



Art is Fine at MSU

Mississippi State University

Alumnus

Spring / 1986

From One High-Flying Team To Another

If Gen. Michael P. McRaney exhibits aplomb in dispatching his duties as head of the Air Force's immense public affairs program, it's because he first learned to be a winner at MSU.

By Napoleon Byars

Twenty-six years after James "Babe" McCarthy's boys won the Southeastern Conference basketball title led by Bailey Howell—who would go on to stardom as an NBA great—another member of Babe's team has achieved stardom of a different sort. In January, Michael P. McRaney, a forward on Mississippi State's championship team, was promoted to the rank of brigadier general and pinned on his first star.

McRaney is the director of public affairs in the Office of the Secretary of the Air Force. From his office in the Pentagon, he serves as the top spokesman for Air Force programs and operations. McRaney is responsible for directing and coordinating the activities of more than 2,500 public affairs personnel stationed at Air Force bases in the United States and abroad.

McRaney was born July 11, 1937, in Hattiesburg, Miss., and attended S. D. Lee High School in Columbus, Miss. He graduated from Mississippi State University in 1960 with a bachelor of arts degree in marketing and advertising. He also received his commission as a second lieutenant through the Air Force ROTC program at MSU.

In his 26-year military career, McRaney's assignments have included public affairs positions at Hill Air Force Base, Utah; Seoul, South Korea, as American Forces Korea Network radio officer (Armed Forces Radio Television Service); Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.; and the Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs, Colo.

He has been a public affairs plans officer for the United States European Command in Vaihingen, Germany, and the director of public affairs for the Stra-

tegic Air Command at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.

McRaney has worked in numerous public affairs positions in the Pentagon and served as Department of Defense spokesman and public affairs representative during the 1978 United States airlift in Zaire. He assumed his present duties in April of 1985.

So, how did this MSU Bulldog find an open lane and drive to the top of Air Force Public Affairs?

"I grew up in a media environment," McRaney said. "My dad worked in radio stations throughout the South. He eventually retired from part of the radio business and moved to West Point, Miss., where he owned and operated several radio stations."

While working with his father, McRaney recalls doing everything from being on the air as a broadcaster, writing copy and selling advertising, to helping sweep floors.

"I miss the fun of radio," he said. "In a sense it's a lot like Air Force Public Affairs. It's dynamic and always changing. There's always something new to do out there, and your creativity is limited only by your energy and willingness to work hard."

McRaney was exposed to Air Force life as a young boy growing up in Columbus.

"My dad was closely associated with Columbus Air Force Base," the general recalled. "He would take me to the air shows to see the planes and meet the pilots. That early exposure was a great influence in sparking my love for the Air Force."

As a senior at Lee High, McRaney was a leader and an athlete, and at MSU he lettered two years in basketball playing for the legendary McCarthy.

"Babe McCarthy was an innovative coach," McRaney said. "He was also a lighthearted and humorous man who could be as tough as nails when he needed to be. But more than anything, he was a great motivator who knew how to get the best out of his players in order to win."

The days of deafening cowbells ringing in "The Pit" (MSU's old gymnasium), where students used to literally hang from the rafters cheering on the home team, are long gone. Still, those championship years when the Bulldogs were the terror of the Southeastern Conference and ranked nationally as high as third are pleasant memories for McRaney—especially those wins against Kentucky on the Wildcats' home court. "We cut their nets down, and they weren't happy about that," he said.

"We had a fairly simple offense built around Bailey Howell," McRaney continued. "He (Bailey) had the uncanny ability of being in the right place at the right time on the court and a great touch around the basket."

"We ran a controlled offense that was a precursor to the four-corners offense of today," he added.

State's offense was so effective that, during the conference-title year of 1959, the Bulldogs never lost a game after gaining a five point lead on opponents.

McRaney credits MSU sports and McCarthy for giving him an appreciation for teamwork, physical conditioning, mental alertness, and academics—qualities that have helped him throughout his career as an Air Force officer.

"There is a strength that you come away with as a result of attending MSU," McRaney said. "The school gives each graduate a sense of pride in what he or



she accomplishes there. MSU also gives its graduates that push to get out in society and try to improve things.”

Even though he is the Air Force’s top communicator, McRaney does not see himself as a master of the media. “I am charged with presenting the best side of Air Force issues,” he said, “but I also must react to those things that happen in an organization this size that are not so positive.”

From dealing with the on-going publicity concerning the overpricing of spare parts for weapon systems to the media blackout during the Grenada operation, McRaney has the monumental challenge of nurturing the relationship of the military and the media. It is a challenge that is not without frustrations.

The Pentagon has learned that it’s easier to straighten out an errant military maneuver than it is to straighten out a misconception in the media. That is a fact that McRaney has come to accept. However, the “blame-America-first syndrome” rubs him the wrong way.

Commenting on the press stories suggesting that the United States was somehow responsible for the shooting down of KAL-007 by Soviet pilots, McRaney said:

“I was appalled that it was even suggested that we in the military had a coordinated effort to let 007 intentionally stray so we could trigger and study Soviet

defenses. I, and many others, grew weary of explaining, defending, and denying those stories of our involvement in a coldblooded murderous Soviet action.

“Somehow, what was lost (in the media coverage) was all the suffering, the tragedy of that cowardly, barbaric act.”

Even with his frustrations in working with the media, McRaney is always working to show the public the good side of the Air Force.

“Good news is hard to sell,” he said. “It’s the bad news that gets the attention. In public affairs we have to explain the bad news factually and fairly and try to get the media to report a balanced story.

“I think the B-1 crash proved that we have learned the hard lessons in getting the bad news out and getting it over with,” the general continued. “We didn’t try to hide any facts. We revealed the cause of the crash quickly. We thought it was best to do that. Even though it was a tragic, costly, and embarrassing crash, we took a positive attitude toward disclosure.”

Being a radio man since he was 16 and working in public affairs all of his Air Force career, McRaney has a sharp and thorough insight into the dynamics of the military and the media and is committed to improving the relationship between the two.

“I don’t want the media to be our cheerleaders,” he said. “However, I do want to be able to expect fairness, balance, perspective, accuracy, reason, and sensitivity from the press.”

On the Air Force part of the equation McRaney said that he wants to emphasize professionalism in public affairs. “We (the Air Force) do a lot of good things,” he said. “There is no doubt in my mind that we have the best public affairs people and organization in the world.

“The Air Force has a vital mission to defend this country and that’s what we’re about. Our job in public affairs is to communicate that to the American people. The public has every right to know that the Air Force is a terrific way of life and that they are getting their money’s worth.”

General McRaney is married to the former Karen Hardy of San Angelo, Texas. He has two daughters: Melissa and Nancy.

His military decorations include the Legion of Merit, Defense Meritorious Service Medal with one oak leaf cluster, Meritorious Service Medal, Joint Service Commendation Medal with two oak leaf clusters, Army Commendation Medal, and the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award Ribbon.

And, even though 26 years have passed since his Bulldog squad ruled the courts, it is evident that Michael McRaney is still playing on a championship team.