused, and we were there second to a group of Marine F-4s.

[00:10:15.86] And one of the F-4 drivers dropped a bomb into the Marine CP, and they were screaming and hollering. And the few guys that were left told us to come on. I mean, it was a disaster. And we were there on site for about an hour trying to help. Later on, we found out that none of the Marines in that group made it. So it was-- but it was horrible.

[00:10:41.24] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:10:42.05] JOHN FLOURNOY: I remember missions that were-- where you would feel really good about what you were doing, because you would really-- like up in the DMZ area, up on Hill 880 and those places up there where you had those Marine fire bases, those guys, I mean, they wouldn't have lived if we hadn't flight after flight come in there and knocked the NVA back down the mountain. I mean, the NVA might have 50,000 or 100,000 troops there. You might have 20 Marines on the top.

[00:11:16.17] It was terrible and-- but there were often times that we could save their butts. One of the things I think that I was most excited about was I was the ordnance officer in that squadron, in addition to being a squadron pilot. And I knew that we needed a better weapon than the low drag bombs that we were using, because the bombs would go into the soft soil and they would have just a big clump of mud come up in the air. And you really weren't effectively doing what you needed to.

[00:11:53.32] So I spoke with the group ordnance officer in Da Nang and found out that we did in fact have VT fusing. VT fusing is radar controlled fusing so that you can-- VT fusing had not been used in Vietnam. In fact, I don't think it had been used hardly anywhere because it was dangerous. It was a very dangerous thing to fool with.

[00:12:18.09] And of course, I was fearless. And I said, well, I want-- I told this colonel. I mean, yeah, he was a colonel. I said I want to see it. I want you to get me some of it, and I'm going to take it apart and look at it and figure out how to work it. And so we did. And we figured out why it was so dangerous. And the reason it was dangerous is because the people that had used it in the past didn't adhere to the rules that you had to adhere to.

[00:12:46.56] And you can't release-- you can't do a multiple release on VT fusing, or one bomb will home in on the one in front of it. And the next thing you know you, have a mid-air explosion. And so anyway, we had it working like a charm. And the Marine FACs, which were flying around in O-1 Charlies, and the Army forward air controllers-- Air Force air controllers in A-1 Skyraiders would have us come over for targets and for troops in the open or whatever. And they were just appalled at how effective it was.

[00:13:24.18] So anyway, it was working great. And the rule in the squadron-- our squadron was the only one using it-- and the rule was that I was going to be the flight leader in-- every time we went out, because I was going to check everybody's ordnance, make sure that it was properly installed. I'd already taught them how to use all this equipment about setting the altitude that it goes off. You could change that in your cockpit. You could even set-- there are a lot of things you could do.

[00:13:51.95] But we got a new squadron CO. I probably shouldn't tell you his name and so I won't. But anyway, he insisted he was the colonel, and I was a captain. And he was going to lead. And I said, well, that's a mistake. Well, it was a mistake. And he did some things that were really, really stupid. And I couldn't even get him off the radio to tell him to get the hell out of where he'd dropped these bombs. And it ended up--

[00:14:19.83] so I tried to swoop down and warn him that these damn bombs were down here. And so anyway, it exploded and it just decimated my airplane; blew landing gear through the wing and blew out hydraulics. And we were over North Vietnam. And it damaged his plane. But anyway, I was lucky to survive. I flew out over the ocean. Finally, flew the plane back and crash landed-- couldn't get the landing gear to work and I crash landed the airplane.

[00:14:48.44] And I was really, really upset about it. And of course, you would be too. But about three days later, we were sitting having lunch at the shack where they had the luncheon for the squadron-- for the air group. And they had one of these cranes come over with that plane underneath and they had it hanging underneath. And it started doing this and they-- lo and behold, they got out over the Gulf of Tonkin and released it. And when it twirled down and hit the water, you should have heard the cheering. I mean, it was just phenomenal. It reminded you of Catch-22 or whatever the movie--

[00:15:29.89] MARK FRANKLIN: Was that your aircraft?

[00:15:31.19] JOHN FLOURNOY: It was. It was so badly damaged. They were sending it to Japan, I think, to take it apart. And-- yeah.

[00:15:39.14] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, if I could back up, you mentioned that you had to crash land that aircraft because you didn't have any landing gear. Can you talk about that?

[00:15:45.80] JOHN FLOURNOY: Yeah. It wasn't any big deal because we had tailhooks, and the runway had cables.

[00:15:57.87] MARK FRANKLIN: Like on an aircraft carrier.

[00:15:59.40] JOHN FLOURNOY: If you knew how to land on an aircraft carrier, you could follow the meatball, as they call it, in the mirror. You could land right into the cable. So it wasn't any real big deal. I was just so-- just mad.

[00:16:15.84] MARK FRANKLIN: Did your commander make it back also?

[00:16:17.97] JOHN FLOURNOY: He made it back. But he didn't want to see me because I think he knew what I would do. And it wouldn't be pretty.

[00:16:24.63] MARK FRANKLIN: No sir. You also said you were an ordnance officer. What else did you do as an ordnance officer?

[00:16:30.07] JOHN FLOURNOY: Well, I had-- I don't know-- maybe 25 to 30 people, enlisted men and a senior NCO working for me. And we handled the loading and the repairs on the cannons and all. We had those mini guns that were 5,000 rounds a minute and 20 millimeter. And they would jam because it was blowing the sand and all that.

[00:16:58.70] And so we repaired everything and we received the ordnance. We sent to the bomb dump and got the right number of and the right types of bombs. And then when we found out what the missions were, we were responsible for loading and arming all the weapons that went out on the airplanes. So that was what I did in my off time.

[00:17:20.69] MARK FRANKLIN: When you weren't busy, right?

[00:17:21.83] JOHN FLOURNOY: Yeah, I was, which was great. I like being busy, and you didn't sit around and wonder. JOHN FLOURNOY: Ah, I didn't with the ARVN. And I had a little bit with the Koreans. They had their-- I've forgotten the name, what they called those guys. But they were pretty rough. I mean, they were-- what did they call them? The Tiger troops? Is that--

[00:17:49.99] MARK FRANKLIN: There were two divisions. There's the White Horse Division and the Tiger Division.

[00:17:52.87] JOHN FLOURNOY: The Tiger Division was-- they had a group that was pretty close to our base on-- in Chu Lai. And we would go over there sometimes and talk to them. And the only other affiliation or connection I had is when I left Vietnam, I went to Australia out of Saigon in a C-130, in an Australian C-130 with about 80 corpses in bags in the back of their troops.

[00:18:24.76] And I, of course, being a pilot, I flew up in front with them and sat there. And they gave me a ride down to Australia and then gave me a ride on down to Sydney and so. And then I spent a couple of weeks there. This is while I'm coming home, I'm going the back way. And I had a wonderful time in Australia. I can tell you that.

[00:18:50.30] JOHN FLOURNOY: They are just mixed feelings. I didn't really feel like at any point in time-- after I'd been there about four, five months, I was-- I had seen enough to know that we were not there to win that war. We were there in a holding action. And I could figure out that it was probably because of the Chinese situation supporting the-- or the Russians. And I knew the Russians were operating all the SAM sites, the surface to air missile sites. And I say all-- I know they were the guys behind the North Vietnamese if the North Vietnamese were in fact operating it. But they were there.

[00:19:42.34] So I figured that somebody that was smarter than me had figured that we didn't need to take it too fast or we might open something that's much more dangerous, nuclear or whatever. I don't know. So I didn't-- I didn't get into worrying too much about it except to think that it was tough when you think that we could have ended that war, in my humble opinion, in a matter of six or eight months.

[00:20:09.08] But we would have had to go right at all the sources of supplies in North Vietnam, and we would have had to hit the railroads coming in from China. And we would have had to hit the ships that were unloading in the Haiphong Harbor. And we were not allowed to do that. And not only that, you'd have stand down agreements like Tet holiday.

[00:20:33.35] And we would-- this other captain who was in my squadron and I were the first guys out on Tet holiday in spring of 1967. And we left South Vietnam and flew over the DMZ and checked out with Peacock control, which was a C-130. And we told them that-- what we were seeing. And I called them back and I said, you're not going to believe what I'm seeing. And they said, well, what do you mean?

[00:21:05.97] I said, I'm seeing so many trucks and ferries. And I said, you won't believe it. And I said, we've got two of these cannons loaded with ammunition. And we can inflict severe damage. They are violating the Tet holiday. And so Peacock control says, stand by, when they call, I guess, Saigon. And then they called back and said, just count what you can. I said, I can barely count them, there's so much down there. I mean, I can just barely keep score.

[00:21:41.27] And I got back and went to intelligence and debrief. I later found out-- I found out maybe a month later that the debrief went immediately to Washington, and Washington didn't say or do anything. And I heard that LBJ had it on his desk. I heard that later, and I don't know whether that's factual or not. But I do know that it went-- it got to Washington in a matter of hours. And-- nothing. So you figure that out.

[00:22:13.95] JOHN FLOURNOY: Well, I didn't. We didn't have telephone contact at that time. And we wrote letters, but I mean, I wasn't homesick. And I was so busy, I didn't have time to do much of anything. And my family would send articles out of the newspaper here and there. And then at one point, I was sent back to stand a nuclear standby. My mother and father came over to Japan. And I was based at Iwakuni, and I was there for a couple of weeks. And they came over along with a girlfriend that I had had at that time. And they all came over, and we had a great time for a week or so. But other than that--

[00:22:57.77] MARK FRANKLIN: Not a whole lot of contact, which you mentioned they would send you news articles. Did you get a sense of how the country was supporting or not supporting? And how did that affect you?

[00:23:04.73] JOHN FLOURNOY: Yeah. Well, I had seen-- I'd seen some of that before I left here, and I figured there are people moving to Canada to avoid the draft and their right-- they're-- But there was so much-- at that point in time, there were so many people that were just liberal, and they were smoking dope and they just weren't-- they weren't people I admired at all.

[00:23:28.50] And if they wanted to walk and complain and do all that, I mean, it's a free country. But I didn't get any sense from word at home that there was any resentment that I was there serving. In fact, I got several secondary letters that my mother would send, people that said that they had read one thing or another and they were proud that I was in the Marine Corps and I was serving in Vietnam now. I just never let that bother me. I didn't. I just tuned that out.

[00:24:05.70] JOHN FLOURNOY: Yeah. I mean, there's several, yes, several that I still see and communicate with. But after about 20 years, they die off or they go here or there. So it's just two or three that I really-- JOHN FLOURNOY: Whatever-- nobody ever said anything ugly to me about what I was doing. I can tell you that. Maybe they were afraid to, but they didn't.

[00:24:44.23] And I stayed busy because I didn't quit flying. I went straight from Vietnam after I got home, I was based over in South Carolina and started flying F-8 Crusaders because I was going to go to an active Reserve squadron in Atlanta. And this was after five years of active service. And then I think I flew five years in the Reserves in Atlanta, until finally I was watching these airplanes self-destruct from metal fatigue.

[00:25:21.79] And our commanding officer, who was an Eastern Airline pilot, died on the runway at NAS Atlanta from a broken lock on a wing fold on the runway at afterburner. And that was about the last-- that was about the third or fourth plane we lost due to metal fatigue. And I said, that's it for me. But I had also had a corporate plane by then that we were flying and I was flying all over the Southeast. So I just never worried about it.

[00:25:54.57] MARK FRANKLIN: So when you left the Marine Corps, you served your country, you served and it was time-- you made the decision to leave the Marine Corps. What did you do after you left?

[00:26:02.33] JOHN FLOURNOY: Well, I was real busy then. I already had my company here. I had started a construction and a real estate development company, which I'm operating 46 years later so-- and so that's what I do today. But I've been busy all along and I don't-- I never really worry too much about all those people that want to bitch and moan about-- I mean, it's only a handful of people that make things happen anyway.

[00:26:34.35] JOHN FLOURNOY: I'll say this, I've never been ashamed of what I did over there. I've always been proud that I did it, and I went. And after reading General McMaster's book, he just put his finger on what was going on at that point in time. And I won't get into any of the details of that. But it just explained what I already knew, explained it. And this is how it happened and this is why.

[00:27:03.69] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you think your experience in Vietnam affects the way you think about veterans today and the wars today?

[00:27:09.63] JOHN FLOURNOY: Well, I have a lot of-- I have a lot of respect for veterans that have really put their life on the line and that have been in the combat. I mean, of course, there's a fraction of veterans today that really are in the front lines or see the action. The rest of them are supporting. You got to say, well, somebody's got to do it.

[00:27:35.10] But I really feel strongly about the guys that have problems coming home after-- especially the ground troops, who are there smelling it and hearing it. And I mean, I was fortunate that I didn't smell it and I couldn't hear it. I could see it, but-- and I thought about it, but it didn't drive me crazy.

[00:28:01.23] I was doing my job, and I was doing the best job I could. And if I was excellent at what I did it, that was all the better.

[00:28:09.87] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you-- sir, how do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[00:28:14.31] JOHN FLOURNOY: I think that the overall feel about the Vietnam War is improving every year. I think people are beginning to realize that the people that came back from Vietnam that were so crazed were-- I mean, they realized that they were going through something horrendous. And so I think the general public feels better about Vietnam veterans and about people that are still maybe mentally affected by what happened to them.

[00:28:50.70] MARK FRANKLIN: What lessons do you think you take from Vietnam that you'd like to pass on to this generation and future generations?

[00:28:58.84] JOHN FLOURNOY: I think that it wouldn't be the Vietnam thing, it would be service to the country. It would be how important and-- JOHN FLOURNOY: I think it's a good idea. And I know that I can say on this camera here, we're recording this at the National Infantry Museum at Fort Benning and-- outside of Columbus, Georgia here, which is a phenomenal facility as you well know. And my interest in this museum had to do with teaching children and same thing here.

[00:29:49.51] MARK FRANKLIN: Service to the country.

[00:29:50.80] JOHN FLOURNOY: Right.

[00:29:51.34] MARK FRANKLIN: And how great it is to be an American, and that we owe a certain debt to this country, to serve. Yes, sir. Sir, it has been my absolute honor to talk to you today. And I want to thank you very, very much.

[00:30:03.01] JOHN FLOURNOY: OK.