

Althoff, David USMC

[00:00:15.83] JOE GALLOWAY: When and where were you born?

[00:00:17.77] DAVID ALTHOFF: Well, Joe, I was born in Effingham, Illinois, in 1932 on May the 5th.

[00:00:22.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow. Who were your family members?

[00:00:25.76] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, I come from a big family.

[00:00:27.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah?

[00:00:27.80] DAVID ALTHOFF: My mom and dad, Robert and Helen Althoff, and then I had 11 brothers and sisters. So there were 12 of us, seven boys and five girls. Until I was 16 we lived in Illinois, then we moved to Arizona in 1947.

[00:00:46.04] JOE GALLOWAY: What town in Illinois?

[00:00:47.33] DAVID ALTHOFF: Effingham, Illinois.

[00:00:48.22] JOE GALLOWAY: Effingham.

[00:00:48.86] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:00:53.41] Well, I was going to ASU, and I was going to be drafted. So I ran down and joined the Navy flight training program, so I wouldn't get drafted.

[00:01:10.04] OK, I went direct to Pensacola for basic, then went through basic flight training in Pensacola, and then advanced flight training in Corpus Christi, Texas. I had lots of training, because I, of course, went in in 1952, and I didn't go to Vietnam until my first tour in 1963.

[00:01:27.86] JOE GALLOWAY: '63. That's early days.

[00:01:29.19] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yeah. So I had carrier deployments. I had several carrier deployments, and I had a lot of good training in aviation.

[00:01:38.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Good training. Now, you moved along from one aircraft to another in this process.

[00:01:42.65] DAVID ALTHOFF: Right. Oh, yes.

[00:01:43.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me about each of them.

[00:01:45.53] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, well, I flew 26 different kinds of airplanes and helicopters, so that'd be a long process.

[00:01:51.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Not all of them. Don't tell me about all of them.

[00:01:53.96] DAVID ALTHOFF: OK. Well, basically, I went through flight training in the SNJ and F6F Hellcat. So then, once I completed flight training, I went to Cherry Point, North Carolina, and went through training in the AD Skyraider.

[00:02:11.87] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. I love that plane.

[00:02:13.88] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, yes, I loved it. That's one of my favorite airplanes.

[00:02:16.55] JOE GALLOWAY: That was a great aircraft.

[00:02:17.24] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yeah. Then, well, I flew-- during flight training at Ellyson Field, for helicopter training, I flew all the small helicopters--

[00:02:28.75] JOE GALLOWAY: The little ones.

[00:02:29.69] DAVID ALTHOFF: --the little bubble. And worked my way up to the H-19, which was-- and spent a couple of tours in an H-19, and 34s.

[00:02:41.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, you went through Naval aircraft training but you're a Marine.

[00:02:45.89] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yeah, when I got my commission, got my wings, I selected a Marine Corps commission. See, if you go through-- I went through as a NavCad, Naval Aviation Cadet. By the time you get to graduation, then--

[00:02:58.55] JOE GALLOWAY: You get to choose.

[00:02:59.83] DAVID ALTHOFF: You get to choose whether you're going to be a Naval aviator or a Marine aviator.

[00:03:03.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:03:08.10] DAVID ALTHOFF: I went to Da Nang, and I was the adjutant for ProvMAG-39. And spent my tour there, '63 and '64, in Da Nang. As the adjutant for the air group, I, well, administrated the group, pretty much, me and the colonel. There was two of us-- the group headquarters were bad ass. And one of my jobs was to go out into the local economy and contract for lumber and cement and different supplies that we needed to operate the air group, there.

[00:03:42.76] JOE GALLOWAY: You had to build your own base?

[00:03:45.53] DAVID ALTHOFF: We pretty much built--

[00:03:46.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty much.

[00:03:47.35] DAVID ALTHOFF: --the base at Da Nang. And so I'd go out and meet the contractors and negotiate a contract with them. And that was the start of the war.

[00:03:58.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:03:59.02] DAVID ALTHOFF: That's when the Vietnamese-- when North Vietnam was coming down invading South Vietnam. And I would go out to meet a contractor, and see him on Monday. When I would go out Friday to finalize something, he'd be hanging from the rafters. They'd come down and they just hung all the priests and nuns and mayors, and anybody with any leadership, they'd just come in and kill them all.

[00:04:23.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Kill them all.

[00:04:24.85] DAVID ALTHOFF: So that was the start of the war. And I had a different aspect on the war than some, because I saw why we were there. To protect these poor people that were being overrun.

[00:04:40.31] Not too bad. There was an old French barracks there, and so I had a shower, and a decent bunk and a room. Of course, I lived with all Marines. And the squadrons would come in to Da Nang, and rotate in to Da Nang, from the carriers in different places. So I flew with three or four different squadrons that would come in. I would fly with them initially, to check them out on the area, and get them familiar with what was going on.

[00:05:07.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:05:08.24] DAVID ALTHOFF: And we were training the ARVN troops, so we were teaching them how to fly helicopters in combat. So there'd be a division of ARVN helicopters, and our division right behind them, telling them how to maneuver, and--

[00:05:25.94] JOE GALLOWAY: How to do it.

[00:05:26.92] DAVID ALTHOFF: --how to get out of there safely, and in safely.

[00:05:33.55] It wasn't very high, it was just me and the colonel.

[00:05:36.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Just you and the colonel.

[00:05:37.73] DAVID ALTHOFF: Colonel Gomez, and he was an ex-artillery officer and didn't know a hell of a lot about aviation, quite frankly, so he just kind of let me--

[00:05:45.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Let you run with it.

[00:05:46.09] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yeah, he'd take the Gooney Bird and fly himself down to Saigon or somewhere, and have a good time, while I was the--

[00:05:53.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Keep things on the rails.

[00:05:55.62] DAVID ALTHOFF: I was kind of running the show.

[00:06:01.42] Started in 1967. I went right into HMM-262.

[00:06:07.45] JOE GALLOWAY: OK, and they were located where, at Da Nang?

[00:06:10.90] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yeah, Da Nang. Then we went immediately aboard a carrier and went up north to the Quang Tri area.

[00:06:20.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Still on the carrier, or now transferring to Quang Tri base?

[00:06:23.84] DAVID ALTHOFF: Well, we transferred off of the carrier onto Quang Tri.

[00:06:27.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Onto Quang Tri.

[00:06:28.22] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:06:28.57] JOE GALLOWAY: This is--

[00:06:29.35] DAVID ALTHOFF: Well, we operated for a while off the carrier before then.

[00:06:31.90] JOE GALLOWAY: This is getting close to Tet '68.

[00:06:36.55] DAVID ALTHOFF: Well, yeah. We went all through Khe Sanh siege before Tet. We went from one hell hole to the next hell hole.

[00:06:47.65] JOE GALLOWAY: You certainly did, Ollie.

[00:06:49.82] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:06:54.12] Well, we flew out of Khe Sanh the whole 77 days of the siege. And we were at Quang Tri, we were based at Quang Tri, but we would fly up every day, and fly all the supplies into Khe Sanh, that came into the country.

[00:07:11.74] JOE GALLOWAY: In one of our previous interviews you talked about how they ordered you-- someone had the brilliant idea that you would pick up medevacs on the hilltops around Khe Sanh, and fly them to Charlie Med in Khe Sanh--

[00:07:31.58] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:07:32.27] JOE GALLOWAY: --which is picking them up out of one hell hole and putting them into another.

[00:07:37.34] DAVID ALTHOFF: Well, on the hilltops they didn't have any real protection, other than the trenches they dug, and stuff. But when you got down to Charlie Med, if you could get inside the bunkers, you were pretty much safe--

[00:07:49.13] JOE GALLOWAY: You were underground.

[00:07:49.40] DAVID ALTHOFF: --underground, and it was pretty safe there. They would triage them at Charlie Med, because if a guy's bleeding to death, you got to stop that, and get him so you could transport him out to the Sanctuary, or one of the--

[00:08:02.70] JOE GALLOWAY: The hospital ships.

[00:08:03.08] DAVID ALTHOFF: --hospital ships, yes.

[00:08:04.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:08:04.94] DAVID ALTHOFF: That was a necessary step in most cases. But in some cases the guy was so bad, when you called in you said, take him directly out to the ship.

[00:08:13.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Go straight. Yes.

[00:08:15.20] DAVID ALTHOFF: By the time we got there and were operating out of those hilltops, they'd all been zeroed in by the NVA. So they knew exact coordinates for your landing zone and everything, and they'd see you coming in, they'd start to barrage.

[00:08:27.83] First part of 1968, even May of '68, we lost 15 of our CH-46s, completely destroyed--

[00:08:36.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:08:37.58] DAVID ALTHOFF: --from combat.

[00:08:39.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Out of a total of how many?

[00:08:41.06] DAVID ALTHOFF: Out of a total of 24.

[00:08:43.87] JOE GALLOWAY: That's more than 50% casualty.

[00:08:45.39] DAVID ALTHOFF: That's more than 50%, yes.

[00:08:47.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow, that's a tough go.

[00:08:51.52] DAVID ALTHOFF: That was very tough go, yes.

[00:08:58.15] Best day. Well, I flew 1,084 combat missions, and most of them were-- a good majority of them were medevacs, and insert and exserts of recon teams into known enemy territory.

[00:09:18.15] JOE GALLOWAY: That's dangerous business itself.

[00:09:20.19] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, yes, because there were about anywhere from 25,000 to 30,000 troops right around Khe Sanh.

[00:09:25.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:09:26.52] DAVID ALTHOFF: And anywhere you went they were just like anthills.

[00:09:29.22] JOE GALLOWAY: They were all over you.

[00:09:29.94] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes. So the recon teams would go out and get trapped. They were reporting back what they saw until they got surrounded, and by the time they were surrounded and getting all shot to hell, well, they would call for an evac and I'd go in to pick them out of there.

[00:09:46.71] The best days, in my mind, were, you could go in to pick up the troops and you didn't have a bunch of dead bodies. They were all at least able to walk aboard the chopper.

[00:09:56.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:09:57.93] DAVID ALTHOFF: The days when you'd go in-- the worst days were going in and there'd be-- out of 12, there'd be two of them still alive, and even them, wounded. And then you'd have to pick up and go out, and send the crews out to pick up the dead and carry them on board the chopper, while all hell was blowing up around you. And these young men that they'd be carrying aboard would be missing arms and legs and stuff. It was just very, very grotesque.

[00:10:28.44] Well, that was mainly during the first tour, '63 and '64. The villagers, well there was a lot of French influence there, so I met with a lot of the French people that were still in country and had businesses, and also the ARVNs that we trained. And I was very impressed with the French. The ARVNs weren't that committed at the time, to tell you the truth. We'd go in with a six-by to pick up 12 pilots, say, put them in the back of the six-by and transport them from where they lived up to the airstrip to take off. And as it went through town half of them would jump off. Not half, but we'd be lucky if--

[00:11:05.51] JOE GALLOWAY: You'd lose them.

[00:11:05.76] DAVID ALTHOFF: --we got there with half of them, because they didn't want to go.

[00:11:08.52] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't want to go.

[00:11:09.75] DAVID ALTHOFF: They weren't that willing to participate. So that-- while you were flying with them it kind of made you hold back because they weren't that committed.

[00:11:23.99] I had no contact. I had a big family. I had five kids, a wife and five kids but--

[00:11:28.22] JOE GALLOWAY: You were writing or--

[00:11:31.07] DAVID ALTHOFF: Just letters is all.

[00:11:32.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Just letters.

[00:11:32.85] DAVID ALTHOFF: Just letters, yes, when you went on R & R, because we didn't have time while we were in country. We were stationed way up on the DMZ, you know.

[00:11:40.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:11:40.88] DAVID ALTHOFF: And there were no papers being delivered up there, to speak of. I guess there was some radio contact, but again, we're flying 10, 12 hours a day.

[00:11:50.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:11:50.54] DAVID ALTHOFF: By the time you brief and debrief, and do your preflight and everything else, by the time you hit the rack, it was--

[00:11:59.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Time to go to sleep.

[00:12:00.18] DAVID ALTHOFF: You weren't going to read any newspapers, to speak of.

[00:12:07.12] Recon team, they're all recon teams.

[00:12:08.83] JOE GALLOWAY: All recon teams.

[00:12:10.12] DAVID ALTHOFF: All in the middle of a real sandwich, where they were surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of snipers and mortars and rockets, and you name it. And the first one was one of the recon teams from 1/9 that was out. And they were on a ridge line and a steep slope, where I had to hover up against it and back into it to load the folks. As I recall, now, there were 20 folks in that unit that went out, and there were nine of them still alive and 11 killed.

[00:12:49.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:12:50.23] DAVID ALTHOFF: And then, by the time I got them out of there, with all the incoming and everything else, there were only about four or five of them that were still walking.

[00:12:59.05] JOE GALLOWAY: They were taking casualties while you were loading them?

[00:13:01.62] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, yes, while we were loading, there are snipers firing away at us, and rocket-- mortar rounds landing around us. And my crew chiefs and gunners would have to go out and help load them all. So you're sitting there, hovering without a crew you can even talk to, because they're out in the bush recovering the bodies.

[00:13:22.33] JOE GALLOWAY: They're out in the bush, pulling guys in.

[00:13:23.47] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes. And we'd have to stay there to make sure we got to the very last one. You're not going to take out of there without getting everybody.

[00:13:30.81] JOE GALLOWAY: And at any minute, you can take a mortar round and finish the whole thing.

[00:13:35.74] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, right on top of you, yes. And fortunately, the CH-46 was a chopper that could take a lot of battle damage. You'd come back with 100 holes and that thing's still flying. And it's just amazing what it would absorb from that.

[00:13:49.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Might be leaking some hydraulic, but it was--

[00:13:51.61] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, yes. Well, I was shot down four times and every time it was because of loss of hydraulics. You just can't fly without them.

[00:14:00.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:14:00.51] DAVID ALTHOFF: That's 2,500 pounds of pressure that control the rotors, and you won't fly without it. So when those lines get hit, you're going to go down pretty quick.

[00:14:13.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes. Now you say you were shot down four times. How were you rescued?

[00:14:20.49] DAVID ALTHOFF: Well, of course, my wingman would come in. We'd call in gun support. I spent some time on the ground, under the nose wheel of the aircraft with my .45. I'd shoot somebody trying to kill me, but for the most part, the wingman would be in pretty quick and pick you up.

[00:14:38.58] JOE GALLOWAY: He'd come in, quick, and get you.

[00:14:40.04] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yeah.

[00:14:40.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Would you go back and get another bird and come back out?

[00:14:43.55] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:14:44.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes?

[00:14:44.67] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes, it was just a matter of an interval between flights.

[00:14:49.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Keep moving.

[00:14:52.17] DAVID ALTHOFF: But fortunately, your wingman was right there to take care of you.

[00:14:57.06] JOE GALLOWAY: Amazing, amazing.

[00:15:02.52] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, second Silver Star. Well, that was May 13th, and that's the one that they're working on now, to upgrade--

[00:15:10.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Upgrade.

[00:15:11.30] DAVID ALTHOFF: --to the Medal of Honor. But it, again, was a recon team that was being hacked to pieces, and surrounded by multiple NVA. And I spent a lot of time in the zone. What had happened to 12-- I took a 12-man team in to recover a four-man recon team that had been in there before, and got slaughtered. So I land with the 12, and they spread out to pick up the other four. Well, then they get overrun, and so I go in, and by the time they call me back in-- I go in the first place and we're taking all kind of incoming fire, and everything. And then I take off while they're going out there to recover the four, and I'm hovering around, and pretty soon, they call me back, and they're being shot all to hell. And they're in three different groups, because they're looking here and looking there, they're going over the ridge line, up and down, to bring the wounded and dead in.

[00:16:16.73] So then, I go into the first zone and pick up the folks in there, and by the time they load and everything, that's a good 5 minutes in the first zone. Then I go to the second zone, I have to find them in first place, because they're spread out, and there's no navigation or anything. They talked me in by the sound of my rotors. But I was right over the treetops looking for them, and I find the second group, and land or hover and load those up. Then again, another five minutes or so getting those aboard, and taking fire the whole time. Then go into the third zone to pick up the last of them. And that one, the last one, they were on a ridge line, where I had to hover right up against the side of the hill, with my rotors about maybe two feet from the big boulders and stuff, that--

[00:17:00.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, wonderful.

[00:17:01.07] DAVID ALTHOFF: So the amazing thing is the crew members we had. Man, we had the best Marines in the world as crew members. Our crew chiefs and gunners were just absolutely outstanding. Because I had to be there hovering, I couldn't see the end of the rotors clear back there, 80 feet behind me.

[00:17:21.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:17:21.92] DAVID ALTHOFF: And that far from the rocks and trees and et cetera. And the crew chief would have to be telling me, up a little, left a little, right a little.

[00:17:31.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Your life is in his hands.

[00:17:32.67] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes. All of our lives are in all of our hands. Out of that 12, I think there were four or five alive. Yes.

[00:17:44.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Did they--

[00:17:44.80] DAVID ALTHOFF: And you never know how many survived even that, when I got them to the hospital ship.

[00:17:49.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Exactly. Did they achieve the recovery of the four bodies?

[00:17:54.55] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes, well, yes.

[00:17:55.66] JOE GALLOWAY: They got them?

[00:17:56.47] DAVID ALTHOFF: There was one that-- the four went in to get a lieutenant who was in a cave, who had been killed previously, about two weeks previously, and buried in this cave. And we kept trying to get him out, but just couldn't. And so when the four went in, they got all shot up, and then I took the 12 in and they got shot up. So it was a really tough, tough situation with the amount of enemy troops around there. And they were using the guy as bait, pretty much.

[00:18:28.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:18:29.40] DAVID ALTHOFF: They knew we weren't going to leave the guy there.

[00:18:30.34] JOE GALLOWAY: They knew the Marines were going to come back for him.

[00:18:32.31] DAVID ALTHOFF: Sooner or later, they're going to keep coming back until we got him, and we did.

[00:18:36.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you get the lieutenant out of the cave?

[00:18:38.91] DAVID ALTHOFF: Not on my trip, no. Because they got, we got shot up so bad that, again-- there's another side of this is, in the leadership role, when you've taken five people in to get four out, say, and the four are certain to die. The five of us, there's still a question, are we going to live or are we going to die? But you risk-- you have to have a calculated risk, is whether you're going to stay and get them out, or are you going to save what you've got?

[00:19:08.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Are you going to lose the whole thing?

[00:19:10.80] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes, lose the whole thing. So that's always a tough decision for an aircraft commander to make, when you go into these zones.

[00:19:22.20] I took a corpsman and eight other troops into a zone. They were in on a patrol and they got overrun, and the corpsman, the squad leader and one other were still alive. So there were-- out of the nine, there were six dead and three alive. And so I go in, and the corpsman and the squad leader had both been shot. The corpsman, Lanny Long, had been shot through the thigh and took a chest wound. He had a sucking chest wound. And so we had to land and search out the other nine, and bring them all aboard. And it was another one of those things, where we were taking fire the whole time, and finally got them aboard.

[00:20:20.46] And after a lot of turmoil, and locating-- I had to move around again, there. And the corpsman and the squad leader and the other Marine that was there were helping to bring them in, but the majority of it was my crew that had to be out searching these guys. And you know, you jump off a chopper in the middle of the jungle, and you're trying to locate nine bodies, and they're spread around. It's that hectic--

[00:20:48.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Almost a Mission Impossible.

[00:20:50.53] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes, a lot of suicide missions, quite frankly. You just knew it was going to be.

[00:20:55.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:20:56.67] DAVID ALTHOFF: And so I did get them out. And the third Silver Star was May the 18th It was May-- yes. Early May, then May 13th and May 18th.

[00:21:10.59] JOE GALLOWAY: So all three Silver Stars in the month of May '68.

[00:21:15.06] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:21:15.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow. You had a busy month.

[00:21:18.74] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:21:24.09] I have to tell you that both the corpsman and the squad leader came to see me after I retired.

[00:21:31.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah?

[00:21:32.37] DAVID ALTHOFF: Well, a lot of-- probably dozens of people that I've rescued have come back to visit with me and thank me for getting them out of an impossible situation.

[00:21:41.22] JOE GALLOWAY: I'd think so.

[00:21:42.66] DAVID ALTHOFF: And a quick story if I might. I haven't-- you might even want to turn off while I tell this, but this Lanny Long, who was a corpsman, contacted me after he went to the hospital ship, and it took him months to recover. But anyhow, after he got out he searched me down, and called me to thank me, and wanted to come see me. So I said, OK. He came out to see me in Arizona, because, about that time I'd retired. And he came out to see me in Arizona and we had a good talk and what have you. So that was May 18th, and he comes out every-- he calls me every May 18th, and a lot of the time he comes out to see me. He's been out to see me four or five times.

[00:22:24.95] Well, he got married. Then he brought his wife Anne out, his new wife out to meet me. And then he started having some kids and he brought his girl out to meet me. So I'm sitting there watching TV one Saturday, and the doorbell rings. And I go, what-- it's this little girl about

seven or eight years old. And she looks up at me, says, are you Mr. Althoff? And I said, yes. She started crying to beat hell, and she says, if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be alive. Then Lanny and Anne come around the corner and-- ah. I'm standing there, like-- and he says, I got you, Colonel.

[00:22:59.04] So that's not the end of the story, though. The girl, whose name is Morgan, grows up and goes into the Army and gets commissioned. And when she gets commissioned in the Army, she asks me to pin her bars on her.

[00:23:12.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Ah.

[00:23:14.01] DAVID ALTHOFF: So I go, and give her the salute. Tears running out both of us, just like water. And then this last May 18th, Lanny calls me, and so we give our usual talk and update. And I said, well, how's Morgan doing? And he says, well, Morgan is a captain-- or major in the Army, and she's in charge of a field hospital in Iraq. So now it's coming full circle, you know.

[00:23:39.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:23:40.14] DAVID ALTHOFF: Him being a corpsman all the way around to--

[00:23:41.91] JOE GALLOWAY: All the way around to her being an Army doctor?

[00:23:45.75] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:23:46.86] JOE GALLOWAY: That's amazing.

[00:23:47.78] DAVID ALTHOFF: Amazing, huh?

[00:23:48.93] JOE GALLOWAY: It's got to make you feel pretty good.

[00:23:51.06] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, yes. Yes. Well, that's what make it all worthwhile, the hard times and everything.

[00:24:02.62] Oh, Lord, they were all well trained. I've got pictures of, in the tail pylon, of eight rounds in an area like this. Now, these guys were sharpshooters.

[00:24:11.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:24:12.22] DAVID ALTHOFF: They were snipers of the first magnitude, and tough, tough soldiers. They could fight on a bag of rice and go out for a week, and walk through the jungle 100 miles and be ready to fight. They were an incredible enemy. Incredible. And there were so many of them, too. And they'd come across that border, daily, just in droves and droves and droves. And of course, we were right there next to the DMZ where they came in, and so there were fresh troops when they got to us.

[00:24:42.67] JOE GALLOWAY: You got there first dibs.

[00:24:45.23] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes.

[00:24:49.43] Well, of course, that was rough for everybody. I went home in June of '68, and one incident I remember, my folks met me, my mom and dad and my wife and kids met me at Travis Air Force Base, and we retrieved the gear and stuff, and I was in uniform. And we went out to eat at this restaurant where they wouldn't serve us, because I was in uniform.

[00:25:17.61] JOE GALLOWAY: They would not serve you?

[00:25:18.42] DAVID ALTHOFF: They would not serve us. And here I am, I'm sitting here all, what the hell's all this about? I wasn't in tune with all of the animosity and everything that was going on against the military. And so I look at my dad and he looked at me, we shook our heads and we left, but it was heartbreaking.

[00:25:38.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:25:38.94] DAVID ALTHOFF: It was heartbreaking to know that that's the way they felt about us. But they were punk kids. When I look back on them, I'm thinking, what the hell do they know, anyhow? They're pot smoking dummies that-- I have no use for them.

[00:25:56.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes. And you're living in California, so you've got them all around you.

[00:26:02.45] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, God, yes. Yes, surrounded.

[00:26:10.66] I come back '68, and then I spent four years, and three years of it I was at headquarters Marine Corps in the Pentagon.

[00:26:18.94] JOE GALLOWAY: And retired when?

[00:26:20.53] DAVID ALTHOFF: I retired in September of 1972.

[00:26:25.39] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do after the war? After you got out of the Marine Corps?

[00:26:30.54] DAVID ALTHOFF: After I retired I bought my dad's real estate company, and spent about 15 years as a real estate broker. I had five offices in the Phoenix metropolitan area. And after about 15 years I got sick of that and spent a year or two doing nothing. Then got into the business of building-- started a company with a friend of mine, another vet that was 100% just like me. So we started a company to build medical facilities for the VA, and did that for a while. And then I got tired of fighting the VA for any money or anything that was due, so quit that and--

[00:27:24.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Quit that.

[00:27:24.86] DAVID ALTHOFF: --been retired since.

[00:27:29.20] I wouldn't say a lot. I just got so busy with what I was doing. When I was in headquarters Marine Corps, I was involved in the personnel department, and was helping recruiting pilots, because we were having a tough time keeping the pilots up. So I was going around the country giving talks to different groups, and recruiting-- helping in the recruiting effort to get pilots into the Marine Corps. So it was interesting, and I was traveling around, and--

[00:28:02.56] JOE GALLOWAY: It kept you busy.

[00:28:03.38] DAVID ALTHOFF: I didn't-- Yes, it kept me busy. Then once I retired I was really busy, so I just didn't take the time to sit around and worry about too much.

[00:28:16.21] I want to tell you, Joe, one of my greatest pleasures in life is staying in touch with these guys from my squadron HMM-262. We just had a reunion in Quantico, Virginia. We have one every couple of years-- every two years. But we just had one a couple of months ago in Quantico, we had 130 of our guys there, from squadron.

[00:28:37.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:28:38.44] DAVID ALTHOFF: And we get together-- we've all been through so much together, it's just like, communication is just-- absolutely doesn't have to be spoken. You just look at each other and say, ah, yes. We've got so much in common over that period that we were there together, that it can't be replaced in any way that I know of.

[00:29:06.55] Oh, I think it was for good. Yes, because I was proud of what I did. I didn't think about it, didn't-- it wasn't anything for about 20 years, because nobody-- until we started having reunions and stuff, that I even thought about it again, very much. But I know the experience was good for me, in dealing with people, and the leadership role I had there helped me in business. And so I was very pleasantly motivated to do things.

[00:29:38.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your time in Vietnam affect the way you think about the troops coming back from today's wars?

[00:29:45.22] DAVID ALTHOFF: Oh, yes. Yes. I have a soft spot in my heart for every one of them. Man, when I see the arms and legs missing and stuff, it just tears me apart.

[00:29:56.11] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today?

[00:30:02.86] DAVID ALTHOFF: Probably as a big mistake. I think the majority of the people in the United States think it was a bad cause to go to.

[00:30:11.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you think that?

[00:30:13.08] DAVID ALTHOFF: No.

[00:30:13.56] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:30:13.95] DAVID ALTHOFF: I don't think that at all, because of my previous tour where I was dealing with the people that were being massacred every day. And these people were plain farmers, they weren't military folks. They were just plain farmers trying to raise some rice to raise their families and what have you. And these guys were coming in from the north and overrunning them and killing them off, and enslaving them and taking their property. In all good conscience, you just can't sit there and watch that happen, year after year. As a nation, a nation that we are, we need to go and help people like that.

[00:30:52.65] Now, I can't say other parts of the world that we've been involved in are the same. Like in Afghanistan and Iraq and all that, I'm not sure whether we should be there, but I do know that in Vietnam the war was a just war.

[00:31:09.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Are there lessons you took from your Vietnam experience that you would like to pass along?

[00:31:17.64] DAVID ALTHOFF: Lessons? I guess maybe the main lesson I'd pass along is, no matter how tough the situation gets, you can overcome it. You can live through it and survive it, and still be happy afterwards. When it gets really, really tough, and-- especially when you're surrounded by good solid Marines, that's a good lesson, to know that there are that many good people in the world that I could serve with.

[00:31:49.40] I was stationed there for two years before I could go, and finally a friend of mine said, come on, it's time to go to the Wall. You've got to do it. And I said, no, I don't think so. So he coerced me and we went down, and I started down the Wall. Now, I lost 49 guys in my squadron, 21 of them in one day. And I started down the Wall and I'm walking down, just absorbing what I was seeing, and all these names and stuff. And pretty soon, I just stopped and looked down, didn't want to go any further. I looked up, and there were the names of the 21 guys that we lost on February 28, 1967.

[00:32:34.31] JOE GALLOWAY: All together.

[00:32:35.21] DAVID ALTHOFF: Just all together. And that's the place I stopped, and I don't know why. I just came to a stop there. Looked up. Tough day.

[00:32:46.70] JOE GALLOWAY: No, they were calling you.

[00:32:50.27] DAVID ALTHOFF: Yes, I guess. Something sure was.

[00:32:58.20] I think it's time we celebrate what we did. Celebrate the good we did for the world back then. And it's time for recognizing the folks who did it. And they're doing that all over the country, I'm sure you know.

[00:33:16.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:33:16.39] DAVID ALTHOFF: But Saturday night, my wife and I, and Karen, were at a celebration in Scottsdale. They had about 300 of us there and--

[00:33:24.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes, that's good.

[00:33:25.09] DAVID ALTHOFF: --it was the same thing. It was recognizing what happened there, and recognizing the people that did it.

[00:33:38.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you received your Vietnam veterans lapel pin?

[00:33:41.70] DAVID ALTHOFF: I think I have. Maybe a couple of times. I don't remember. I've received a lot of things.

[00:33:49.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes. Well, thank you for coming down and telling your story.

[00:33:58.05] DAVID ALTHOFF: OK.