

Baldwin, Robert USAF

[00:00:15.69] ROBERT BALDWIN: Well, I was 21 when I went in the Air Force. And I was-- and I deployed-- I was 24 years old when I went over there.

[00:00:25.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you married?

[00:00:26.76] ROBERT BALDWIN: Married, yes sir, sure was.

[00:00:28.22] JOE GALLOWAY: Had kids?

[00:00:28.59] ROBERT BALDWIN: No children. No, no children at all. Never had to worry about that.

[00:00:32.40] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your hometown?

[00:00:33.99] ROBERT BALDWIN: At that particular time, when I left, I left the family. I left them at Wichita Falls, Texas. But my hometown was Knoxville, Tennessee. But I left the family, they stayed in Wichita Falls when I went to Vietnam. I deployed out of-- I was stationed at Wichita Falls, Texas, there at Sheppard Air Force Base.

[00:00:53.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What was your sense of the war before you deployed?

[00:00:59.67] ROBERT BALDWIN: Well, believe it or not, I was worried that the thing was going to be over before I got a chance to get over there. And, well, what a take back that was, after the reflection, after it was over with. But I was chomping at the bit to go. I was volunteering, and had friends going that was non-volunteer.

[00:01:18.18] And I couldn't understand why I was the volunteer and wasn't getting picked up to go. So I went to base personnel and queried them about it. And one of the senior NCO's there said, if you want to go that bad, he says, I'll see what I can do for you. And it wasn't but about a month and a half later after that, I had orders to Da Nang Air Base in Vietnam.

[00:01:49.50] ROBERT BALDWIN: I was a flight mechanic at-- our AFSC was designated as flight mechanics. We worked on the airplane that we flew on. We weren't flight engineers, as to the sense that we were-- our total duties was flying. We maintained the airplane we worked on at Sheppard. But when I went to Vietnam, that changed because of the duties. So much flying, we were divorced from the mechanical duties and just went into the operations side of the house. And we were--

[00:02:19.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Flew every mission, yeah.

[00:02:20.96] We flew every day.

[00:02:28.53] ROBERT BALDWIN: I didn't go to the schools. I didn't go to the rescue schools and stuff. I was flying the slick CH-3Es at Sheppard. We were training pilots in the CH

helicopter. And then the rescue schools, per se, was at Eglin. But I guess the Air Force saw that I had the AFSC. I didn't need the-- they just overlooked my training for combat. I didn't get to go to Eglin to go to school.

[00:03:00.06] I went straight to Da Nang as a flight engineer-- flight mechanic-- and I was in-unit trained, per se. My first air refueling, I didn't a bit more know what to look for or anything else. And it's really a funny story, in a way.

[00:03:21.18] I was up north. Of course I had-- we had tried to get training flights set up, where the tankers would come up from-- and give us a couple of ARs where I could see my duties and what have you. But I could read the checklist, extend the probe, and figure the fuel, and how much was going to put, and what aux tank, and what have you. But that's basically-- I never did get to see the tanker come up. Of course, I wasn't going to be doing the refueling anyway.

[00:03:46.80] And it's sort of funny in a way. I was with my pilot that day, and we were setting up for a refuel. So I set up a jump seat, extended the probe, set up the refueling panel to where I wanted to take the fuel, and we decided-- discussed with the pilot how much fuel he was going to take on, where he wanted it put. I go back-to-back, slide the cabin door open, and I'm back there looking for the tanker.

[00:04:08.28] Well, I'm looking back and up for the tanker. I didn't know the tanker was going to come in 500 feet below us. Nobody had ever told me that.

[00:04:15.66] So I'm sitting there, and the pilot's saying you got him in sight yet, Bob? And I said, no, I'm still looking sir. And you'd hear the tanker say Jolly so-and-so, we're two miles and trail. Then a few minutes later he'd say, Jolly so-and-so, we're a mile and trail.

[00:04:30.15] And I'm still looking up for that tanker. And the pilot say, you got him in sight, Bob? I said, no, I still don't have him in sight. About three minutes later, I said, oh, shit, there he goes. He was 500 foot below us.

[00:04:40.77] [LAUGHTER]

[00:04:41.91] That was my first experience at air refueling. But I really-- the machine gun part of it, I mean, that's braindead. You point the gun, and pull the trigger, and once you figure out the aerial part that you're doing, a hand-- you know, how much you got to lead the target and what have you.

[00:04:59.74] And the external hoist, that was a piece of cake. It was a dream to me, instead of that away frame thing we had to rig up with the cables running all through the cabin and stuff. We had an external hoist. I thought this is dreamland, you know? But I had no problems. I had no problems whatsoever.

[00:05:20.64] ROBERT BALDWIN: At that particular tour, I stayed the whole tour at Da Nang. And they were asking for volunteers at that time. One of the deals, if you extended six months, you got 30 days back in the States, and then you'd get to go to Thailand. But I had an

assignment-- they were looking-- they needed instructors at the school, and one of our pilots-- Stan McGhan, Captain Standley McGhan that was with us at Da Nang-- talked me and a couple of the other guys to consider volunteering for the instructor duties at Eglin Air Force Base, at that time.

[00:05:58.74] And evidently I impressed him with my abilities, or my abilities to instruct, or what have you, and he did the necessary things to try to get it. So instead of extending there, I thought, well, maybe I can do a better job training. Because I was there, and I was the NCOIC-- progressed to the NCOIC of the flight mechanics/flight engineers at that time, and I thought I could instruct some guys with some of the skills and stuff that I learned.

[00:06:36.36] ROBERT BALDWIN: Most of the ones, Joe, that we met were employees on the base. We were-- really, at Da Nang, we were restricted to the base. We weren't like the Army and what have you. We didn't go off base.

[00:06:50.34] The only time I was off base was to go to the beach, one time. And unfortunately, the day that we got a chance to go was the day that Martin Luther King was assassinated. I'll never forget it as long as I live. And they come over with loudspeakers to get everybody-- all personnel report back to the base. That was my only time.

[00:07:12.17] The closest we would get to going off base would be to the big BX there. But the people that I associated with were the house girls, the barbers, the people that supported us. I always got the little kids that lived on base across from Hooch 17-- they were always bumming the cigarettes, and the candy, and the gum, and what have you. And I would get clothes sent from the States over, and give them to the mama san for the kids, and stuff like that. But as far as interacting with any of the locals, or what have you-- never had the opportunity.

[00:07:47.82] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:07:48.07] ROBERT BALDWIN: But I never had a problem-- the military people that was on base, we never interacted with their-- because-- now maybe some of our pilots did, in some of the missions that were intermingled. But as far as me, I never had an opportunity to work with their military people, or-- other than the people being-- supporting us on base. That was about it.

[00:08:21.68] ROBERT BALDWIN: As you know, how the war ebbed and flowed, with the stopping of the bombing north, and what have you. But us, being at Da Nang, We were in an area where there was always something going on. The Marines were there to protect the base at Da Nang. So my first missions were medevacs where Marines would get shot up, and we'd go hoist them out of the jungle, that type mission, the medevac type missions.

[00:08:55.05] As the war would change, and we'd pick up up north-- ROLLING THUNDER, you know, the big, big bombing. We would pull-- we had two airplanes on alert at Da Nang, we had two H-3s on alert at Quang Tri. And before the big long guns were brought down to the DMZ, we pulled our alert at what we call the MACV compound, which was really just north of Hue-Phu Bai up there, and just south of Dong Ha.

[00:09:30.19] And then when they brought the big guns down, they could reach that area with the big guns. So when they built the Marine base at Quang Tri, we moved down to Quang Tri, which gave us a safer operation to operate out of. But the MACV compound stayed there. As far as I know, it was there through the whole war, till they took that whole area.

[00:09:52.94] But some of them that I remember was Khe Sanh-- the siege of Khe Sanh. We were sitting there, fat, dumb, and happy one night. And they said, we need to have every helicopter you got, everything you can muster. Raining, terrible night, weather-- just typical. And they were hauling the wounded Marines from Khe Sanh over to Dong Ha. And they were using anything they could get to do it with.

[00:10:26.87] And they had all these wounded people. They needed to get them out of there, and get them south. And we took-- we just started helicopters taking off. We punched the tanks off right out there in the middle of the field. Didn't have time to defuel them or nothing. We just punched them off, because we knew we was going to be filling up with bodies and people inside.

[00:10:45.23] And we took off of-- they'd vector us in, and we'd spiral down and break out at night. And they had incoming rounds coming in from across the DMZ. And we'd land, and they wanted us on there minimum time, because they knew-- they had spotters out there-- they knew when we would spiral down and come in, they would be firing guns from across the DMZ. Luckily none of us got hit.

[00:11:07.99] But I got off the airplane-- these are things that you remember, and it's embedded in your mind that you'll never forget-- is walking into this bunker at Da Nang-- I mean at Dong Ha. And along this one trench line, that they had all sandbagged in, was all these dead Marines stacked up, just on top of each other. Just choo choo choo choo. Then the next stack, right on up. I estimate them to be three to four foot tall, just lined up up here.

[00:11:38.51] And on the side over here, they had the wounded-- the gut shots, the legs, the arms, the legs. And the blood that was running down into this bunker area, and this young Marine-- you know the old pump fire box-- the pump extinguishers that squirted the water-- he's squirting that water, washing the blood out, so they wouldn't be walking in the blood.

[00:12:04.27] And we'd just take them. We didn't rig up our litter stanchions inside the helicopter. We just laid them in the floor. And they got the IVs, and IVs just coming out of the arm. And the PJs just trying to get the IVs back in, and finding which one went to whom. And you know what-- and we'd load that helicopter up with bodies. I don't remember the count. We'd step around and over them to get back up to where I could get my checklist run and get ready to take back off.

[00:12:34.51] You got incoming rounds, spiraling back up out of there. Get back over, feet wet, come back down to Da Nang. And we'd land, and the ambulances would meet us there, and haul these people off, take them over to the other thing. That's-- I'll just never forget that-- how much good we did that night, but I'll never forget the unfortunate ones that we couldn't bring back that night.

[00:13:01.30] But all the fighter pickups that I made, I had the-- fortunate to be on crews, and be able to go pick these guys up, and meet them, when I'm the one that's the first one to shake their hand, if it's-- the PJ didn't have to go down. Guys in North Vietnam being run by dogs, and knowing they're going to be caught any time, and we could--

[00:13:26.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Snatch them out.

[00:13:27.69] ROBERT BALDWIN: --snatch them out. One that we picked up, feet wet, good friend of mine today, he said he wasn't even hurt hardly at all, until Bob Baldwin-- he looked around in the water, and this damn helicopter's-- he thought it was going to land on top of him. And he lands, and I reach out and grab him in that raft, and I didn't know he wasn't a big guy, yet. I almost threw him out the window.

[00:13:51.06] [LAUGHTER]

[00:13:52.36] JOE GALLOWAY: To the other side.

[00:13:54.09] ROBERT BALDWIN: He says, I wasn't really hurt that bad till big old Bob Baldwin got a hold of me, and about threw me out the other side of the airplane. [LAUGHS] Charlie Neel is the gentleman's name. He lives out in Colorado now. Great, great people, and to be able to-- I got invited to the Misty FAC reunion, and got to meet his wife and his daughters and stuff. And they come up to you, and hug you, and they'll say, thank you for letting me have my daddy back.

[00:14:19.43] His wingman-- his back-seater, ironically Joe was-- we picked him up on the 9th of June. No, that's wrong. I really don't have-- I can't remember that date. It was in the June time frame when we got him. And the other bird, picked up his back-seater. He was banged up a little bit, and tore his ear up a little bit, and what have you. The other bird picked him up.

[00:14:45.42] They picked him up by hoist. We elected to land, because they were firing at us from shore. And they put the boats over, trying to come out to get him. And this F-4 from Da Nang just cut that boat in two. It's just like a war movie, you know?

[00:15:02.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Sawed it in two.

[00:15:03.60] ROBERT BALDWIN: Just ate it up, I'm telling you. But this guy-- Carruthers was his name, if I remember correctly-- he recouped, came back on flying status. Next dadburn mission, he's shot down again, and he spent the rest of his time in North Vietnam. Hanoi Hilton. I got to sit with him, and meet his wife, and stuff. We picked him up once and didn't get him the second time.

[00:15:34.68] Didn't get him a second time. But we had others. We had others, multiple shootdowns. We would pick up a guy, and then maybe us, or Nakhon Phanom, the guys out of-- our sister squadron over there would pick up a guy, he'd get picked up more than once. Multiple shootdowns of the Misty FACs.

[00:15:51.51] Those guys were, I'm telling you, they're unbelievable. It just-- what they did, and when we had a mission down, and when you had a Misty FAC running a mission, you had the best running it. I mean they-- of course that F-100 was pretty quick. Sometimes they couldn't see as good as that 01, or the 02, but they would hang with you as long as they had breath-- any chance of picking up somebody.

[00:16:20.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:16:21.76] ROBERT BALDWIN: But those are things I remember. I remember the changes. The orbits in the gulf. We'd go all the way up to Haiphong. I got pictures of the Russian ships coming in and going out. We'd wave at them, they'd wave back.

[00:16:34.99] We'd bust the coast, going in and making a run in for a pickup. North Vietnam-- the old farmers would be out there, you know, doing-- and he'd wave, and we'd wave back. I never shot at nobody that didn't shoot at me. I mean, I ain't got nothing against that old farmer. He didn't do nothing to me.

[00:16:49.96] But it's all those things I remember. All the people that supported the rescues, and wanted to support you, you know? There'd be a fighter pilot-- 100, 105 an F-4 down. Fingers Lake, Bat Lake, wherever in North Vietnam. There'd be somebody coming off the ground at Chu Lai-- can we be of help?

[00:17:10.30] Because everything's on guard, everybody hears it. Everybody wants to come get involved. Nobody can hear, nobody can talk. Just a great feeling to be able to participate in those type things.

[00:17:21.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:17:27.42] ROBERT BALDWIN: Best day-- I had a lot of them. I had a lot of them. One, I guess, it wasn't my-- I didn't make the recovery. But I was so worried, I knew where the guy was down, and they had worked it so long. I'd been up there two days before.

[00:17:47.32] Went to-- Joel Talley went in and got that-- I forget his name. He was a 1-0-- I think he was a 105 driver. He'd been down about three days. And I would have bet money that we could never have got him out alive.

[00:18:03.19] Because I'd been up there, and looked at it, and it was terrible. And that was-- one of the FAC guys come down and debriefed at the end of the day, when we didn't get him out. And Gordie Greever, God rest his soul,

[00:18:21.37] Gordie got off, he come and landed at Da Nang that night, and he-- the first thing to come off the airplane was his damn helmet. He said, by God, Chief, I ain't going back. Doc, boss, I'm not going back up here anymore. I'm done. Them people, they're going to kill everybody up here.

[00:18:33.67] I get old Gordie calmed down, you know. And the next day, they went up there. And they got him out, picked him up. And they would put the-- come in and put the penetrator down and sit there in a hover. If nothing happened, they'd pick it back up and move over to the next tree and put that penetrator--

[00:18:54.13] and that's when Joel went down. Joel Talley went down and got off, walked around down there and hunted him. Joel was a brand new PJ. I bet he hadn't been in country-- he hadn't been there long enough to drink two beers. You know what I mean?

[00:19:07.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:19:08.26] ROBERT BALDWIN: And I was sitting there and listening to this on the radio, and everybody's got their fingers crossed and what have you, to pick that guy up. And there's others that-- been on the ground, running and trying to get-- just those type of missions.

[00:19:22.91] Another one was picking up a road watch team. One of our crews, McTasney was the aircraft commander. I think he was the first Academy grad to win the Air Force Cross, if I'm not mistaken,

[00:19:38.71] awarded that. My flight engineer that was signed on that one was Al Malone, a young black guy, super man. John Stemple was PJ. He walked out on the probe trying to direct these guys to walk around, and they shot his M16 right out of his hand.

[00:19:56.41] And they got two of them. They shot that H-3 all to pieces. They staggered out of there, and they made it to Khe Sanh. And they asked Khe Sanh at night to turn the lights on so they could land. They said, we ain't turning no lights on. We're taking incoming.

[00:20:12.07] They wouldn't turn on-- they went and landed. They landed in between rows of tents, tore all their communications wiring down. And nose gear collapsed when they landed. And they was up there all night long, waiting, because the mission went on.

[00:20:27.04] And Gerald Young went in later. And you probably remember that mission. They shot it down, and it rolled down. Gerald Young got the Congressional Medal of Honor off that mission. Unfortunately, we didn't get the rest of those guys out of there. But they put a road light-- they put a bright light team in and was able to go in.

[00:20:45.04] And they found McTasney and got him out. He was burned all over, not-- Gerald Young. They found him. He was on the ground down there. He tried to hide the flight engineer and Eugene Clay and Maysey the PJ. But we think they found them during the night and got to them.

[00:21:05.97] But Gerald Young tried to lead them away. And he got away far enough to where a Huey picked him up the next day. But the crew of McTasney and Al Malone, they stayed at Khe Sanh at night. And they finally got a 123 to bum them a ride to get-- because their airplane was shot up so bad, they got-- brought it back with a crane. They had to sling it back, it was shot up so bad.

[00:21:30.98] We was all sitting around waiting on them to get back. And you can look at their eyes and see the exhaustion, the crew, they got all their equipment with them, and they were dirty from walking around that old red dirt. Once you walked on that dirt at Khe Sanh, the only way you could get it off was wear it off. You wasn't going to wash it off. I'm telling you that.

[00:21:53.95] That stuff, I've never seen nothing like it. They were red from that and all the dust in their eyes. They were exhausted. Colonel Caughron, the commander, said, great job, guys, he says. I tell you, he said, we've prayed for you. And we're glad to get you guys back and what have you.

[00:22:08.83] He put his arm around Al Malone. And he said, Al, he says-- he said, Sergeant Malone, he says, good job. He says, how'd it go up there. He said, Colonel, he said, when we took off here last night, he said there was four crewmen on that airplane.

[00:22:27.26] But when we landed at Khe Sanh, Jesus Christ was sitting in the jump seat. I'll never forget that.

[00:22:45.28] Those are the things. They're right here. JOE GALLOWAY: They get you right in the heart. ROBERT BALDWIN: They still do.

[00:22:57.07] ROBERT BALDWIN: Worst one. June 9th, we lost Jolly 23 and couldn't get nobody out of it. I was on that mission. I mean, we had a good day. I mean, that day, I think we had four or six saves that day. Incredible saves. But then we went after Hellborne, an A-4 driver.

[00:23:25.15] And he was trying to hit the Laboy ferry. He got shot down at night. And we got-- I was just a backup to the backups to the backup. I mean, my crew was thrown together. I was off that day at Da Nang. I mean, we had damn airplanes scattered all over Vietnam on rescue missions.

[00:23:45.45] And I went up that day, and just thrown together crew. And in fact, the airplane was in-- what did we call it? PE. We was doing the inspections on it. A lot of stuff was tore off of it. And we had to K-ball a bunch of stuff to put on it to get it ready to go. Threw a crew together.

[00:24:12.15] My aircraft commander was Harvie Stringer. He's since passed away, another great man. And we scrambled out of there and headed up that way. Well, we knew that one bird had already been shot off the mission, shot up real bad. And they were limping back to-- I think they made it back to Hue-Phu Bai and landed there.

[00:24:31.26] And then the Coastie and their crew, that put them next. Well, they call them in. Probably, we was 15 miles out, 15, 20 miles out when they called him in and tried to make the pickup. And they were hovering, looking up a ridge line, which is just over the-- into Laos, just over where couldn't talk about back in them days.

[00:25:00.49] And they got him with a .50 cal, just ate their lunch. And he banked her around. And the FAC was calling, you're on fire, Jolly, you're on fire, you're on fire. And then the whole thing-- and he tried to make it back down.

[00:25:15.89] And the FAC says that when he just come into a hover about a half a mile from where he was trying to make the pickup, the airplane just went whoof, exploded, and it just went in. But we were right-- we went in and was right there.

[00:25:30.98] We could see the flames coming out of the airplane. We made 360s all around, what have you. Nobody got out. There's no way anybody-- that's probably-- and then to go through the whole day and not be able to recover the pilot-- that day, that bird was shot down. My bird was shot and run out of there.

[00:25:51.59] Another bird was-- limped into Khe Sanh, shot all to pieces. Two more birds were shot up and had to get out. This-- General Momyer about dusk, about getting about dark, he says, RTB. Sorry, he says, that's it. And he's going to call an Arc Light. He's going to call the B-52. They was everywhere. They was all over that ridge.

[00:26:13.16] And then I got involved. That was a bad one. It was just a bad day. It was a good day in one sense because we got-- we made all those other saves. But the old saves, do they equal losing your whole crew? I say, yes, they do because that's what we were there to do.

[00:26:33.82] And then, later on, I got involved and with joint force full accounting to find that crash for Lieutenant Rittichier. You know, he was the Coastie that was shot down, and Jim Locker, PJ that was on that one, and Captain Yeend. He was from Mobile, Alabama.

[00:26:53.82] There's one thing happened on that I'll never forget. When we found the airplane, they found it. I come real close to being able to go over and join joint force accounting to go do the sifting and bring that airplane home.

[00:27:08.83] And I was interviewed down at-- as a civilian then, after I retired. And the things that I helped do to help find that airplane. I tracked down those FAC drivers. That was the key to finding that airplane was finding those FAC guys.

[00:27:25.24] And once we located them, and joint force accounting started talking to those folks one on one, we were-- I had it on the wrong side of the road, believe it or not. We brought my pilot in and brought the other pilots in.

[00:27:39.25] And General Wooster was kind enough to do some magic stuff for us at Holbert, and some simulator stuff. And they digitized the terrain, today's terrain, and overlaid it with a reconnaissance film from the F-4s and the U-2s from back in those days and just took us back 40 years in time. And we put that in the simulator. And it's, like, you step back. That mission, there it all was. Unbelievable. It's unbelievable.

[00:28:18.49] JOE GALLOWAY: You did find the--

[00:28:19.18] ROBERT BALDWIN: Oh, yeah. We found Jolly-- oh yeah, we found it. Yes, sir.

[00:28:22.09] JOE GALLOWAY: You recovered the--

[00:28:22.78] ROBERT BALDWIN: Absolutely. Yes, sir. We recovered them all. Yeah. I got to identify the parts. I was sitting at home. But I was a civilian then, working with the special ops out here. And it's just sort of like I'm still in rescue.

[00:28:35.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:28:36.24] ROBERT BALDWIN: You know? But I've had a hell of a good career. I mean, I wouldn't trade it for nothing in the world. But those are the sad ones and the good ones. And I had a lot of good ones and a lot of sad ones.

[00:28:48.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe the missions where you were awarded your DFCs.

[00:28:54.79] ROBERT BALDWIN: Well, one was there on that Jolly 23 mission, that shoot down there. Another one was recovering guys shot down, Army guys, H-34 shot down. We went in there two days. And they was one of the recon teams, Special Forces type. They'd been put in by-- I don't know if they was a king bird, what they call a king bird, was flown by the VNAF. And they were great pilots. I mean, they--

[00:29:26.86] JOE GALLOWAY: They were flying the old shuddering shithouse.

[00:29:28.43] ROBERT BALDWIN: H-34. The H-34, that old H-34. And they could put them in a hole that you wouldn't think a helicopter could get in. They had gonads. I'm telling you. The ones-- they were tough, tough, dudes.

[00:29:45.41] But I got a DFC off of that. I think I got one off of picking up Charlie Neel in the water. And I think-- probably, I think I might have got one for going way into North Vietnam, and I never will forget that one where we thought we'd found a new route. Nobody fired at us.

[00:30:11.84] We had this guy. He was being chased by the dogs. And my PJ, Steve Northern, was laying on the back ramp. We've got the ramp down, and he's laying back there. I got him, Bob. I got him. I got him. 360 turn around.

[00:30:26.13] He had him spotted. And he was in a little hole. We made a turn and come back around like this. Joe Green was my pilot. Flared that thing up there like that and put that hoist down. I'm not kidding you. O'Brien was this guy's name.

[00:30:41.94] He jumped on that hoist. I know he jumped that hoist, which had to be 10 feet in the air when he grabbed it. He grabbed that penetrator. He was sitting on-- he got the seats down and what have you. I don't think he ever put a strap on.

[00:30:53.46] He was trying to climb that cable as I was bringing him up. He grabbed-- he grabbed me. He grabbed me when he came up there, I spun him around, tried to get him, bring him in. Geez. That was one happy dude. He was one happy camper.

[00:31:07.68] JOE GALLOWAY: How long had he been running?

[00:31:09.12] ROBERT BALDWIN: He'd been down about 3 and 1/2 hours, about 3-- and he come down pretty close to a village. And you're seeing, I can imagine these guys, what they're thinking. I've tried to put myself in their place. And I'm thinking, you're coming down.

[00:31:22.50] All this stuff's got to be going through your mind, a million things. And you look around and here's a village. Oh, my god. What else can happen? Here's mama san coming out with a hoe, going to beat the fire out on me, or somebody is going to chop my head off over here, what have you. But it's a lot of luck.

[00:31:40.83] Now we didn't get his-- we didn't get his back seater. Never-- he never come up-- beeper. These guys, those FAC birds, they were so low most of the time. They only had microseconds. And everything had to work like clockwork. I mean, if they was lucky, they got two swings before they were in the trees, going 300, 400 miles an hour, your eyeballs is almost ripped out of your face.

[00:32:07.16] JOE GALLOWAY: You violate the first rule of air warfare. Don't parachute out where you just bombed a village.

[00:32:14.75] ROBERT BALDWIN: That would help. But sometimes, you don't have a-- you don't have a-- yeah. He was one happy camper. He was ready to go. But as we were headed back out of there, the co-pilot, he smoked. Everybody smoked back then.

[00:32:32.73] And he slid that window back, and he had his map with all the gun placements, and how we come in. And that damn thing, out the window it went. Right back there went our darn map. He was the only one that had one. We went back like the blind leading the blind.

[00:32:49.28] We come smoking right out, hit feet wet, right on back down the coast. We got back down to intel that night. They said, you all come in through one of the most hostile areas in North Vietnam. Look at these gun placements. The only thing we could figure out if they was planning something.

[00:33:05.45] It was getting close to that big Tet when the siege of Khe Sanh and all that's taking place. We just figured they didn't want to shoot because they didn't want to give themselves away. They would have smoked us.

[00:33:14.29] JOE GALLOWAY: They did?

[00:33:14.88] ROBERT BALDWIN: They'd eat us up with 37s, ZPUs and stuff. We would try to head for the clouds. If we could get in those clouds and hide, that was our salvation.

[00:33:30.47] ROBERT BALDWIN: Just letters.

[00:33:31.02] JOE GALLOWAY: Just letters.

[00:33:31.96] ROBERT BALDWIN: Just letters. There was no phone calls. We didn't do that stuff back then. I tried to write a couple or three times a week. And I hated to write letters. You can only say-- wait, you can only say so much. But you know they're back there,

[00:33:48.56] and it's not-- we didn't have-- there wasn't CNN, and all that stuff back there like we do. And I look at what we've went through since and how we've progressed to where we got now. I think, maybe, it was more of a good thing. It kept you more into the present, where now, you've got-- you can sit there and look at your wife on the screen--

[00:34:13.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:34:14.45] ROBERT BALDWIN: And talk to each other. And the kids are running around. And you've got a mission, like, you're sitting in Afghanistan now, and you've got a guy down, and you've got a first light effort.

[00:34:27.56] What do you keep your mind on? Over there, we kept our mind on our business because every day was business. At Da Nang, you could be walking to the BX, and a 122 rocket comes soaring in at 2:30 in the afternoon and blow you to smithereens.

[00:34:46.18] So I don't know. I always said, anybody in Da Nang is always going to be shorter. Every time a bang, you do this. I said, I'm going to leave this country, and I'm going to be three inches shorter

[00:35:00.89] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war? And how did you get it?

[00:35:08.07] ROBERT BALDWIN: Stars and Stripes. That's about it, and listened to Armed Forces Radio on the radio. TV was zilch. We didn't have no TV. So everybody couldn't wait to get that Stars and Stripes. But I want-- I was more interested in the ball scores than I was-- I wouldn't.

[00:35:32.50] JOE GALLOWAY: I take it that whatever they were reporting didn't affect you.

[00:35:35.71] ROBERT BALDWIN: It didn't bother me. It didn't change anything I did, one way or another. Because we had a mission. We could measure our efforts every day. I mean, if you went up on alert or you was in orbit or what have you, and you didn't get scrambled or what have you, or didn't end up anywhere, that's a good day. That's a good day.

[00:35:56.65] If somebody gets shot down or somebody gets hurt, and you go get them, you go pick them up and what have you, that's a better day. You've done your job. You can measure your effort. We had the tightest knit unit in Southeast Asia.

[00:36:11.04] Everybody was a brother, pilot, co-pilot, PJs. Everybody knew it. That was one of the big throwbacks to the big-- they just-- these guys would come in onesies twosies, the Army, they didn't know-- they didn't know the guy.

[00:36:22.71] You're out here in the boonies, and they come in with a Chinook or a Huey and drop off two guys, here's your replacements. Get over here and get your thing. You can go over and get in that foxhole. They didn't know him.

[00:36:32.69] JOE GALLOWAY: You didn't--

[00:36:33.50] ROBERT BALDWIN: They didn't know anything about him.

[00:36:34.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Didn't want to know him.

[00:36:35.57] ROBERT BALDWIN: There you go. There you go. No camaraderie.

[00:36:39.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Not until they've--

[00:36:40.28] ROBERT BALDWIN: You've got to have--

[00:36:40.76] JOE GALLOWAY: --been there three months at least.

[00:36:42.80] ROBERT BALDWIN: Right, right. These guys--

[00:36:44.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Because otherwise they're going to get killed.

[00:36:46.46] ROBERT BALDWIN: There you go.

[00:36:46.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Then you've got to worry about it.

[00:36:48.53] ROBERT BALDWIN: A Marine gunny told me at Quang Tri one time, he said, these young Marines come in. He said, if they make it through the first firefight, they'll make it through the war. If they don't-- if they don't learn to keep their head down, they'll never make it. I guess he was right.

[00:37:03.98] He was a great guy. He would go ride back and forth to Da Nang. Every day, we'd come up there. Every day we'd go back home. Rain or shine. And when the-- all the fighters, all the missions over with, the pilots come, we crank up, and we go back. He'd ride, but he'd bring the intel up.

[00:37:19.31] Every so often, he'd ride down with them. And we'd go down. And they didn't have the ration, the cards, to get the booze and stuff. And I didn't drink liquor. I'm a beer drinker. So I'd buy all the booze and give it to the Marines.

[00:37:31.77] A black Marine colonel came over one time and ripped up one guy. We gave him a bottle of liquor. Well, hell, that night, he got drunk, put his toe up on the table, shot it out with .45. Shot his big toe off. Yeah. Boy, that colonel, he was waiting.

[00:37:47.06] Oh, he lined us up and chewed us-- he said, if I ever catch any of you Air Force boys bringing any more liquor up here to my people, he said, you will not land another helicopter on this base. Oh, lordy. But they'd feed us good. We'd get the coffee and stuff from them. Brothers.

[00:38:06.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah

[00:38:13.17] ROBERT BALDWIN: I come back in August of '68.

[00:38:18.16] JOE GALLOWAY: What was that like?

[00:38:20.79] ROBERT BALDWIN: Coming home really wasn't no-- I didn't experience all these things you hear about, the catcalls and the baby killers. I don't know. I guess the reason I didn't is I stayed in the military and didn't go into the regular, local-- if I'd have went back to Tennessee, or back to Wichita Falls,

[00:38:42.77] I'd still have been in the military community. So you didn't see a lot of it. But if I'd have went back to Knoxville, got out of the military, I'd have probably seen it and experienced it. If I got out and went back to school or something like this.

[00:38:55.16] But I went straight from there, come through the airports, and had a couple of beers and talked to the people, and right on to Eglin Air Force Base, training VIs to go to South-- and I had their ultimate attention. We had a great school down there. Great, great bunch of people.

[00:39:12.23] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with your fellow veterans over the years?

[00:39:19.21] ROBERT BALDWIN: Like I said, I stayed in. I retired out of the Air Force in '85 from the headquarters MAC, and went back to Tennessee. And we were there. Soon we built a new home. And I was working-- did a little construction. I enjoyed doing that. Then I decided, well, I've got to get into something. I want to be a postal inspector.

[00:39:47.48] So I applied through the post office to get into the post. Got hired pretty quick. And then the wickets, to go through the wickets to get to be able to go to postal inspector-- the school, you had to have a year minimum in some other craft into the postal system.

[00:40:06.44] So I think I was what they call a mail handler, which is really a physical labor in the post office. You do most of-- you sort letters and do all-- move the mail through the facility and what have you. And to be honest with you, the postal system is what the postal system is, it's the most brain dead job I've ever had in my life.

[00:40:25.45] But you had to go through that wicket to get to what you wanted to do. And their school, the postal inspector school, at that time was in Oklahoma. And I really didn't like what I was doing, but I knew what I wanted to do. I had to do the bad to get to the good.

[00:40:41.47] But anyway, they were creating a position as an Air Force AFETS, Air Force Engineering Technical Service position at the 39th Wing at Hurlburt Field. Well, then it was at Eglin-- 39th-- the wing was over at Eglin. And they call me up and said, Bob, we're writing this position description.

[00:41:02.53] And as we write this description, your picture just comes up. You would fit this job exactly. I said, I don't want no more to do with helicopters. I said, you know, I've done all the fun I want with helicopters. But they said, well, at least apply for the position.

[00:41:22.10] So I'd come down to one of the reunions, one of my chief friends, Chief Majors, he just insisted I put in for it. So I put in for it. Lo and behold, I got the job. 17 years with the AFETS program. I went to England. I was with the Special Operations helicopter through Desert Storm as a civilian. I deployed with them. I went to Turkey and Kuwait.

[00:41:47.72] It's just like being back in, but I had civilian clothes. JOE GALLOWAY: And they were paying you better. ROBERT BALDWIN: I had a lot of fun training young guys again, doing exactly-- working on them old raggedy H-53s, through the Pave Lows, and all that again. It was just-- my wife and I just had another great experience. And I retired again from civil service, out of that.

[00:42:13.46] JOE GALLOWAY: You never did get to be a postal inspector.

[00:42:15.57] ROBERT BALDWIN: Never did make it. I think I'd have been a good one if I got the opportunity. But the H-3s and assignments we had in Alaska was one of the best. I mean, for rescue, when we was up there with the 71st Rescue Squadron, a peacetime operation, in the hunting season it was just unbelievable the missions we'd get. We'd get missions-- lost hunters, crashed airplanes. That's a PJ's heaven up there as far as being able to practice their-- you know, mountain climbing accidents, hunting accidents, suicides, unfortunately, spousal abuse, you go to them cabins out there in the middle of nowhere where some guy got mad at his wife and beat her up, or she shot him, or all those things.

[00:43:00.83] Philippines, lord, what a great assignment that was. That reminds-- the Philippines, I had the opportunity, Easter Sunday, 1972, we rescued Charles Lindbergh with 42 other Filipino personnel out of the island of Mindanao. We flew down there from Clark and went into that-- they were studying these cave people.

[00:43:36.11] And they had a little French Alouette helicopter that was supporting him when he slung a blade. There's no way those people could have ever got out of that jungle. It was unbelievable. They did a big thing on it. It's in the National Geographic magazine. It shows all the stuff and all the people.

[00:43:54.21] But I had that great opportunity for Charles Lindbergh to sit in my jump seat, in my position. And he got to visually see an air refueling. And we talked about how the H-3s were the first helicopters to fly nonstop across the Atlantic. Well, he got to ride in one of those. He said he'd read about it, and it just amazed him. What a gentleman. I got pictures of him. And it's just a great experience.

[00:44:22.49] But that's a couple of-- but Alaska, and I've just had so many opportunities to rescue people. Rescue to me has a long reaching-- from the battlefields. It's just a great experience.

[00:44:45.64] JOE GALLOWAY: In the end, what did the war mean to you and your generation?

[00:44:50.68] ROBERT BALDWIN: Well, I've got a lot of mixed feelings about that. But from the outcome, I know what the capabilities we had were. I think that was the first one to where the politics overrode the sanity of the military, unfortunately.

[00:45:10.09] Some of the decisions that were made, leadership that was exhibited, left so much to be desired. We had so much talent in Southeast Asia with the things-- there's a lot of things that happened in Southeast Asia that I didn't agree with. I didn't like the quick rotation of-- it was more in the Army than

[00:45:36.65] it was the Air Force and what have you. Our commanders and ops officers would stay the year. We would have this continuity and unity for a year, where the Army, they just turned over their O-5s so quick.

[00:45:51.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, every six months.

[00:45:52.58] ROBERT BALDWIN: You see, that's crazy to me. You got-- I don't believe in short assignments. I don't believe in 90-day stuff in combat. I don't believe you've got time to get your teeth--

[00:46:02.99] JOE GALLOWAY: I don't even believe in a one-year rotation.

[00:46:05.28] ROBERT BALDWIN: Right. You go till it's over. You go till it's over.

[00:46:09.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:46:10.71] ROBERT BALDWIN: That's how you rock and roll.

[00:46:11.72] JOE GALLOWAY: And that will make it get over with quick.

[00:46:14.07] ROBERT BALDWIN: Absolutely. You better believe it will. It gives you an incentive to-- if I'm going to have to do this, I'm not going to do this long. We're going to get this over with. I see things today. I got the opportunity to watch that-- I think it was National Geographic Channel, that had the little rescue synopsis on there, about four or five missions.

[00:46:37.14] In one of them, they had an IED explosion, had this guy bleeding out on the ground and other severely wounded people, they launched the aircraft to go get them. And the pilots wouldn't land until they cleared all this area to make sure all this time. I said, what the hell is wrong with the hoist?

[00:47:07.05] What's wrong with the hoist on this airplane? Don't nobody know how to use a hoist anymore? Hoist this guy up, that PJ, damn right, well, I can put him on the square foot of ground you're standing on. I know there's no IED right there. That guy's laying there.

[00:47:22.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:47:23.76] ROBERT BALDWIN: That PJ can straddle that guy, run that strap around, and we've got him. We're gone. JOE GALLOWAY: Gone. ROBERT BALDWIN: You don't need to go out here. I couldn't get over that.

[00:47:32.71] But the thing that impressed me about that was the new medical, how better the medical-- the young pararescueman-- things that they did. It's just now-- our PJ had a medical kit about like so. I mean, that was it. And they did wonders with that. I mean, they could--

[00:47:54.27] JOE GALLOWAY: But they've got-- they're saving people that would have bled out--

[00:47:59.50] ROBERT BALDWIN: No doubt.

[00:48:00.07] JOE GALLOWAY: --in a heartbeat.

[00:48:01.30] ROBERT BALDWIN: No doubt. It's just-- it's unbelievable what they can do. I sort of keep it-- but I don't know the younger guys now. The older guys that we're here with, that you've met here, and what have you. Lord, they've been to my house. I go to-- we're just like-- I don't see that camaraderie anymore. I hate to see it go. I hate to see it go. But I see rescues taking place. And I see it in fire and police helicopters. I see it in the fire-- the military helicopters, they're hovering way up here.

[00:48:38.98] And the closer you can get down, put that helicopter belly in the trees, the closer that you are to that objective, it's the less-- it's a lot less dangerous. That cable is swinging and all this. I don't-- I can't see the whole picture around me,

[00:49:01.15] see? There could be power lines there. It might be these things. But I wonder about the training. If I had a young guy, and he had a pilot that high in the air trying to make a pickup, he wouldn't be qualified when we got home. He'd be back training.

[00:49:18.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Back training.

[00:49:19.61] ROBERT BALDWIN: Yeah. And the pilot ought to recognize that also.

[00:49:22.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, sir.

[00:49:24.29] ROBERT BALDWIN: Joe, it's been a pleasure.

[00:49:25.88] JOE GALLOWAY: My pleasure.

[00:49:26.60] ROBERT BALDWIN: I love you, brother. And you know that.

[00:49:28.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:49:28.61] ROBERT BALDWIN: Yes, sir.

[00:49:29.54] JOE GALLOWAY: I appreciate it.

[00:49:30.47] ROBERT BALDWIN: I appreciate you. I just liked the-- when Joe called me and asked me if I'd do this, I said, well-- I didn't have to think about it long. I said, I'd be more than happy.

[00:49:41.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Good, good.

[00:49:43.25] ROBERT BALDWIN: I love everything about it.

[00:49:44.45] JOE GALLOWAY: All right.

[00:49:44.94] ROBERT BALDWIN: All right, sir.