

General and jet pilot tells of challenges

Retired Gen. Merrill A. McPeak recounts anecdotes of past flights

By G. Jaros
Oregon Daily Emerald

He was flying straight up into the sky when the wings came off his airplane.

Then the fuel dumped out onto the engine and the airplane exploded.

That is the only time that retired four-star Gen. Merrill A. McPeak has ever had to jump out of an airplane — and he wasn't in combat. It happened in front of a crowd in Del Rio, Texas, while McPeak was flying with the Thunderbirds. The Thunderbirds are the Air Force's elite flying team, made up of some of the best jet fighter pilots in the world.

McPeak, who retired in 1994, flew to the University on Tuesday to talk with members of Bill Lamson's freshman seminar, "Come Fly With Me: Exploring the Heritage of Flight."

McPeak, who served with the Joint Chiefs of Staff during Desert Storm, spoke about air power and its significance to this country.

The general arrived in Eugene in his homemade acrobatic airplane, which he flew down from his home in Lake Oswego.

When asked about obstacles he has overcome in his life, there was a long pause before he began to reflect on his Oregon roots and getting a college education.

"I'm just an Oregon guy from Grants Pass," McPeak said. "I was a kid from a very ordinary background."

His family didn't have much money, so he had to get a scholarship to go to college, he said. He attended San Diego State rather than the University because they offered him an academic scholarship that provided tuition and books.

"I went down there because I was assured of a place to stay and something to eat," McPeak said.

He worked full time while attending college. A job as a "hasher" at a fraternity house gave him room and board. A hasher washes dishes and serves food, he said.

Later, he joined the Air Force ROTC because their upper division courses paid \$90 every three months, "which came in damn handy," McPeak said. It was the only thing that kept him eating a couple of times, he said.

"I had no intention of making the Air Force a career, in other words," McPeak said, adding that the whole experience was more fun than it was an obstacle.

McPeak never imagined that be-

ing an ROTC cadet would help provide not just food and shelter but also dinners in the private quarters of the president of the United States and stays at Camp David.

His first visit to Camp David, nestled in the Maryland mountains, was when the Joint Chiefs of Staff met with President Bush six weeks before Desert Storm.

"It is a lovely place," McPeak said. "There are a lot of little cabins scattered around and various presidents have added a thing or two. One added a chapel, another a fireplace."

McPeak didn't land in such lofty places by sheer luck. He worked hard.

He discovered a love for flying after college while in flight school.

He spent the next 12 years flying fighter planes. As a career pilot, McPeak logged more than 6,500 flying hours. He flew in nearly 200 air shows throughout the world as a member of the Thunderbirds before becoming a combat pilot in Vietnam.

In Vietnam he flew as an attack pilot as well as a high-speed forward air controller, or scout, seeking out targets and marking them with white phosphorus rockets before calling in other fighters to do the actual bombing.

"Most forward air controllers were slower aircraft, but in some places you just couldn't go slow," McPeak said. He flew 269 combat missions.


Following Vietnam, he commanded various units. He was a general for 14 years and in charge of all Air Force operations in the Pacific before going to Washington D.C. to join the Joint Chiefs of Staff to help command air operations for Desert Storm.

During his career McPeak was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross with Oak Leaf Cluster and a chestful of other medals including the Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross with Palm.

When asked if anything scares him or makes him nervous, McPeak talked about the unforgiving nature of flying and the dangers of bad weather.

"Flying can back you into a corner sometimes," McPeak said. "Part of the secret to flying is to always have options. Every once in a while I have painted myself into a corner, flying where there wasn't a way out, and it's not scary but it keeps you alert."

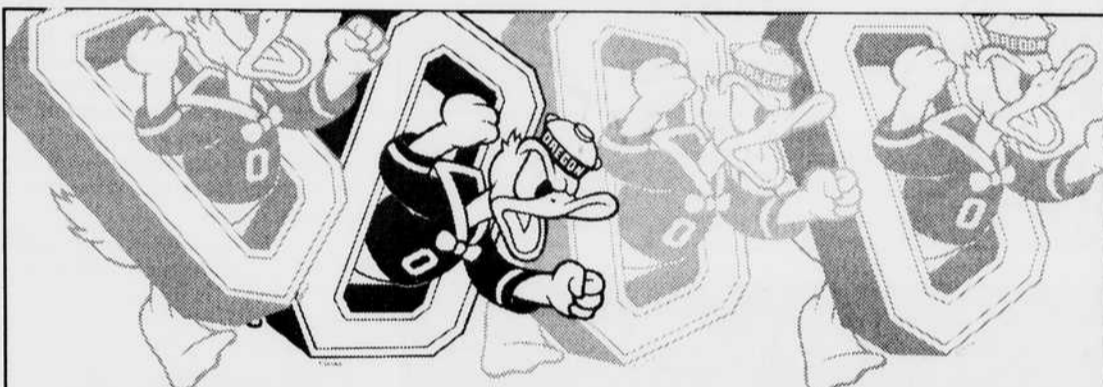
"And so I guess I'm not afraid of anything. In fact, I'm the best pilot in the world, no doubt about it, including in bad weather, but I have lived as long as I have because I treat it with respect."





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CRIME WATCH

(Reported Feb. 23 to March 1)

- Feb. 24, Attempted Burglary I, 1100 block of Ferry Street.
- Feb. 25, Theft II, 1300 block of Columbia Street: bikes stolen.
- Feb. 25, Criminal Mischief III, 1000 block of Patterson Street, University Inn: graffiti.
- Feb. 26, Theft I, 400 block of East 8th Avenue, University Bookstore Warehouse: items stolen.
- Feb. 26, Assault IV, 1100 block of Agate Street.
- Feb. 26, Theft I, 1200 block of Franklin Boulevard, Pacific Hall: bike stolen.
- Feb. 26, Theft III, 1600 block of University Street: items stolen.
- Feb. 27, Trespass II, 1200 block of University Street, EMU.
- Feb. 27, Assault IV, 700 block of East 16th Avenue.
- Feb. 28, Shoplifting II, 800 block of East 13th Avenue, University Bookstore: attempt to steal items.
- Feb. 28, Unlawful Possession of a Controlled Substance, Franklin Boulevard and Oryx streets: possession of methamphetamines.
- Feb. 28, Death Investigation, 1500 block of Alder Street: Lane Community College Student found dead.
- Feb. 28, Theft I, 1200 block of East 13th Avenue: items stolen.