

Dartmouth College Oral History Project  
The War Years at Dartmouth  
Interview with Robert McLaughry '44  
By Mary Stelle Donin  
September 8, 2008

DONIN: How is it that you ended up coming to Dartmouth back in 1940? Did you have family members who went here before you?

MCLAUGHRY: No, I didn't. But we used to summer some down in southern New Hampshire. I was being raised in Amherst, Massachusetts, and Providence, Rhode Island. So I kind of fell in love with the North Country, I guess. And we came up and saw the Dartmouth campus, of course. That was very intriguing. And then I went to Andover Academy and we had a pretty good football team there and I was interested in football so they decided that I would go to Dartmouth.

DONIN: Did you apply anywhere else?

MCLAUGHRY: Didn't apply anyplace else. Although I said... We beat the Yale freshmen down there rather badly when I was at Andover so they said... My only time I ever talked to a future president of the United States. He was coaching the freshman team at Yale. So he came over and talked to me and he said, "I'm sure we can take you if you come down with the rest of that group up there that you got." So anyway, I didn't actually formally apply.

DONIN: Who was that that you were talking to?

MCLAUGHRY: The president from Michigan.

DONIN: Ford?

MCLAUGHRY: Ford, yes.

DONIN: Gerald Ford.

MCLAUGHRY: Gerald Ford.

DONIN: Oh yes. He was quite a football player.

MCLAUGHRY: Yes he was. Nice guy. Very nice fellow.

DONIN: But Dartmouth was glad to have you for their football team.

MCLAUGHRY: Well, I don't know about that because we got interrupted by the war and left early. So I never got a chance really to play for the varsity. But we had a good freshman team.

DONIN: So were you any relation to the famous coach here?

MCLAUGHRY: Yes, I was his son. He was coaching at Brown then.

DONIN: Oh!

MCLAUGHRY: And Red Blaik was the coach. Red Blaik went on to the Army academy at West Point. Then he came up later, the next year actually.

DONIN: Your dad?

MCLAUGHRY: Yes. When Blaik left, he came up.

DONIN: So he was here coaching when you were a student?

MCLAUGHRY: After the war.

DONIN: After the war. He must have liked what he saw at Dartmouth when you were a student here then.

MCLAUGHRY: Oh yes, they liked it up here. They loved it up here and made it their home for the rest of their life in Norwich, up in the hills. They had a great spot up there. Couple of hundred acres. So it worked out great, mutually.

DONIN: How nice to have your family here at the college that you went to.

MCLAUGHRY: Yes, that was great. Then I had a daughter who went here to Dartmouth. And then I have a grandson entering this year. He's down in Chile right now but he'll be back in a couple of days and he'll be entering as a freshman.

DONIN: He's a skier, right?

MCLAUGHRY: Yes.

DONIN: It seems to run in your family.

MCLAUGHRY: Well, I wasn't much of a skier. Wemo Epply here was a real skier. He was on the ski team. We used to go over to Woodstock, three or four of us on the football team and there was no grooming in those days so six or eight falls wasn't bad coming down Suicide Six there. And Wemo, every once in a while, he's running slalom meanwhile over there with the fancy guys. And he'd come over and he'd look at us, shake his head, go back to real skiing. [Laughter] We only fell six times. That was pretty damned good. We never got hurt. So anyway, we had a great time with it. A lot of fun.

DONIN: So let's go back to your... So it was in the fall of 1940 that you matriculated here.

MCLAUGHRY: Yes.

DONIN: And I guess your first year was pretty... I mean even though the war was on, the US wasn't involved yet. So you guys were able to have a fairly sort of regular, if you will, freshman year, right?

MCLAUGHRY: I suppose so. It was that cloud hanging over us all the time. And every day reports from Europe and the war was going badly during that period. It started in '39 and into '40, and the war was going badly. And the draft was set up ahead of time of us getting in. I mean, where you had to identify yourself. Really getting ready for the draft, I guess it was. But anyway... So there was always the feeling that we were probably going to get in it.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

MCLAUGHRY: And then what are you going to do when you go? What service are you going to go into? What are you going to do? Go into submarines or fly airplanes or work in the trenches.

DONIN: Right, right.

MCLAUGHRY: A lot of talk about it.

DONIN: Do you remember Pearl Harbor Day?

MCLAUGHRY: Oh, absolutely. Driving back from Providence, Dave Clark, one of our close friends and later distinguished himself in the Eagle Squadron over in Europe, he and I were driving back from

Providence, Rhode Island. In the old days there weren't any super highways, you know. It was the narrow state roads. We drove into Keene to get some gas, and they said, "The Japanese have attacked Pearl Harbor." And that's how we found out. So we listened for an hour or so on the radio. Of course there was no television or any other thing. And then we went back and began to seriously think about it. So a lot of us, within the next month or so, went in. Took physical exams and did the rest of it, and got sworn in. But we weren't taken yet. We had to wait a few months. And so everybody was gearing up.

DONIN: It must have been hard to concentrate at school.

MCLAUGHRY: Yes, it was. Because we were doing this, listening every day more intently and getting all kinds of information and scuttlebutt, as they used to say. Good news, bad news, all kinds of stuff. And so it was on everybody's mind in a big way. And where to go, what to do, what's up new? And so forth. Unless you were on a track to go to medical school or some other thing that you knew about, most of us of course didn't really know what we were going to do.

DONIN: Right.

MCLAUGHRY: There were so many opportunities in this country. So it was an interesting period.

DONIN: And shortly after that President Hopkins made the announcement that Dartmouth was going to start running year-round. They were going to start having classes go on all summer long and they were going to accelerate the terms so that students could finish up faster. So you were here through that summer of 1942?

MCLAUGHRY: No. I left before that. I went into the Navy Air Corps.

DONIN: You joined the....

MCLAUGHRY: We went in as second-class seamen. We started out as second-class seamen in the so-called Dartmouth Squadron.

DONIN: Right.

MCLAUGHRY: We were going to go out and win the war.

DONIN: There was quite a crowd of you that went down to Boston, right?

MCLAUGHRY: Well, there was about 25.

DONIN: Uh-huh.

MCLAUGHRY: And we went down to Boston and then down to Jacksonville, Florida, and then out. And then broke up. Some of us went into the Marine Corps, some stayed with the Navy and went in various directions. So we didn't have a Dartmouth Squadron really that stayed together. Everybody went off in different directions. [Laughs]

DONIN: The spirit was there when you left.

MCLAUGHRY: Oh, yes, absolutely. Oh, yes, we were going to go out and win that war.

DONIN: Yes.

MCLAUGHRY: Those damned so-and-so and so forth.

DONIN: So when you left, you had about two years under your belt of schooling, right? Two years of....

MCLAUGHRY: Well, close to it. Close to it. Yes.

DONIN: Had you given any thought to what you were going to have as a major?

MCLAUGHRY: I thought about, you know, various things. But not really. There were so many other things going on. We were just waiting to leave because we were sworn in and had been signed up and sworn in to the Navy, for example, at that time. And then it was a confusing time.

DONIN: And you were also busy being an athlete while you were here, before you went off to war.

MCLAUGHRY: At the beginning, yes. I got a serious injury, so I wasn't able to play the fall of '41.

DONIN: You hurt your back, didn't you, the fall of '41?

MCLAUGHRY: I broke the seventh cervical in my neck. A seventh cervical wound in my neck.

DONIN: The vertebrae.

MCLAUGHRY: Yes.

DONIN: Yes.

MCLAUGHRY: So they wouldn't let me play then. So they shipped me down to Boston, and I went through some business there. And then it healed up fine. And I got a waiver on it for the Navy.

DONIN: Wow!

MCLAUGHRY: So that was what my big worry was, that they were going to turn me down. But it healed up okay.

DONIN: You passed all the physicals and all that?

MCLAUGHRY: Yes.

DONIN: Wow, that's lucky.

MCLAUGHRY: Had to get some waivers and things.

DONIN: So that was the end of your football career, I guess, right?

MCLAUGHRY: Yes. I came back. We played a little after the war. But I had lost 20 pounds or so, and I was not in good shape to play. I went from 185, 188 to 155, or 157. So it took me a while to get built back up again.

DONIN: You came back, what, in '46, I think, right? Isn't that right?

MCLAUGHRY: Yes. Well, yes. Late '45.

DONIN: Uh-huh. The college must have looked very different to you then. I mean the population here was greatly increased by that time.

MCLAUGHRY: Absolutely.

DONIN: Once the war was over. Did you move back into a dormitory, or did you live off campus?

MCLAUGHRY: Well, I lived at the fraternity. Oh yes, then 85 South Main Street was kind of a nest of previous '44s. Hier and some of those others had been there and they left to go off in the service. So a bunch of us settled in there, 85 South Main Street. That was a big old house. I finished up really there.

DONIN: So of course you were back here, even though you were officially class of '44, you were here going to school with students much younger than yourself.

MCLAUGHRY: Well, they still had the remnants of the V-5 and V-12, still some military stuff was closing down. Quite a different group. And quite a few of the old guys came back. So it was a good time. It was interesting. Got much more serious about the studies. Found them more interesting. And did much better academically.

DONIN: Mm-hmm. That seems to be the case with a lot of the returning vets. A lot of them said they were much better students, more focused.

MCLAUGHRY: Yes, much more so.

DONIN: Some of them were even married at this point. Now did you find you sort of socialized just within your age group with the '44s or with the returning veterans, rather than....

MCLAUGHRY: Well, there was a mix. There were some that were older than we were.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

MCLAUGHRY: For example... Well of course, I did stay at the C&G house, too, when I came back. So some of them, one of them, was the class of '39 or something, you see.

DONIN: Mm-hmm.

MCLAUGHRY: Who for some reason had left college and then had come back. But a lot of them were class of '43, '42.

DONIN: Did you spend a lot of time at your fraternity house?

MCLAUGHRY: Quite a lot, didn't I? Did I spend much time at the fraternity house?

- WM. EPPLY: Well, you were on a committee of several of us that the college asked to open up the fraternities after the war.
- MCLAUGHRY: That's right.
- EPPLY: They had been closed. Most of the fraternities had been closed. Bob was leading a committee that was charged with opening up the fraternities. They had been literally padlocked.
- DONIN: Which fraternity were you in?
- MCLAUGHRY: Psi Upsilon. Shall I sing the song, Psi Upsilon?
- DONIN: Absolutely. [Laughter]
- MCLAUGHRY: Wemo and I were in the same fraternity.
- DONIN: Oh, that's great.
- MCLAUGHRY: Yes, we were great friends there.
- DONIN: No, you were also, I think, president of Green Key, weren't you?
- MCLAUGHRY: Yes. Mm-hmm.
- DONIN: And what did that involve?
- MCLAUGHRY: Well, at that time it was kind of a welcoming organization, and we had a pretty good-sized group. Malcolm McLane was the vice president. And so any visitors coming to the college and one thing and another, we were involved in that. And to work out arrangements for their schedules and all that sort of thing.
- DONIN: Mm-hmm. Life must have been very different here when you returned because of this mixture of people that were on campus. You had a whole new influx of brand new fresh out of high school civilian freshmen plus this whole influx of returning veterans.
- MCLAUGHRY: Mixed people. It was good, though. I got a lot out of it. I thought it was great. And a lot of these young guys became friends. Good friends, even though there was age differences. But it was a good time. So when it all came to an end, and I had to get out and go to work, I kind of hung on by my fingernails hoping maybe to stay a

few more years. No, no. It was time to get going. But, you know, you left with some reluctance.

DONIN: And of course your class, those of you who came back later on to finish up, your class was one of those that matriculated with Ernest Martin Hopkins, but when you came back, you had a new president.

MCLAUGHRY: Oh, yes.

DONIN: John Dickey.

MCLAUGHRY: John Dickey.

DONIN: Did you have memories, particular memories of when you first met him?

MCLAUGHRY: Well, he was [inaudible]. He had an impressive background. I thought he did a great job as president. He was president for 25 years like Hopkins had been for many years. And, no, I always had very high regard for John Sloan Dickey. And he was doing good things for the college. I thought he did a good job. Very good job.

DONIN: Did you get to take his Great Issues course that he started?

MCLAUGHRY: He started it, but I was just leaving, you know, or just had left, I guess. Yes.

DONIN: So you finally finished up in '47?

MCLAUGHRY: In the spring of '47.

DONIN: Now the class of '44 never really got a graduation ceremony, did they?

MCLAUGHRY: Not really, no. It was always kind of mixed up. That's the reason these books, you showed me the other one, are somewhat mixed up or lacking in information. And even the little book...

DONIN: Well, the *Aegis*... You're not in the *Aegis* because you weren't here.

MCLAUGHRY: No.

DONIN: And the freshman book is a little bit mixed up too.

- MCLAUGHRY: Well, yes. They've got me down for going to Exeter, period, that's all. And I went to Andover. Big difference.
- DONIN: Right. [Laughter] Oh yes, especially for people that went there.
- MCLAUGHRY: That's right.
- DONIN: They did the best they could, I guess, and sometimes there were a few mistakes.
- MCLAUGHRY: Yes, sure. But they always had somebody... "Look, we haven't got anybody to do this job. You've got to do it and you've got a week to get it done." You know, that sort of thing. I've forgotten who the guy was that they had. It wasn't a classmate, it was somebody else. One of the other classes. He just didn't have enough time to really do a first class job and it had to be really in at the printer on a certain date and so I don't know that it was 100% his fault. But there's a lot of things that weren't 100% right in the books, or were missing in the books.
- DONIN: So how do you think all this coming and going of your class, you know, some portion of the class stayed behind, and lots of you left at different times to join various arms of—various sections of the military. How do you think that impacted your feeling of class unity and belonging to a particular class?
- MCLAUGHRY: Well, I think that once the remnants of the class were very close and great friends, and still are, the ones that are still with us. So, you know, it was a great group of guys. Wonderful group. And just a great group. So I think—I was really amazed how well it worked out. I mean some people were never heard from again because of where they lived or whatever. Or didn't have an interest. But an awful lot of them were interested. And if you noticed, the percentage of giving in the old days there was very high, and we did quite well. And so I suppose, considering the conditions and what happened, I think it was a pretty close group of people. They kept up the relationships right up to now.
- DONIN: Were you ever tempted to migrate to another class because you were back here, and you were going to officially, you know, have a graduation ceremony, say, with the class of '46 or '47 or whatever? Were you ever tempted to migrate to another class?

- MCLAUGHRY: Well, they did give you that choice, as I recall. But I wasn't interested.
- DONIN: Do you think that the... You said you were more focused and you were a better student when you came back after the war. Did you notice a change in the quality of the teaching when you came back?
- MCLAUGHRY: I don't think so. I mean I think we had excellent teachers before the war. But just we were growing up, you know. Just a part of maturing. We were pretty green when we came up here. And we had some great guys and a lot of things going on. There were a lot of things that diverted attention. For some of us, not all of us. There were some that were very strong students. As I say, they were going right along into medicine. They knew that's what they were going to do and worked hard at it. I think it was a change. Big change, big change.
- DONIN: Did you find that Hanover felt sort of too small for you in terms of your social life once you came back from the war? I mean, you were obviously very much more grown up and had world experiences that you hadn't had when you were here before the war. Was it hard to be socializing with, you know, undergrads that are right out of high school that had no military experience?
- MCLAUGHRY: No, not really. No, not at all, actually. Delighted to be back here. [Laughs] And so, no. I didn't think so. A lot of these new friends that you made in the underclassmen, great guys. And, you know, I don't think there was any of that at all really. You were damned glad to be back.
- DONIN: Yes, indeed. And of course by this point was your father up here coaching when you were back?
- MCLAUGHRY: He went into the Marine Corps also during the war. And was judge advocate down at Parris Island. So he then came back and started coaching again.
- DONIN: Great.
- MCLAUGHRY: He had a law degree and all that sort of thing so he was a judge advocate there. So that was fine. It worked out well. I always lived on campus, one way or another but the folks were nearby. That was ok.

**[End of Interview]**