

Armitage, Richard

[00:00:16.29] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Born April 26, 1945. I grew up in Decatur, Georgia. I was 23 when I-- actually 22 when I went on a ship and I was 23 and 1/2 when I-- off the coast of Vietnam, 23 and 1/2 when I went in country.

[00:00:36.32] JOE GALLOWAY: What led you to join the Navy?

[00:00:39.41] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Football, they gave me a scholarship.

[00:00:44.30] JOE GALLOWAY: And the source of your commissioning was out of the Academy?

[00:00:47.93] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Yes it was. For the time on the destroyer I was trained as an engineer. Right before I went to Vietnam I had what was going to be a 12-week counterinsurgency class and then I was to be an adviser to the Vietnamese, but the person who preceded me in Vietnam got shot so they curtailed my training and sent me over.

[00:01:17.87] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on landing in Vietnam?

[00:01:21.68] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I loved it, and hot as hell, stunk like hell, but I knew I was going to be happy there.

[00:01:27.14] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your initial duties?

[00:01:29.23] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I was the ambush team adviser at a coastal group in Vinh Binh province in III Corps. The Vietnamese Navy is a little different from the US Navy. They had both junk craft that plied the rivers and they had a semi-marine force which was the ambush team.

[00:01:47.22] JOE GALLOWAY: Now the an ambush team, describe what that is.

[00:01:51.72] RICHARD ARMITAGE: There were 11 or 12 of us depending on who was available for duty, and we'd primarily go out at night, set up on what we hoped were lines of communications of the VC and try to disrupt them. And then come back in at dawn.

[00:02:03.48] JOE GALLOWAY: On the ground or on the water?

[00:02:05.58] RICHARD ARMITAGE: No, no, we were on the ground, we were walking the rice paddies. Sometimes we would be inserted by junks up the river, but primarily we walked out and walked back.

[00:02:14.49] JOE GALLOWAY: But this was a naval force you were working with.

[00:02:17.10] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Vietnamese navy, yeah. As I say, they were organized a little differently from the US Navy. If we were out on ambush the night before, I'd sleep in in the

morning because we wouldn't get back until around dawn. Didn't want to move till we could see what was going on. And then in the afternoon get up and we'd either go on patrol with the junks or be involved in the maintenance of the junks. And then that was interspersed with calls from our headquarters to go on this mission or that mission or carry these troops or those groups. So--

[00:02:51.76] JOE GALLOWAY: When you say the headquarters, that's Vietnamese headquarters?

[00:02:54.76] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Well it was actually Vietnamese and MACV. They paralleled the communications so the Vietnamese would get roughly the same communications we did.

[00:03:02.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Your living conditions were the same as the Vietnamese? Pretty rough?

[00:03:08.98] RICHARD ARMITAGE: No, the first time it was pretty nice. We fell in and an old French base-- as I say, in III Corps up the river about 15 kilometers from the coast and actually had a plywood shed that we lived in. It was fine.

[00:03:31.00] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your impressions of the Vietnamese people initially and by the end of your tours?

[00:03:38.71] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Well, initially I was kind of I guess pumped, I liked being adviser. I liked the notion of helping people who could carry rifles for themselves. So I very much believed in that type of an effort. I was fascinated by village life and this was a real rural village, dirt floors and all thatch huts. You know the drill. And I was very enthusiastic about what I was about.

[00:04:05.77] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your impression of the Vietnamese people?

[00:04:10.39] RICHARD ARMITAGE: It changed over time. Initially I was just astonished that they could be relatively stoic in the face of what was pretty much neuralgia as they were. Over time I became frustrated with some of their lack of ability to step-- or willingness to step up and be counted in every instance. But even over a greater length of time I came to realize that they'd been doing this for a while, and although I eventually ended up doing it for three combat tours in country, I had a choice, I could come back and they couldn't.

[00:04:43.63] JOE GALLOWAY: Three tours. That's a pretty good bunch more than most people put up with. What kept you there?

[00:04:55.63] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I like to think that I didn't want anything of great moment to take part without me taking part in it. Beyond that I did get a free education, though I wasn't a gung ho Navy person. And I felt it was expected of me. I took part in a lot less significant actions than someone I'm talking to right now did. My life was a little different. These were all one-offs, an ambush here-- either they'd ambush us, we'd ambush them. It was not a 24/7 operation. It was once a week, sometimes twice a week activities throughout the first year.

[00:05:39.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Were your targets in this local Viet Cong or North Vietnamese or some of both?

[00:05:47.28] RICHARD ARMITAGE: The first year they were almost all Viet Cong and they were dressed in traditional what they call Áo bà ba Duyên, the black pajamas. Occasionally we'd see someone in khakis but not very often, that changed as I later served in Tay Ninh and then finally in Bong Son.

[00:06:08.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Bong Son, yeah I know it well.

[00:06:11.55] RICHARD ARMITAGE: It's a nasty area.

[00:06:12.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Nasty area. You could get in a lot of trouble there.

[00:06:22.40] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Well the most vivid of combat was one of my first actions where on a small ambush team. We were ambushed and lost three right off the bat, three Vietnamese. If you'd asked me, I'd jumped to the ground and threw grenades and fired off weapons. As it turned out I hadn't fired a round. I was so scared. So that's pretty vivid. I think there were two. One day we went on an operation, a day operation, we were unloaded by junks quite up the river not far from a place called Sa Dec and had a short skirmish with some VC, and were able to free a man and a woman who were held in a huge hole of water and handcuffed with their hands behind their backs, these rudimentary VC handcuffs. That was pretty meaningful to me, particularly as it was early on in my time in Vietnam. The second most memorable day in fact the most memorable day was the last day when Vietnam fell. I was in Vietnam at the time. And it's the best recollection because I was able to organize the evacuation of 31,000 Vietnamese so at least we didn't let them down.

[00:07:44.33] JOE GALLOWAY: You were instrumental in that.

[00:07:47.28] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I organized it.

[00:07:48.38] JOE GALLOWAY: You organized it. You arranged for 30,000 people a lot of them connected to the Vietnamese navy to escape.

[00:08:00.38] RICHARD ARMITAGE: And marine corps by the way, Vietnamese marine corps, quite a few of them.

[00:08:03.29] JOE GALLOWAY: And you arranged for them to escape to the Philippines.

[00:08:06.68] RICHARD ARMITAGE: That's correct.

[00:08:08.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Why did you do that?

[00:08:12.01] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I was sent back to Vietnam on the 24th of April 1975 to effect the destruction or the removal of certain sensitive equipment and large equipment, like ships. I did this for four days and realized that the country, along with my boss Erich Von

Marbode, that the country was going to fall. The next day I worked with Vietnamese navy officers to arrange for a secret evacuation of the Vietnamese navy and their families to Con Son Island initially, from whence we would sail to the Philippines.

[00:08:45.17] JOE GALLOWAY: And did. You sailed with them?

[00:08:48.23] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I sailed with them.

[00:08:49.94] JOE GALLOWAY: And took them to the Philippines and got kicked the door down so they could get in?

[00:08:55.28] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Yeah. Well, kicked the door down. We had to have a small ceremony to reflag the Vietnamese ships as American. The Vietnamese were not allowed to land in the Philippines. They were taken off to other MSTs ships for shipment to Guam, and I was placed under house arrest by President Marcos. House arrest consisted of me and two chief petty officers with whom I had worked in the past going to the chiefs club and drinking as much beer as a law allowed.

[00:09:27.08] JOE GALLOWAY: You had daily contact with the Vietnamese?

[00:09:30.36] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I lived with them.

[00:09:31.07] JOE GALLOWAY: You lived with them.

[00:09:32.03] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I lived with them.

[00:09:33.89] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact did you have with our allies, beyond the Vietnamese?

[00:09:41.30] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Well I certainly would see US forces Swift Boats, SEALs, et cetera. Sometimes we let them stage from our base. I saw the Australians on occasion when I would go up near Nui Dat for an R&R. We tried to have two or three days off every six weeks when I was in the delta.

[00:09:58.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Drink Foster's.

[00:10:00.14] RICHARD ARMITAGE: So, and they're-- speak about drinking some beer.

[00:10:10.43] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact did you have with your family back home during this tour?

[00:10:15.41] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Back in the day I would write a letter and maybe in a month or three weeks get an answer back from my wife. I had two or three conversations the first year going to Saigon, going in one of the clubs out there that had telephones and having two or three short conversations.

[00:10:34.16] JOE GALLOWAY: The MARS, the famous MARS system.

[00:10:36.51] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Yes. And I had one R&R where my wife and my first daughter met me in Hawaii. In retrospect, Mr. Galloway, having that limited contact with the family was actually a blessing. By the time I had heard from my wife about some problem and I had responded, the problem was long past. And these young men and women today, they can't get their heads out it, out of the problem, it must be very difficult.

[00:11:02.36] JOE GALLOWAY: It's instant for them. How much news did you receive about the war from home?

[00:11:12.22] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Well, I had AFVN on a little transistor radio that we all had powered by the failing PRC-25 batteries. And occasionally when the mail helo would come, you'd get a Stars and Stripes. My wife kept me pretty sheltered from what was going on back home and I was kind of-- I thought I was focused on the duty at hand.

[00:11:36.68] JOE GALLOWAY: So, however that news was it didn't affect what you were doing?

[00:11:41.98] RICHARD ARMITAGE: No, I had a job to do and I felt that I was doing it.

[00:11:50.48] JOE GALLOWAY: When did you return home, what year?

[00:11:53.93] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Well, I returned home to become an instructor at the counterinsurgency school after my first year tour in April of '70. I curtailed that to go back to Vietnam for a River Patrol Division in Tay Ninh in February of '71 and then took another tour in Bong Son from the end of '71 to right before the Paris ceasefires were signed, the Paris ceasefire accords.

[00:12:25.99] JOE GALLOWAY: So you had several returns home?

[00:12:28.92] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Yeah. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:12:31.48] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your reception like from family and friends?

[00:12:35.41] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Fortunately, I lived in San Diego, and San Diego always has been a military town, though I was not immune to some of the controversy and the neuralgia surrounding the whole war effort and those who fought it. In a relative sense I was kept above it.

[00:12:54.92] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow veterans through the years since?

[00:13:00.56] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Pretty daily. Either Vietnamese or others such as yourself.

[00:13:04.79] JOE GALLOWAY: You talk to the Vietnamese, your buddies?

[00:13:07.94] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Yes, I talk to them, those who survived, yeah.

[00:13:11.98] JOE GALLOWAY: You hear from the ones you brought out to the Philippines?

[00:13:14.78] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I hear from those I brought out, and I see them from time to time. Of my ambush team, the only one who's still alive happened to be originally Chiêu Hôi from the Viet Cong. He is still alive.

[00:13:27.24] [LAUGHTER]

[00:13:28.28] I don't know what his ultimate sympathies were.

[00:13:30.32] JOE GALLOWAY: And here?

[00:13:31.33] RICHARD ARMITAGE: No, there.

[00:13:31.97] JOE GALLOWAY: There.

[00:13:32.39] RICHARD ARMITAGE: In Vietnam.

[00:13:37.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any problems readjusting to life after the war?

[00:13:42.12] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I had a nice wife and two daughters, I didn't have any problem adjusting and I never looked back.

[00:13:54.19] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your Vietnam experience affect your life afterward?

[00:13:58.90] RICHARD ARMITAGE: It did make me want to gravitate toward the areas in which decisions such as Vietnam were made and it led me I think to mostly a life of government service, both in the Pentagon and the Department of State.

[00:14:16.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your service in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life or changed you in some way?

[00:14:30.80] RICHARD ARMITAGE: It had a lasting influence I would say, but I'm not sure that I put it into effect. I always felt that Vietnam in one way didn't leave and that I read about it and studied about it as much as I could after my return. And I thought I'd never repeat the lessons of Vietnam, at least commit new errors or mistakes. But I think-- I'm afraid that in the situation in Iraq something that I was involved in, we did repeat some of the errors of Vietnam. And it shames me greatly.

[00:15:07.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Which errors are you referring to?

[00:15:12.81] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Primarily we-- without taking away from any of the service from all our men-- and they primarily were men back in Vietnam days-- the whole

adventure was based on I think two big mistakes. One was the Gulf of Tonkin attack, which I think we've seen in retrospect was not quite what it seemed to be. And the second was we didn't give due regard to the fact that if you're going to be of assistance, young Vietnamese men could carry a rifle as well as young American men. And there was plenty for us to do and there's plenty of support and advising et cetera that we should have done, but we certainly didn't need to lead the effort with our military.

[00:15:57.37] JOE GALLOWAY: And that's a good lesson learned, but you think we may have failed a few times since?

[00:16:04.87] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Yeah, I think we have failed. And again, it's not because now men and women aren't valued beyond recall. In fact, I don't know how our men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan could go to work every day putting up with the IEDs they had as an almost daily occurrence. But the fact of the matter is it's Iraq and Afghani's country and they ought to take the lion's share of the work.

[00:16:38.01] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans returning from combat today?

[00:16:45.45] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I said I myself didn't look back when I returned, but I am very proud that the nation salutes the men and women that are now returning as veterans. And I wish that for all of them, I'm glad for it, I hope it's for the right idea. If the salute that is given to men and women who served in Afghanistan and Iraq is because true gratitude for their courage then I'm thrilled with it. If it's some sort of pseudo-patriotism that allows people who don't hear the angry iron and don't smell the cordite to feel good about themselves then I feel less good about it.

[00:17:27.57] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[00:17:32.97] RICHARD ARMITAGE: It's very interesting. We're celebrating the 50th anniversary or so right now as part of the effort that you're involved with. And it's interesting to me how in a way a loss for us-- because we didn't accomplish our objective-- is now much more celebrated. And I think it's the proper celebration of the sacrifice of those who endured it. Whether the judgments of those who led us into the war were correct or not, history is showing and will continue to show. There's another element that I content myself with. The former prime minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, one day said publicly to me that you and your fellow veterans should feel quite proud. You may not have accomplished your objectives in Vietnam, but you accomplished your objectives in Southeast Asia. Because the rest of us, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore were poised for a communist juggernaut and you gave them the time, your sacrifice gave them the time to develop beyond the reach of the communists. I thanked him mightily for that statement.

[00:18:43.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:18:51.91] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Yes, as my sacrifice was not a tenth of what many's were, I'd have to say that I took away much more positive-- memories of Vietnam, appreciation for the history, the culture, for the sociology of the nation. So by and large for me it was a positive experience interspersed with well-known moments of terror.

[00:19:18.47] JOE GALLOWAY: In the end, what did that war mean to you and your generation?

[00:19:25.70] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I think frankly it put us apart from a generation who split from us. I noticed when I returned to the Pentagon as a Pentagon official having served in Vietnam no matter where or how or in what capacity, in this building was worthy of respect. And what has happened I think in our nation is those who serve our nation, including those who served back in the difficult Vietnam days, are now seen in a different light, a much more positive light and by the people have been put apart from the rank and file citizenry of our nation.

[00:20:08.66] JOE GALLOWAY: By their service, they did.

[00:20:10.33] RICHARD ARMITAGE: By their service.

[00:20:13.43] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from that war that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans?

[00:20:23.11] RICHARD ARMITAGE: I think the lesson is one again I think I failed to some extent, but the lesson is that we should always be willing to speak truth to power. It's a difficult thing and it's a lesson that would have served us well in Vietnam the 58,000 or so of our countrymen who died and the hundreds of thousands who were wounded, had we been willing to speak truth to power earlier. The same can be said to be true of Iraq in my view. I'm not ashamed of it, I didn't oppose the war, I tried to evade the war and avoid the war by getting UN Security Council resolutions but at the end of the day, all of us could have spoken a lot more truth to power.

[00:21:08.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you been to the Vietnam War Memorial?

[00:21:11.60] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Absolutely. It is the most memorable memorial in this city. And I was involved when I worked on Capitol Hill in the controversy surrounding it. And I think Maya Lin did an absolutely splendid job in capturing all that was Vietnam.

[00:21:38.35] JOE GALLOWAY: You've obviously heard about this 50th anniversary commemoration. What are your thoughts concerning this effort?

[00:21:46.15] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Well, actually I heard about it from you. And my thoughts were if Joe Galloway asks, you, you can't refuse. And I'm pleased to be part of this and I salute you again, you don't have to do this. And so that's my overwhelming thought is gratitude to you and your colleagues, General Kicklighter, and others for taking this on.

[00:22:07.15] JOE GALLOWAY: We thank you for that. Is there anything I haven't asked you, I should have asked you?

[00:22:12.37] RICHARD ARMITAGE: Plenty.

[00:22:13.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Plenty. Well, you want to give me some answers?

[00:22:17.20] RICHARD ARMITAGE: You know what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas? If you get my drift.

[00:22:22.48] JOE GALLOWAY: I get your drift.

[00:22:23.64] RICHARD ARMITAGE: OK.

[00:22:24.28] JOE GALLOWAY: It's a pleasure talking to you.

[00:22:26.56] RICHARD ARMITAGE: It's always good to see you, sir. Thank you.