

Jim McCord -- At Peace With Himself

By Robert L. Jackson
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"Dad, when are you going to tell the truth?" the oldest children of Jim McCord asked their father, time and again, last summer and fall.

It was an agonizing question for McCord, a devoted family man.

"I'm going to tell the truth at the propitious time," he replied.

Recounting the story to a visitor at his home, McCord seemed relieved that the truth of Watergate is finally emerging. He is a man at peace with himself.

APART

James W. McCord Jr., the man whose dramatic courtroom letter ripped open the Watergate scandal, is a cut apart from his fellow conspirators.

For the slow-talking ex-government employee, the Watergate break-in was no adventure. It was a serious operation authorized by the highest officials of government, or so he believed.

McCord's career has been one of federal service. He spent 19 years in the CIA and four as an FBI agent. He is a retired Air Force colonel with a son, Mike, 21, currently enrolled in the Air Force Academy.

TESTIMONY

In recent weeks, McCord, 49, has told of his Watergate involvement — and implicated others — in closed-door sessions with Senate investigators and a federal grand jury.

McCord's letter to U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica, which Sirica read in open court last March 23,

charged that political pressure was exerted on the seven defendants to plead guilty, that Nixon administration officials had prior knowledge of the bugging and that perjury was committed at the trial.

The letter led Sirica to postpone McCord's sentencing until June 15, pending his further testimony to the grand jury and the Senate. From there the Watergate case broke wide open.

PAYMENTS

McCord continued to receive cash payments after his arrest, he said, because he felt like "a prisoner of war," a captive whose government — or in this case, administration — was standing behind him.

But as last January's trial approached, he saw the payments as an effort to insure his silence, and he said he stopped receiving them. He was also outraged, he said, when proposals were advanced to blame the CIA, an agency he reveres, for this domestic bugging episode. He refused to go along with "a phony defense."

"When this ploy failed, I was under pressure to plead guilty," McCord said, "but I wasn't going to turn on the other defendants and be responsible for putting them behind bars."

"If I pleaded guilty, there was no hope, I said. I'll take my chances with a trial and hope for a fair trial. I wanted to avail myself of the same rights an any citizen has."

ATTORNEY

McCord said he told his attorney, Gerald Alch, he would be glad to take the witness stand. But Alch, McCord said, decided his "defense posture" would be better, and his rights of appeal better protected, if he did not testify.

"But the trial turned out to be a mock trial situation where critical testimony was perjured," McCord said.

"Liddy (G. Gordon Liddy) was made out to be the whole show. I felt men were being sacrificed. I felt a sense of injustice about the whole business."

TRIAL

When the trial started January 8, McCord, Liddy and five others were defendants. They included former White House consultant E. Howard Hunt, Jr. and four Cubans from Miami — Bernard L. Barker, Virgilio Gonzalez, Eugenio Martinez and Frank Sturgis.

Hunt, on January 10, pleaded guilty. Five days later the four Miami men — all proteges of Hunt — pleaded guilty, too. Liddy and McCord remained on trial and were convicted January 30.

McCord's five weeks in the antiquated District of Columbia jail after his conviction were hellish, he said. He was particularly concerned about his younger daughter, Nancy, 17, who attends special education classes.

DAUGHTER

Father and daughter are particularly close. McCord drives her to school most mornings and spends Sunday afternoons with her at the park. The McCords also have an older daughter, Carol Anne, 19.

As a well-known prisoner, McCord spent hours in the jailyard listening to the problems of other inmates and occasionally helping them draft legal writs. He also thought about his own case.

Of his letter to Judge Sirica, which he composed soon after he was released on bail, McCord says:

"I wrote it alone, without even telling my attorney."

REVELATIONS

The two-page letter led to his additional revelations before the Watergate grand jury and the Senate.

McCord, an intelligence agent and later a bombardier during World War II, was an FBI agent in San Diego and San Francisco from 1948 to 1951. He then joined the CIA, where his speciality was protecting U.S. embassies overseas from being bugged by other

countries.

He retired as the agency's chief of physical security in 1970 with a distinguished service award "for outstanding performance," and became a private consultant.

Consistent with his career as a security specialist, both at the CIA and then at President Nixon's campaign committee, McCord evinces great respect for documents.

Even as a hobby, McCord deals with documents. He and his wife, Ruth enjoy genealogy research. They dig through files at the National Archives to trace family histories.



JAMES McCORD DURING THE TRIAL. His children asked when he'd tell the truth