



# A Country Boy Just Doing His Job

**Serving his country in Vietnam forever shaped Hereford breeder Jim McCown, Cedar Creek, Mo.**

by *Christy Couch Lee*

**T**he images are still as vivid as the moments they occurred more than 45 years ago. Flashes of red. Smoke. The spiraling of the helicopter to the ground.

The sounds of live gunfire echo in his ears. The helicopter engines roar.

The heat of the Vietnamese tropical rainforest. The relief of surviving yet again.

“We were hauling Marines and intelligence information from Bien Hoa to Phu Bai and often

out of a seven-day period, two of those days would be spent landing in a hot LZ (landing zone),” says Hereford breeder Jim McCown, Cedar Creek, Mo. “When we would get back to the home base, I would raise my head and look at the holes in the chopper, and I would think, ‘I was pretty lucky this time.’”

“Twice, I was in a chopper that took live fire and took down the engine,” he continues. “You didn’t see anyone walk away from those. But somehow, I did.”

McCown served our country in the Vietnam War from 1971-1972. He was a self-proclaimed country boy who was thrown into the middle of a battle a world away. He didn't choose the experience, but when duty called, he served his country proudly. Most definitely, the experience forever shaped the man he is today.

### Country boy turned infantryman

In his early years, McCown lived at Good Samaritan Boys Ranch. He was adopted at the age of 5 and moved to the then small community of Nixa, Mo., with his parents, Andrew Jackson (Jack) and Winnie Jeanette McCown.

"I always have attributed my love of animals to my time at the Boys Ranch and growing up on the old 'Seaton Farm,' West of Nixa," McCown says.

He began raising 13 steers on the Nixa farm, then acquired one registered Hereford heifer through FFA in high school. Eventually, he invested in two additional registered Hereford heifers. By the time he graduated, his herd had grown to six head.

McCown graduated from high school in 1970 and enrolled at East Texas State University-Commerce, where he played football as a left guard. And before long, the young college student was whisked into an entirely different world.

Enrolling in college at the height of the Vietnam War, McCown knew he would soon be called to duty when his draft number was four.

"And off to the Army I went," he says. "It was a hard decision for any 18 or 19-year-old. I was just a college kid, having fun and playing football. I didn't particularly want to be shot at — I'm an old country boy, and I didn't cherish that thought. But I decided I had a responsibility to go."

When he entered the Army in 1971, he was offered the chance at helicopter pilot training.

"I kick myself for not following that path," he says. "I ended up volunteering as a door gunner on a helicopter, when I should have been the pilot."

The life expectancy for a door gunner in a hot-landing zone during this time? Fifteen minutes. He served in this role for 18 months — making about two landings in hot zones each week.

"There were two jobs you didn't want to have in Vietnam — one was lieutenant as a squad leader, and the other was door gunner. If you lived through taking that live fire, you were awfully lucky," McCown says. "I was extremely lucky. I managed to make it through."

What was supposed to be a 12-month tour turned into 18, and he was gradually promoted to the rank of sergeant.



McCown served for 18 months as a door gunner before being promoted to a sergeant.



"That was easy to do in Vietnam, as sergeants and officers were killed off so quickly," he says.

### Lasting effects

Wartime can change a person, McCown says, sometimes for good and sometimes not.

"As kids back in Missouri, the worst thing we would do is find someone to buy beer for us — our morals and values were pretty high," he says. "But you take this small-town country boy and stick him into a war zone? I just remember thinking, 'What in the world is going on here?'"

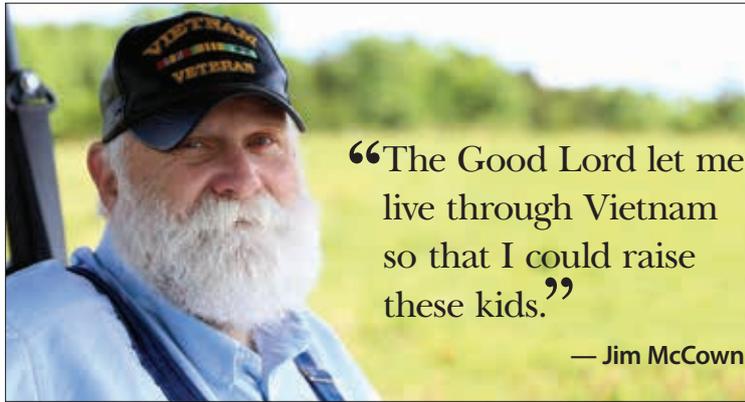
After being in combat for a few months, McCown says, a soldier became acclimated just to survive.

"Everybody thinks a tour of duty is a whole year of day in, day out bullets being fired at you, and it wasn't," he says. "Those times of fire lasted maybe 30-40 minutes. But the buildup of

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McCown began his small Hereford herd during high school after purchasing a registered Hereford as an FFA project.



“The Good Lord let me live through Vietnam so that I could raise these kids.”

— Jim McCown

knowing something was going to happen? That’s what scared you. And the apple-pie country boy disappeared. But the change was so gradual, you didn’t even realize what was happening to you.

“While I was there, I certainly was no hero,” he continues. “When you live in a war like that for 18 months, you have to deal with death on a daily basis, in your own way. When a person is exposed to that much death, there’s nothing good about it.”

While serving in Vietnam, McCown received the infamous “Dear John” letter from his girlfriend back home.

“That was a turning point. I just fell off the deep end, and I didn’t think I would make it home — especially with the job I had,” he says. “I had such a hard time understanding it all. And I kept asking God why I would never be able to return home and raise cows.”

Because he didn’t want his Hereford herd to be a burden to his parents, McCown called home and asked them to sell his herd.

“I kept looking at those bullet holes in the helicopter, and had to tell my parents to sell those cows,” he says. “It nearly broke my heart to do that. But I didn’t want mom and dad to have to take care of my cows for me.”

Losing two good friends in the war also changed McCown, he says. It also gave him a reason to find purpose in life.

“I always have felt like because they lost their lives, I needed to make something of mine,” he

says. “I was living day to day in the war. But when I got back, I straightened up and flew right.”

That return home was not the warm welcome of military servicemen and women today. In fact, McCown says, his return to the States was anything but warm.

“It was terrible,” he says. “They told us at the airport to take off our uniforms, because people were there to spit on us and throw cabbage at us. I held that in for a long, long time.”

As well, McCown began to experience the effects of exposure to Agent Orange — a herbicide used during the Vietnam War to clear forest cover and crops. It has been linked to cancer, severe rashes, and psychological and neurological conditions. Gradually, through the years, the effects have compounded.

“The Agent Orange has eaten up my legs and hip joints, and I can’t walk,” he says. “I’ve had two heart attacks and am diabetic — a whole list of ills that are mostly correlated to Agent Orange.”

## Determination

Hereford breeder Jim McCown, Cedar Creek, Mo., served for 18 months in the Vietnam War and in the process was exposed to Agent Orange, a herbicide used in the war which has led to many health concerns for veterans through the years.

However, he had no idea what was causing his many health issues until he took part in a motorcycle ride to Washington, D.C. with Rolling Thunder® Inc., a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization designed to bring awareness and support to Prisoners of War/Missing in Action and veterans’ needs.

“Riding my Harley to D.C. with that group of veterans was emotional,” McCown says. “Seeing the Vietnam

Veterans Memorial was an emotional visit, as I lost a couple of really good friends over there.”

Being with a large group of Vietnam veterans also opened his eyes to his medical conditions.

“I didn’t even know what Agent Orange was before that trip,” he says. “When I was there in D.C., there were thousands of bikers in a large parking lot. Several of them were standing in a circle, pulling up their pant legs and showing each other their wounds. I had open sores on my legs for years, but had no idea why. I walked up to that group and asked what they were doing. One of the bikers — a complete stranger — said, ‘Oh my, man! You’re eat up!’”

He has since been in treatment with the Veterans Affairs (VA) health system.

“I have two good friends with the same thing I have, and they’ve had their legs amputated,” McCown says. “Every time I go into the VA, they ask if I’m ready for amputation. But those friends died within a year of losing their legs, and I’ve got a lot to live for. I’m in a lot of pain, but life is good. I can still crawl into this truck to feed cows, and I can still watch my granddaughter play basketball and volleyball. Yes, I’ve got a lot to live for.”

To learn more about Rolling Thunder, visit [rollingthunder1.com](http://rollingthunder1.com). HW

### A winding path back to his roots

When McCown returned from Vietnam, he married a hometown girl.

Because of the benefits and security, he decided to stay in the Army. McCown says he knew he didn't want to remain in a "dead-end MOS (Military Occupational Specialty)," so he requested and got special training in new computer technology at Ft. Mead with the Army Security Agency (ASA).

"Our motto in ASA was 'In God we trust, in all others we monitor,'" he says. He was then stationed in Okinawa, Japan, with that detail.

He and his wife had their first child — a son, Chris — while in Okinawa. They then adopted their daughter, Christina, from Korea. And another son, Kevin, arrived — completing the family. McCown spent six years in Okinawa, and after a reassignment to Germany, he says, his then-wife decided the stress was too much. She returned to the States, leaving him with their daughter, Christina.

"I was having trouble finding babysitters for the shifts that I worked, and I talked with the First Sergeant. After 15 years of service, I was given an honorable discharge and returned home with Christina and soon received full custody of all three children," he says.

He returned to college and earned an associate degree in computer information systems. He was only a few credit hours away from his bachelor's degree, but raising three children quickly became a priority.

For 20 years, he served as the director of software development for the Sisters of Mercy Health System, St. John's in Springfield, Mo. He then moved to corporate headquarters in St. Louis for two years as the Director of Business Intelligence, where 45 programmers reported to him.

"Computers are stressful, and I knew one of two things were going to happen — I was either going to retire and watch my cattle graze, or I was going to be a truck driver," he says. "I always wanted to get back into the cattle business, but raising three kids on one income, I just couldn't do it."

So McCown got his commercial driver's license (CDL) and began a career as an over-the-road truck driver.

"Most of the people in my CDL class were young, and I was pretty old," he says with a laugh. "I said, 'As soon as this job becomes work, I'm out of here.' I really enjoyed taking those 53-foot trucks and parking them in a hole. But after a year,



Together, the McCowns now manage a herd of 95 head — a combination of registered Hereford, Red Angus, Gelbvieh and black baldies.

it was just too stressful. So, I decided to be a school bus driver for a while."

And eventually, in 2014, McCown was able to invest a bit of inheritance and retirement money into his dream from his high school days — three cows, with three calves at side and one bull.

"It was pretty incredible to get back into the cattle business," McCown says. "Yes, it's kind of expensive to get started, but there's really no better investment than land or cattle. You can take \$2,000 and invest it into the stock market or into a cow. I'd choose the cow any day. There's no better investment."

Soon, McCown's sons, Chris and Kevin, also caught the "cattle bug."

"Chris decided that if he was going to help me take care of my cows, he might as well take care of his own, too," McCown says. Soon, Kevin purchased 50 acres near Marshfield, Mo. Together, the McCowns now manage a herd of 95 head — a combination of registered Hereford, Red Angus, Gelbvieh and black baldies.

McCown says land brings a premium in the Ozark Mountains, and thus they are remaining at about 300 acres and 100 head of cattle. Together, the McCowns make it a family affair.

### All in the family

Because of his love of numbers and technology, McCown handles the paperwork and registrations for the herd, data management and selection.

"Back when I was 16, we just went to the pasture to pick those cattle out," he says. "When I decided to get back in the business, I found Travis and Sarah McConaughy at WMC Cattle

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The registered Hereford business changed tremendously since the 1960s, but McCown met the new challenge with excitement for the future.

Co. Travis had to explain such things as EPDs (expected progeny differences) and ET (embryo transfer). The registered Hereford business had changed so much since the 1960s. I value Travis and Sarah’s friendship so much. Even to this day I learn things from them. They have been instrumental in our family’s humble success.”

Focusing on the numbers has also led to McCown’s growth in the Hereford industry and selection process.

“Now, I use EPDs to narrow down a couple hundred choices down to five or so. I’m a numbers and spreadsheet nerd,” he notes. “But when it comes down to that final decision, I cannot imagine not seeing the cow — and her mom and dad if they’re there. At that point, EPDs mean nothing.”

His son Chris lives in Cedar Creek, Mo., and works in construction. He provides much of the day-to-day labor for the operation. His children Alexa, Megan and Haley also have

been involved, and Haley has plans to attend college pursuing a degree in animal science. She has dreams of one day taking over the artificial insemination (AI) portion of the operation. McCown also has one great grandson, Walt, the son of granddaughter Alexa.

Son Kevin lives in Marshfield, Mo., and works as a deputy sheriff for Webster County. He also provides manual labor needed to manage two different locations. He and his wife recently purchased a farm, working to make it the “front pasture” operation. His wife, Abby, oversees the finances. They have one son — “PaPaw McCown’s” namesake, James Roger.

Daughter, Christina, has one daughter, Sabrina. Both work in the real estate industry, always keeping their eyes open for opportunities for the family to expand.

There was a time when the McCowns exhibited cattle at several shows a year, mainly local county fairs. Each year Haley and McCown would also attend the Ozark Empire Fair and the Missouri State Fair in hopes of finding that special heifer to improve the herd. They also consigned to the 2016 Missouri Opportunity Sale sponsored by the Missouri Hereford Association.

“Back then, I could walk just fine, and I could load cattle with help from Haley and Chris,” McCown says. “Now, with the progression of my health challenges, I can’t do that. And Haley has gotten very busy with basketball and volleyball and school activities.”

Today, the McCown’s exhibit at about two shows a year.

### Embracing the past, looking to the future

Within moments of visiting with McCown, it’s evident — family is everything, and, he says, when he looks back on his life and accomplishments, family rises to the top.

“The Good Lord let me live through Vietnam so that I could raise these kids,” he says.

He’s also thankful to live in a country that now appreciates and respects American veterans again.

“Those of us in Vietnam? We were just kids doing what we were told to do, and we did our country a good service,” McCown says. “Most Vietnam veterans hold a grudge for how we were treated when we returned from war, and I do, too. But when a complete stranger comes up to me, shakes my hand, and thanks me for my service? It means a lot to a Vietnam vet. It actually puts a tear in my eye.”

Those images of serving his country will never leave McCown. But that experience most definitely made him who he is today: a family man with a love for country and a deep appreciation for Hereford cattle and the lifestyle they bring. **HW**

## A decorated soldier

Jim McCown, Cedar Creek, Mo., served for 18 months in the Vietnam War. During that time, he received several Army Commendation medals — many of which were lost during a fire in 2000.

“I wish I had a picture of me wearing them, but I don’t, and it’s difficult to get these medals replaced,” he says.

### Individual citations from highest to lowest

- Joint Service Commendation Medal (Army)
- Army Commendation Medal (7)
- Army Good Conduct Medal
- Vietnam Campaign Medal
- Vietnam Service Medal
- National Defense Service Medal



### Unit citations from highest to lowest

- Army Presidential Unit Citation
- Army Meritorious Unit Commendation
- Vietnam Presidential Unit Citation
- Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross **HW**