

Balton, Monroe US Army

[00:00:17.09] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: When and where were you born?

[00:00:19.88] MONROE BALTON: Wichita, Kansas at 1703 North Hydraulic in the year 1941.

[00:00:27.56] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: What month?

[00:00:28.31] MONROE BALTON: June the 25th.

[00:00:29.41] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: June.

[00:00:30.11] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:00:30.47] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You're older than me. I was born in November of '41. We're both pre-war.

[00:00:37.27] MONROE BALTON: Yes.

[00:00:37.79] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: More steel in the models then.

[00:00:40.40] MONROE BALTON: Yes.

[00:00:42.02] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Who were your family members?

[00:00:44.46] MONROE BALTON: Well, my father was Dr. Monroe R. Balton. We have different middle names. He's a doctor of Veterinary Medicine. My mother was Edith Ruth Balton. She was from the Purnell family out of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. I have an older brother, Michael Rombey Balton, and a younger brother, Keith Gilbert Balton, who has since changed his name to Keith Abdul Rahim.

[00:01:23.45] MONROE BALTON: I grew up in Wichita. I attended elementary school, junior high and high school, graduated from high school in '59.

[00:01:31.40] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: 1959.

[00:01:32.99] MONROE BALTON: Yes.

[00:01:33.59] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Same year I did. How did you come to enter the military?

[00:01:39.68] MONROE BALTON: Well, I went to undergraduate school. I enrolled in ROTC. The first school-- I attended two schools in undergraduate school-- Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. And it was a land grant college, so they had compulsory ROTC for the first two years. And I liked it and liked military history and decided to opt for the senior program.

[00:02:08.36] And then right after I entered the senior program, the sit-ins of the early '60s took place in Baton Rouge. And I subsequently left the university there in May of 1962. I transferred to the University of Kansas and began attending there in September of '62. I re-enrolled in ROTC and graduated in '64 and got my commission-- my butter bar in 1964.

[00:02:45.10] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Got your butter bars in 1964. Timing is everything.

[00:02:51.91] MONROE BALTON: Yes. Yes.

[00:02:54.52] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Where were you assigned originally?

[00:02:57.37] MONROE BALTON: Well, originally I was supposed to go to field artillery but while I was home after graduating, I essentially got a message from the Department of the Army that I was going to be entering the officers basic for air defense artillery. So my first assignment was Fort Bliss, Texas. I went to the air defense artillery officers course.

[00:03:34.51] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: How was that?

[00:03:38.32] MONROE BALTON: Very interesting. It was totally unexpected because I didn't even have an idea that there was anything such as air defense artillery. I knew that we had anti-aircraft units and all that. I thought they were part of the regular artillery. And I had been prepping myself to attend the artillery school at Fort Sill in Lawton, Oklahoma. So when they sent me this, it caught me off guard. I actually enjoyed it because of the high tech aspects of it. It was mostly radar acquisition of targets and simulated firings of Nike AJAX and Nike Hercules missiles.

[00:04:23.50] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Missiles.

[00:04:24.40] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:04:24.90] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:04:25.17] MONROE BALTON: And I did some work-- we had a chance to work with a system that was still in effect when I went to Vietnam. I can't remember the name of it now, but it was a smaller missile for close-in air defense. And I think there was actually a unit assigned in Vietnam while I was there. But I had an obligation when I graduated to attend flight school. The Army sent me to through flight training when I was in ROTC.

[00:05:00.32] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Off to Fort Wolters.

[00:05:02.24] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, but before I got sent to Fort Wolters, I got a message again from the Department of the Army saying, you are relieved of your obligation to go to flight school. You revert to an OBV 2, which is obligated volunteer with a two year service commitment-- active service commitment. They said, however, if you still want to go to flight school, you can reapply under the appropriate regulations and we'll reconsider.

[00:05:34.43] So my plan when I graduated was to do four years as a flying officer. And then when I came out to go to graduate school-- that way my younger brother finished high school the same year I finished college-- he'd be able to get his way through undergraduate school by the time I got out of the service. So there wouldn't be any burden on our mother with respect to paying for this education. And of course, I was going to have-- I knew I'd had the GI Bill.

[00:06:11.09] But anyway, I reapplied under the appropriate regulations. I forget now the numbers, but I had to go take a demo ride in a Bird Dog at Fort Bliss. They do the same thing. They always try to make you throw up. And I laughed because by that time I had had about 45, 50 hours flying time, all fixed wing, no rotary wing. And I just laughed in the back seat as he went through his routine. And he got in, they approved my application, and I got assigned to rotary wing class 66-2 at Fort Wolters, Texas. And I think the class started in July of '65. Yeah. July of '65.

[00:07:04.23] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: All right. You know that things are heating up in Vietnam?

[00:07:08.16] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:07:09.12] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You're aware of that, and you're pretty sure that's where you're going to end up?

[00:07:13.95] MONROE BALTON: I had a good idea that as a rotary wing pilot, I was going to wind up going to Vietnam.

[00:07:20.63] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:07:21.27] MONROE BALTON: Although I had a cousin who had gone through OCS, got flight training, they put him in Mohawks, they sent him to Germany.

[00:07:30.18] [LAUGHING]

[00:07:33.90] He was always lucky.

[00:07:34.83] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: So you finish up at Fort Wolters, they send you to Mother Rucker.

[00:07:38.94] MONROE BALTON: Yes.

[00:07:39.72] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And you transition into Hueys.

[00:07:43.86] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, well, first, before we got into the Hueys, we went through the rotary wing instrument class to earn what they call a combat instrument ticket. And then we transitioned into Hueys. And then from the Hueys, we went through tactics--

[00:08:07.27] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Gunnery, all that stuff.

[00:08:09.37] MONROE BALTON: All that. All the traditional stuff. They wouldn't let us shoot rockets, but what we did to simulate shooting rockets from the helicopter was we had helicopters with machine guns on them. And they put the machine guns in the stowed position and the instructors would say, OK, those machine guns out there are now rockets. And the rockets will do basically the same thing the bullets will do. So you get a chance to see it-- JOE GALLOWAY: You get a feel for it. MONROE BALTON: Yeah. Just to see what they're going to do when they come out of the barrel.

[00:08:43.51] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Now, at this point, had you heard anything about ARA?

[00:08:48.49] MONROE BALTON: No.

[00:08:49.06] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: No.

[00:08:49.95] MONROE BALTON: No. Not one--

[00:08:51.64] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Nobody mentioned it one word?

[00:08:53.80] MONROE BALTON: Not at all. I thought that like everyone else, I'd most likely to be assigned to a lift company because that's what most of the people did.

[00:09:05.50] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And what do you get assigned to?

[00:09:08.89] MONROE BALTON: The day I checked out of Fort Rucker and cleared the post office, there was a letter from Major Jim Ford from the 2nd Battalion, 20th Artillery, Aerial Rocket Artillery, 1st Cavalry Division (Air Mobile). Now, I have to tell this story. My mother came to Fort Rucker to witness my graduation in the bestowing of the wings. She was in my car as I was in the post office.

[00:09:44.13] And when I came out of the post office, she heard me talking under my breath. Needless to say, there were blue words. And she says, what's the matter? I said, well, I've just been assigned to the 1st Cavalry Division in Vietnam. She says, oh, whoa, what's so bad about that? I said, those are the guys you've been watching on TV getting their butts kicked in the Ia Drang Valley. And she says, oh my God. I said, nah, don't worry about it. We'll see.

[00:10:19.62] And we left Fort Rucker driving to Baton Rouge to visit her sister. As I said, I had a cousin who flew Mohawks. He was a member of the-- he got the Army Aviation magazine. And when I was at my aunt's house sitting in the living room thumbing through the magazines on the table, I run across this magazine that had a photograph on the cover of a Huey with an M4 system on it, shooting rockets. And it said, 2nd Battalion, 20th Artillery, Aerial Rocket Artillery. And I said, what?

[00:11:02.79] So I read the article and then I turned around I said, that sounds awfully familiar. Pulled the envelope out of my briefcase, looked at the return address. I said, this is the same unit I'm going to. I walked into the kitchen, told my mother and my aunt-- I said, you don't have to

worry about me. I'll be coming home. And she said, how do you know that? I said, they're going to let me shoot back.

[00:11:30.27] [LAUGHING]

[00:11:33.75] I had no qualms whatsoever about going to Vietnam after that. In fact, all the guys I knew that were in my class who had not been assigned and who were on the same flight I was on going to Saigon, I said if you're in artillery, you should tell the guys at the repo depot this is where you want to go.

[00:11:53.91] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah. And did they?

[00:11:56.65] MONROE BALTON: Herb Hurst did.

[00:11:57.75] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:12:03.33] MONROE BALTON: We get to An Khe, and we run into Roger McAllister. He's already there, so he knew about it or he got assigned. Possibly just like I did. JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Just out of the blue. MONROE BALTON: Out of the blue. And I thought it was really very interesting because my background training-wise was air defense artillery, not field artillery. So these guys were talking about laying gun sites and batteries. And I said, if it hasn't got anything to do with the Nike Hercules, I don't know about it.

[00:12:40.81] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah, right. Now, here you are, you're assigned to the 2nd of the 20th ARA, and you've never fired rockets.

[00:12:52.61] MONROE BALTON: Correct.

[00:12:53.39] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You didn't even know this existed two weeks before.

[00:12:58.67] MONROE BALTON: Correct. Or by a month before.

[00:13:00.98] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: How are they going to get you up to speed on this thing?

[00:13:03.74] MONROE BALTON: Well, fortunately, I was assigned to a very experienced warrant officer, Jesse Hobby. Jesse and I flew-- so when I got to Vietnam I had about 210 hours military time. And Jesse and I flew together for the next 200 hours. And he taught me basically everything I know about--

[00:13:28.78] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Everything you needed to know.

[00:13:30.55] MONROE BALTON: Yes.

[00:13:31.21] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:13:32.05] MONROE BALTON: He had been part of the original 11th Air Assault. Came over on the ship when the 1st Cav came over. I was in the first--

[00:13:41.19] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: So he's on his second tour.

[00:13:43.11] MONROE BALTON: No, he was at the end of his first tour.

[00:13:44.90] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: At the end of his first.

[00:13:45.93] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, and we were--

[00:13:47.07] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: We're talking, this is 1966?

[00:13:50.52] MONROE BALTON: '66, yes. He rotated August of '66.

[00:13:58.60] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:13:59.32] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. But he was on-- we were the first group of replacements for the 2nd of the 20th after their arrival in Vietnam. They mixed us in with the old guys. And they brought in some guys who had been assigned to other units in Vietnam. For instance, one of the guys came in from the 155th out of Ban Me Thuot. He got reassigned, and you know they just--

[00:14:34.73] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: They were trying to mix them up a little.

[00:14:36.73] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. To avoid getting too many inexperienced people--

[00:14:40.54] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Everybody leaving at the same time. Yeah.

[00:14:41.94] MONROE BALTON: Yes, yes. Quite so.

[00:14:48.89] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Describe for us the ARA and ARA tactics.

[00:14:56.35] MONROE BALTON: Wow. The way ARA worked, it was like being an artillery battery. You sit there, and you wait, and a call comes in over the phone and says, fire mission. Well, when you hear the words fire machine and you're on the line, you yell out, fire mission. When the guys hear that, the right seat pilot jumps in, straps in, starts the airplane.

[00:15:30.39] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Starts the airplane.

[00:15:33.49] MONROE BALTON: The guy in the left seat, the AC, he makes sure that everything's disconnected, all the tie-downs are off, and we have two minutes from the date we hear fire mission to be ready to fly. I mean, that means we're pulling pitch to get off the ground. We would get the directions, the coordinates to our target area, the contact frequency, and the contact callsign.

[00:16:05.89] We'd get in the area where our mission was, and we'd contact the guys on the ground. We'd say, all right, we're on station, pop smoke. And the guy would say, well, I'm going to-- I said, no, just pop smoke. Once we see the smoke, we'll tell you we got smoke, and we'll tell you what color we have.

[00:16:35.13] And what would happen-- we did that because the Cong were listening.

[00:16:39.57] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:16:40.14] MONROE BALTON: And they would pop smoke, too.

[00:16:41.49] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: They'd pop smoke, too.

[00:16:42.93] MONROE BALTON: And you'd get a purple smoke over here and a yellow smoke over here. Orange smoke over there. And we'd say, well, we've got three smokes, a purple, an orange, and a yellow. Which one are you? Say, we're the orange. Roger. Where's the target?

[00:16:55.71] JOE GALLOWAY: We're blowing up the other two.

[00:16:57.04] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. Where's the target? Because it might not be. They might have sent somebody over, popped the smoke, and run back. I said, where is the fire coming from? We get the direction from their spot. He'd give us an azimuth and the distance. We'd turn on the azimuth, go fly out the distance, we'd drop in a couple of marking rounds.

[00:17:20.22] And based on what the radio operator told us, if we were on target, I'd tell my trail ship, fire on my rockets. If we have to make an adjustment, we tell the trail ship to make the adjustment, fire marking rounds again. By that time, we're coming around in trail. And if we get the go ahead to fire for effect, we'd open up on them.

[00:17:52.56] And then we'd wait around and we'd fire a couple of loads. And we talked to the guys on the ground-- we still got problems? No, we don't have any more fire. Or yes, we still have machine gun fire. And we said, well, is it coming from the same direction? No.

[00:18:09.24] The whole thing was a conversation between you and the guy on the ground. And one of the things that rung a bell with me was the guy on the ground is nervous. He's getting shot at. I'm in the sky. Nobody's shooting at me yet. And my attempt was always to ease the guy on the ground-- ease his mind.

[00:18:35.58] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:37.26] MONROE BALTON: Talk to him in a nice, calm voice. Quiet him down so we can get good, accurate information. Because we needed that to be effective. And once we got the good, accurate information, we could put effective rounds on target. And that we did, many times.

[00:18:58.04] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:58.66] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. And then, of course, after the mission was over, we'd get an after action report from the guy on the ground. One machine gun destroyed, three KIA. We had three blood trails. So that means that three people wounded who made it away from the site.

[00:19:22.83] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:19:24.20] MONROE BALTON: We'd put that in our report. We'd fly back to wherever we were based, complete the paperwork, and turn the information in.

[00:19:35.32] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah. What were your living conditions like?

[00:19:39.76] [LAUGHING]

[00:19:42.61] MONROE BALTON: When I arrived at An Khe in May of '66, the platoon was housed in basically a tent. We had wood floors and there were partitions between your bunk site. So you weren't bunked out in the open like in a barracks.

[00:20:10.43] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:20:11.44] MONROE BALTON: But it was a tent roof. We had roll-up sides, so you could let the breeze through.

[00:20:16.60] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And then the mosquitoes got to get in some way.

[00:20:18.91] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. (LAUGHING) Yeah. We didn't have a ceiling whatsoever. But during the course of the next couple of months while we were there, you know, guys chipped in. We had a ready supply of wood, because we got the ammo boxes.

[00:20:35.50] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: The ammo crates. Yeah.

[00:20:36.25] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:20:36.82] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:20:37.09] MONROE BALTON: And we would trade the ammo boxes for other building materials, because we had ammo boxes in excess. We didn't have nails, or screws, or corrugated tin.

[00:20:54.40] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: But you could trade for it.

[00:20:55.45] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, we could trade for it. And that's what we did. We traded. We took the tent roof off, put a metal roof on, corrugated tin. And we scrounged some cargo parachutes, and we strung the cargo parachutes--

[00:21:14.43] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Underneath the tin.

[00:21:15.32] MONROE BALTON: --under the tin to make a ceiling, to give you that cushion between the roof and you that traps the hot air up next to the roof. And it made it like 10 or 15 degrees cooler inside that hut. But every guy had his own space where you could take the ammo boxes, and you put four of them together, and drill a hole in the back where you could mount a light bulb fixture, and that was your hot box.

[00:21:49.69] You put your clothes that would-- to fight mildew and fungus, whatever.

[00:21:57.55] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: All that.

[00:21:58.48] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. And you kept your shoes, and your underwear, and your extra shirts, and field jackets or what have you all went into the hot box. And of course we eventually had power outlets so the guys could-- eventually, you could buy your stereo equipment and all that stuff. It got to be a little home.

[00:22:20.53] There was an area in the middle of the tent that was kind of like a day room.

[00:22:24.36] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:22:25.66] MONROE BALTON: Where you--

[00:22:26.56] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Play cards.

[00:22:27.67] MONROE BALTON: Play cards, throw your magazines. Just a place where you could relax.

[00:22:33.37] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Home.

[00:22:34.10] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:22:34.59] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah. You were going to spend some time there.

[00:22:38.48] MONROE BALTON: One year.

[00:22:46.01] MONROE BALTON: It was an interesting mix, primarily because I'm African-American. I was the only African-American officer in A Battery of the 2nd of the 20th. There was one other African-American officer, he was on the operations staff, and he was part of the S3 staff. But there were no other flying officers. I was the only one.

[00:23:19.71] I had-- well, Herb Hurst and I had trained together at Wolters, Rucker. And we were in the same platoon in A Battery. The guys who were already there were very open and receptive. They were always willing to share their knowledge. There was nobody who was a showoff or-- it was good.

[00:23:57.02] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Nobody treating you badly.

[00:23:58.89] MONROE BALTON: No, no. The only thing they did was when you report in they assign you a personal weapon. They gave me a .38 police special with six bullets.

[00:24:12.69] [LAUGHTER]

[00:24:13.65] That was it. That was my personal weapon. I said, well, how about an M16? You've got these hanging all around the place. No, they're for the enlisted. Well, how about an M14? No, we don't have any.

[00:24:25.80] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: How about a 1911 .45?

[00:24:29.01] MONROE BALTON: I wasn't sufficient rank.

[00:24:31.02] [LAUGHTER]

[00:24:33.60] MONROE BALTON: The .45s went to the field grade and above.

[00:24:38.89] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: So you're stuck with a thing that won't hit nothing.

[00:24:42.60] MONROE BALTON: Except Jesse, a warrant officer, had a .45.

[00:24:47.88] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:24:48.81] MONROE BALTON: So I stuck with Jesse.

[00:24:51.42] [LAUGHTER]

[00:24:52.98] MONROE BALTON: But no, the maintenance staff, the crew chiefs, the door gunners, they were all competent people. During the course of my one year there, we got new guys in, crew chiefs primarily, who had just finished training at Fort Rucker. And for the most part, they didn't know one end of the airplane from the other.

[00:25:23.55] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: They didn't know squat.

[00:25:24.72] MONROE BALTON: Right. So when we were just sitting around-- you know, we spent a lot of time waiting to go fly. Because the way our mission was set up, we were on call.

[00:25:37.02] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Right. Between 5 and 15.

[00:25:40.95] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:25:41.34] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:25:42.09] MONROE BALTON: And while we were sitting hot, we would sit in the back, and we'd get the dash 20 out, which is the organizational maintenance manual, and the dash 10, which is the operator's manual, and we'd sit down--

[00:25:58.95] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And go over it with the crew chief.

[00:26:00.03] MONROE BALTON: With the crew chief, yeah. And the door gunner, because the door gunner was basically the assistant crew chief.

[00:26:05.01] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:26:06.18] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:26:06.57] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You got to teach them somehow.

[00:26:08.13] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. And they were very, very competent guys. I mean, willing to learn and not predisposed to thinking they knew it all. They were like little sponges.

[00:26:22.01] I had no trouble with any of them. There were some who were initially kind of standoffish. But when they got to understand that I was there for the same reason they were and we had a mission to accomplish, we got it done. Although, I refused to work on the officer's club.

[00:26:52.63] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: (LAUGHING) You wouldn't work on it?

[00:26:54.86] [LAUGHTER]

[00:26:56.76] MONROE BALTON: No.

[00:26:57.03] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Why?

[00:26:58.02] MONROE BALTON: Eh, they wanted to build it in a place I didn't approve of, down where the honeypots were.

[00:27:04.92] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: No, no. That don't make any sense.

[00:27:07.50] MONROE BALTON: Hey. But otherwise the new troops that came in were easy to train, eager to learn, and were very conscientious about-- primarily because they were flying in the aircraft with you, your crew chief, and your door gunner, and his assistant. So they made sure the aircraft was safe.

[00:27:29.91] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And you wanted them as trained as highly as possible.

[00:27:33.42] MONROE BALTON: Oh, yes. The only thing was hard to do was get hard to get them to leave stuff back. Like my crew chief on one particular airplane, every time he flew he wanted to carry his full toolkit, which weighed about 300 pounds.

[00:27:47.19] [LAUGHTER]

[00:27:48.36] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: I was told that they were pretty good at hiding extra ammo, too.

[00:27:52.56] MONROE BALTON: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. We'd have-- well, there was an incident with Jesse Hobby and myself where we were flying near a place called Kon Tum. We were attempting to make a landing on a ridgeline, and we had crew chief, door gunner, both machine guns with ammo, full load of rockets, and probably 400 pounds of fuel, not counting the smoke grenades that were strung across the back, and the ammo, and the C-rations and all the stuff that was out in the external stores. We weren't able to make the landing on the ridgeline because we ran out of power about 30 feet from where we wanted to set down.

[00:28:48.66] But fortunately, the ridge was shaped such that the ridgeline was here and there was a slope away from the ridge going down into a little valley. And when we hit-- the airplane, when it runs out of power, starts turning to the right. And no matter what you do it's going to turn to the right because of the torque effect. I just kicked on the right pedal. I was flying in the left seat. Jesse was in the right seat, but I was flying the aircraft.

[00:29:23.58] I kicked the aircraft to the right so it made a 180 degree turn, and I just put it down on the hillside and made sure that the rotor system didn't hit the tail boom. And we just slid down the hill until the engine picked up speed again and we had enough forward momentum to lift off. And when we got back--

[00:29:45.42] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: I guess there weren't any big trees or rocks.

[00:29:47.58] MONROE BALTON: They were close by, and we were just lucky that we didn't hit any. We went back to the nearest airport that the Cav was using, and that's when we unloaded everything. And we found out that we had all this extra stuff on board. We were way overweight.

[00:30:06.27] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Way overweight.

[00:30:07.53] MONROE BALTON: For the altitude and the temperature, we were probably 5, 6, 700 pounds overweight.

[00:30:14.61] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: How much of it was machine gun ammo?

[00:30:18.51] MONROE BALTON: Well, each door gunner had 1,500 rounds of ammo. That weighs quite a bit.

[00:30:26.55] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: That weighs quite a bit.

[00:30:27.96] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. 10.62.

[00:30:29.54] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: So was that the standard load?

[00:30:34.86] MONROE BALTON: Prior to that day, yes.

[00:30:36.40] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:30:37.58] MONROE BALTON: Yes. But like I said, I had to convince them that for operations, when we take off away from our base camp, we don't need a full toolbox. We don't need three cases of C-rations. We don't need-- well, there was a five gallon can of water in there that I didn't know was there. And a lot of it was the pilot's fault, because we didn't inspect those areas and called them out on it. But after that, we did.

[00:31:14.94] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You talked about messing around with the SS.11 simulator. Did you ever get to fire that thing?

[00:31:24.00] MONROE BALTON: I didn't. No.

[00:31:25.05] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: No.

[00:31:25.65] MONROE BALTON: The only one in our unit that fired it was Roger McAllister.

[00:31:28.92] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And he did a good job with it.

[00:31:31.00] MONROE BALTON: Yes, I was there flying cover the day he did it. Took him twice, but he managed to get it done.

[00:31:37.58] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: He managed to get the job done.

[00:31:39.22] MONROE BALTON: Yes.

[00:31:39.81] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah. Can you describe for us the quality of the leadership in your outfit as high as you could see it?

[00:31:51.83] MONROE BALTON: Well, yeah, I can. Starting from the top. Well-- no-- starting from my unit, within the unit.

[00:32:08.60] Battery commander was easygoing, but when I say easygoing, not strict about unimportant things. Strict about keeping your competence up, strict about watching yourself at the officer's club so that you don't become inebriated so you can't operate the aircraft, but not nickel and diming you to death about other things.

[00:32:42.90] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:32:47.57] MONROE BALTON: I had an issue with Colonel Brady. He was the battalion commander at the time. He used to-- what did he say? He said I lacked a sense of urgency. That's what he told me one day, because he didn't like my mustache.

[00:33:09.72] And I said, well, what do you mean, Colonel? Well, when you talk on the radio you talk in a low voice. And I said, well, one of the things I'm trying to do is to calm the guy on the ground down so I can get the information I need to do my job. I said, I don't get that by screaming and yelling at people.

[00:33:34.82] I said, you got to calm them down, get the information, get the job done. Because a couple of times he interrupted a mission I was on and broke in while I'm trying to talk to the guy on the ground. And I told him if he wanted to join the mission, he was welcome to fall in and trail on my wingman, and he could shoot his rockets. But we needed him to stay off the radio so I could get the information I needed to get the job done.

[00:34:07.19] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:34:09.38] MONROE BALTON: We were in Happy Valley. We go over, we land, refuel, and we're at the re-arming depot. And he comes over and lands, and gets out of his aircraft, and walks over. And that's when he told me I lack the sense of urgency. I said, well, Colonel, you're entitled to your opinion. And I said, but I got the job done today, and there are people I know in this unit who occasionally don't get the job done because they get all excited, they don't get the information, and they fail on the mission. And I said, that includes you.

[00:34:48.41] [LAUGHTER]

[00:34:50.09] And then he got on me about my mustache, because my mustache has never been, in his mind, according to regulation, because it overhangs my lip.

[00:35:02.57] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: The cavalry is famous for mustaches.

[00:35:06.17] MONROE BALTON: I know. He was just mad at me.

[00:35:10.11] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:35:10.70] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:35:11.57] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: I hope you told him to piss up a rope.

[00:35:14.36] MONROE BALTON: In a sense I did. Because the day he got reassigned, I shaved my mustache off.

[00:35:21.79] [LAUGHTER]

[00:35:22.79] And stood in line. I've got a photograph of him pinning an Air Medal on me.

[00:35:27.65] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Without the mustache.

[00:35:28.58] MONROE BALTON: Without the mustache. And he used some profanity when he got to me. He says, I see you shaved off that GD mustache.

[00:35:39.09] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:35:40.07] MONROE BALTON: I said, yes, Sir.

[00:35:41.59] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:35:42.68] MONROE BALTON: Thank you. Yeah. It's one of the few photographs that I saved from my time there. All the other photographs I took have disappeared.

[00:35:57.74] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Now, how much time did you have to yourself for recreation or off duty or anything like that?

[00:36:08.33] MONROE BALTON: You had vacant hours. They were like-- in An Khe, the 1st Cav opened a field army mobile cat house.

[00:36:21.65] [LAUGHTER]

[00:36:23.03] And it made Time magazine, so I feel--

[00:36:28.91] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Cheap Charlie's tank wash and blow jobs.

[00:36:32.08] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. But you could go down-- you had to you had to go down into the village to get haircuts for instance. And if you wanted to buy souvenirs and some stuff that wasn't available at the PX, you got it done. I mean, you could go off base. But you didn't go into areas that you knew were insecure. And you always watched your back and you never went by yourself. And you always made sure that there was somebody who knew where you were and what you were doing. And you watched out for your buddy.

[00:37:16.08] Other than that, we had R&R. It was in-country R&R, although I never took advantage of that. I did manage to get an R&R to Hong Kong and an annual leave to Hong Kong. But other than that, around the battery area, if you weren't on duty, you were doing-- you had something you were supposed to be doing. Like you could be training on the SS missile simulator, or you could be helping with the officer's club, or you could be working on your hooch.

[00:37:59.84] They were just a myriad things. They just kept you busy. And then there was a USO facility at An Khe, which brings to mind another interesting story. My mother had sent me an article about a young lady from my hometown who decided to join the special services. And she sent me the article from the local newspaper, and the young lady's name was Margo Looney.

[00:38:37.63] I told one of the enlisted men about her, and I showed him the article. And he said, well, I'm headed over to the USO now. They got some new service girls have come in. So I said, well, don't forget, here's the article, this is her name, check to see if she's there.

[00:39:01.84] And he came back about 45 minutes later, he's just screaming at the top of his lungs. Cap-- no, Lieutenant Balton, she's there! She's there! I said, what are you talking about? That girl from hometown, Margo, she's there.

[00:39:20.08] So we jump in a jeep, drive over, and sure enough, I asked her-- I saw, well, how in the world did you end up here? And she said, when I got to Saigon I just told them I wanted to go where all the helicopters were, because I knew you'd be somewhere around.

[00:39:38.08] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: This was a USO employee or a Donut Dolly?

[00:39:42.06] MONROE BALTON: A Donut Dolly.

[00:39:42.82] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Donut Dolly.

[00:39:43.81] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:39:44.33] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah. Red Cross.

[00:39:45.73] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. Yep, she was a Donut Dolly.

[00:39:49.78] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:39:56.67] MONROE BALTON: The best day. The best day I had in my tour was a night. It was a night mission. I'm flying behind a young man who has me by two weeks date of rank. He's leading the mission.

[00:40:14.79] We're called out because we were supporting a special ARVN US operation, you know, Army of the Republic of Vietnam-- the South Vietnamese army and some American troops. And they were pinned down, and they were asking us for help. Night. We fly out. The guy reads the map pretty well, and he gets us to the area where the conflict is taking place. And as we're flying around in this racetrack, every time we fly over this fork in the stream, the guy in front would get shot at.

[00:41:01.98] You could see the green tracers coming up. I mean, it looked like boxcars on fire, they were so big. And I tried to call him on the radio to tell him he was being shot at, that he should cut out his position lights and turn off his rotating beacon, just as a suggestion. He told me to get off the phone-- the radio.

[00:41:27.57] So I said, OK. So I just backed up.

[00:41:30.66] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Go ahead, hot shot.

[00:41:32.04] MONROE BALTON: I backed up a little bit. I cut off my position lights, cut off the rotating beacon, and the next time we came around, as I was flying AC, I asked the pilot in the right seat, I said, OK, you see where the rounds are coming up from? He says, yeah, I got it. I said, OK. Next time we come around, when he shoots at the guy in front, we'll wipe him out.

[00:41:58.47] And next time we came around, he still won't listen to me on the radio. So we just, as soon as the first tracer comes up, we roll in hot. And it was the first time this young man got first rounds on target. The first two rounds met right where the tracer was coming up. We didn't need to shoot anymore.

[00:42:23.07] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: That was it.

[00:42:24.18] MONROE BALTON: But he kept pushing the button. He wasted about four pair. And he was diving in hot, and I said, let go of the controls. He said, what's the matter, what's the matter? I said, look at our rate of descent. And he looked over. He said, oh, my God.

[00:42:49.74] We were doing about almost 3,000 feet a minute. I said, don't pull on anything, let me do this.

[00:42:57.51] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Let me do this.

[00:42:59.28] MONROE BALTON: And you just pull back on the cyclic, just a hair, and you pull up on the collective pitch just a hair, just to stop the descent. And we rolled out just above the stream and climbed out. And I looked back-- I'm in the left seat, I looked back this way-- and I could see the door gunner on the right gun, he's holding on to the stanchion that supports the machine gun.

[00:43:31.63] [LAUGHTER]

[00:43:33.75] But we came out of that.

[00:43:34.86] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: He got a little bit spooked, did he?

[00:43:36.56] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. But that was a good night.

[00:43:39.63] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: How about the hot shot up above who wouldn't turn his lights off?

[00:43:43.74] MONROE BALTON: Well, he got-- he was pissed. He said, you were using me as bait. I said, I tried to tell you.

[00:43:52.65] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Turn the damn lights off.

[00:43:54.69] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. But he wouldn't. But that was one good day. I mean, there were many good days.

[00:44:00.18] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:44:00.69] MONROE BALTON: There was a day I took my replacement out, Captain Gordon. I don't remember his first name. All I remember was they called him Flash.

[00:44:11.37] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Flash Gordon.

[00:44:11.76] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. He was one of those fortunate individuals who right out of Rucker he got assigned to USC to go to the safety officers course. So he was already just too hot to like touch. And he outranked me, again.

[00:44:35.09] And we were in the aircraft. I was teaching him how to read maps. And I said, take us to this location. You know, I said, we got meet some lift ships, we got to prep an LZ, and we got to stay on station to support the troops once they get out.

[00:45:00.67] And he was an African-American, and he got really snotty and started trying to pull rank in the cockpit. I said, well, wait a minute, you don't understand. I'm flying aircraft commander, you're flying Peter Pilot. I run this show. I'm trying to give you my knowledge. Why don't you just be quiet and listen?

[00:45:30.56] And I tried to explain to him that when you're flying in Vietnam, and you look down, and you see a green squiggly line on the ground, and you look at your map, you're not going to be looking for a green squiggly line. What you're going to be looking for is a stream. I said, the reason we don't see that stream is because the trees have overgrown the stream, and the only way you can tell that there's a stream there is because the trees are all well nourished and not dried out.

[00:46:05.57] He took that lesson to heart. So we're flying out. He can't find the LZ. He can't find the lift ships, which I've been watching for 20 minutes. And he finally says, I give up. I said, OK. Not to worry. We got it.

[00:46:27.38] We fly over. I tell my wingman, I said, don't shoot anything. I'm going to prep the LZ. I'll use all my rounds. You stay on station, and we'll support them with your rockets and machine guns and my machine guns.

[00:46:46.09] And that was the first time I fired a full load of rockets at once. And you know the ship starts to tuck as the rockets go out. And by the time you've got 48 of them going, it's about like this. And you have to be very careful, again, because there's only that one nut holding that rotor system on.

[00:47:10.87] And we were-- I mean, we got the LZ prepped, we go back, and on the way back I said, number one, you always got to know where you are, you always got to know where your lift ships are, and you never miss prepping an LZ. Because those guys getting out of those airplanes--

[00:47:33.78] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: They're vulnerable.

[00:47:34.71] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. They depend on you to keep the heads of the enemy down. If we don't do our job, they get killed.

[00:47:43.33] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:47:45.46] MONROE BALTON: And he went back and told Emory Bush, who was the battery commander at the time, what had happened, and that he wanted Bush to--

[00:47:59.34] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Court-martial you?

[00:48:00.49] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[00:48:01.29] [LAUGHTER]

[00:48:02.04] Say something to me. And he said, Gordon, Balton trained me. He said, if he says you did something wrong--

[00:48:12.09] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You did something wrong.

[00:48:12.76] MONROE BALTON: --best believe you did something wrong. Because he wouldn't let me do anything wrong.

[00:48:18.96] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:48:20.04] MONROE BALTON: So hey.

[00:48:23.50] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Take note of this, young man.

[00:48:25.24] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. It was-- ity was good.

[00:48:26.71] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Would you describe for our audience what's a Peter Pilot?

[00:48:32.35] MONROE BALTON: A Peter Pilot is the guy in the right seat. His only job is to fly the airplane.

[00:48:37.54] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Right. Aircraft commander's always in the left seat.

[00:48:41.46] MONROE BALTON: Aircraft commander is normally in the left seat. He's running the radios, running the mission--

[00:48:47.98] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And the guy over here is junior, and he's flying the bird.

[00:48:51.79] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. He's a newbie. He's a new guy.

[00:48:54.19] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Taxi driver.

[00:48:54.76] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, he's a new guy who doesn't have enough experience to be AC. And his job is strictly to fly the airplane and when called upon to shoot the rockets. That's the Peter Pilot.

[00:49:18.28] MONROE BALTON: Ooh, the worst day. That could be one of two instances-- the night I had to spend sleeping in a hut on the Laotian border. No-- the Cav was moving south of Pleiku. A gunship from one of the lift companies had been assigned convoy cover. Convoy is moving south of Pleiku, headed south.

[00:49:58.33] The gunship gets shot down. I don't know whether the pilots were all killed or the crew of the aircraft were killed, but we were sent out with a demolitions unit to blow up the helicopter, to keep the Cong from getting the guns and the radios. We go out. I'm flying with, I think it was Alan Clinker.

[00:50:30.92] We got the demolition guys in the back, and the crew chief, and door gunner. As we approach the site of the wreck, it's in a very narrow spot on the highway, on Highway 1-- not highway 1, the highway out of Pleiku. I forget the number.

[00:50:55.42] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: 19.

[00:50:56.44] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, Highway 19. You know the geography.

[00:51:00.43] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: I've been there before.

[00:51:06.01] MONROE BALTON: I land on the road to let the demo guys out, and I said, what we're going to do, we're going to take off and fly cover while you plant your explosives. And we'll land, and pick you up, and take off. Well, while we were flying cover overhead, a storm moved in.

[00:51:32.35] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Uh-oh.

[00:51:34.22] MONROE BALTON: And it began-- I mean, just raining really heavy. We land on the road anyway, because we couldn't leave the guys down there.

[00:51:45.50] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: No, no.

[00:51:46.64] MONROE BALTON: And we sit there for a few minutes and say, OK, who's going to do this instrument take off. And I said, well-- Clinker was in the right seat. I'm, again, flying AC in the left seat. And Clinker said, man, I don't have the skills to do this. I said, well you got a tactical instrument ticket. He said, yeah, but, you know, that's really not-- that's not a real--

[00:52:16.75] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: That's nothing.

[00:52:17.05] MONROE BALTON: --that's not a real instrument ticket. I said, OK, what are we going to do? We going to sit here and wait for the Viet Cong to come blow us up? And he says, no. Let's wait until the rain lets up just a little bit. I said, we don't have time for that. I said, I'll do it.

[00:52:35.98] Now, I don't know if you've been in a Huey. I'm sure you have. But the left seat, the artificial horizon is about this big. The artificial horizon in front of the right seat pilot is about this big. And your movements-- it's easier to fly with the big artificial horizon, because it doesn't move as quickly as the little bitty one.

[00:53:02.37] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:53:03.76] MONROE BALTON: So I said, hey, look, I'll do it. I'm not going to sit here and wait for these guys to come blow us up. He said, all right. So I roll her, I pull up on the collective, push forward on the cyclic, get her up on the nose, and we start rising. And then Clinker comes on, OK, I got it.

[00:53:27.84] I said, the hell you do. I'm making this instrument take off. We're going to finish it. I knew there was a ridgeline to our left and there's rubber trees and forest to our right. And I--

[00:53:48.17] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Only way to go is straight up.

[00:53:49.90] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. So we just went down the road, took off, got our transitional lift, started a left turn, come back around. I said, now, remember, there's a ridgeline over there. You can't make it too wide a turn, and you got to keep climbing.

[00:54:10.15] We made it. Clearly, because I'm here.

[00:54:13.42] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Picked up your bombers.

[00:54:14.98] MONROE BALTON: Oh yeah, they were on when--

[00:54:16.42] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: They we already on board.

[00:54:17.55] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, we had landed and picked them up. And they were sitting there listening to our discussion.

[00:54:23.68] [LAUGHTER]

[00:54:24.52] Well, we managed to get airborne and we made it to Pleiku and spent the night at Pleiku. And I had a coatimundi as a bunkmate, a little chipmunk-looking thing. That was probably-- that night caused me the most consternation that I can recall. Because, I mean, it was-- hey, we could have died.

[00:54:55.62] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:55:02.28] MONROE BALTON: We had significant contact with the White Horse Division of South Korea. They had an installation near Qui Nhon. And I did some horse trading with them. As I said, when Jesse rotated, I took him back to An Khe to package things and to turn in his weapon. So when he turned in his .45--

[00:55:35.17] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You got it.

[00:55:35.95] MONROE BALTON: I got the .45. Even though the gunnery sergeant or the sergeant major who was running the show there and in the arms room didn't want to give it to me. He said, ah, hell with it. Take it.

[00:55:50.23] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Take the damn thing.

[00:55:50.98] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. Well, I went to the Koreans, because the Koreans were still using Korean War weapons. I wanted a grease gun, because grease guns used the same ammo as the .45.

[00:56:08.56] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:56:09.58] MONROE BALTON: That way I could carry one kind of ammo.

[00:56:13.03] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: One round.

[00:56:13.54] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. And it could use it in either weapon. And they had a really, really nice setup. They were built back up in the trees on this mountainside that-- it looked like it was an old hunting lodge or something, because it obviously was not built by the Koreans, because it was too old.

[00:56:41.90] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Built by the French.

[00:56:43.42] MONROE BALTON: It could have been built by the French, but I suspect that it was probably built by the Vietnamese for their royalty as a hunting--

[00:56:54.40] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Where was this?

[00:56:55.42] MONROE BALTON: It was just-- it was between Qui Nhon and An Khe on the south side of that highway that ran between-- I guess it was 19.

[00:57:08.02] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: 19.

[00:57:08.72] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. That runs-- that ran--

[00:57:10.79] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Ran all the way to Pleiku.

[00:57:12.20] MONROE BALTON: All the way to Pleiku, yeah. And then, occasionally we would see them down in Happy Valley. We covered some of their ground operations, provided air support. We worked with the ARVN who were flying the A-1Es, because they could carry a lot of ammo. And occasionally we'd be called up for the same mission to support the same troops, and there were a couple of guys that trained with us at Rucker-- at Wolters and Rucker. And instead of being assigned to fly helicopters when they got back to Vietnam, they put them in A-1Es.

[00:58:07.48] [LAUGHTER]

[00:58:09.30] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: I love that plane.

[00:58:10.62] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. It was a beautiful airplane.

[00:58:12.33] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Beautiful airplane.

[00:58:14.49] MONROE BALTON: And the only contact we had with the Aussies was trying to stay out of the way of the Canberras when they were flying in the area, because they fly low and slow. And again, close air support, and oftentimes they'd come barreling in and not check to see if anybody else is in the area.

[00:58:36.15] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And didn't care.

[00:58:37.81] MONROE BALTON: No. And, you know, that was one of my real big beefs about the whole set up is that Air Force couldn't talk to Army, Army couldn't talk to any of the other-- we could talk to the Koreans. We couldn't talk to the Aussies.

[00:58:58.68] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Or the ARVN.

[00:59:00.65] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, true. ARVN.

[00:59:04.76] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Did you have to buy your own extra bullets?

[00:59:08.70] MONROE BALTON: You traded for them.

[00:59:09.84] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Oh.

[00:59:10.72] [LAUGHTER]

[00:59:12.01] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, you traded for bullets.

[00:59:13.71] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:59:15.58] MONROE BALTON: Because you take a bottle of Chivas Regal or a bottle of Jim Beam or Jack Daniels--

[00:59:23.91] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You could get most anything you wanted.

[00:59:25.96] MONROE BALTON: Yep.

[00:59:31.20] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: What were your impressions of the Vietnamese people you had anything to do with? Villagers, town people, or South Vietnamese?

[00:59:40.74] MONROE BALTON: I loved the kids. The kids were all right. They'd come over and they'd want to play. They'd ask you about the airplane. Personally, I never called them by any of the pejoratives that I heard some of my fellow Americans use, because, I said, you know, we're a guest in their country.

[01:00:08.15] I always tried to treat them with respect and courtesy. Tried never to lose my temper with any of them, although I always took precautions. You never let them get too close to the aircraft, especially to the side where the fuel tank access was, because there were stories we were getting through the rumor mill about people dropping hand grenades in the fuel tanks with rubber bands wrapped around the handle.

[01:00:43.09] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:00:43.75] MONROE BALTON: Pull the pin, wrap the rubber band around the handle, drop it in the tank--

[01:00:46.99] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Melt's it.

[01:00:48.22] MONROE BALTON: It melts the rubber band, and boom. So I treated them with respect, but I kept them at a distance.

[01:01:03.61] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Back home there's starting to be some tensions and social, racial, antiwar protests. Does any of that come over to where you are?

[01:01:17.02] MONROE BALTON: Only by virtue of Stars and Stripes and letters from home from people who were ill advised to tell their loved ones in the war zone about what's going on. Because the last thing we want to hear about is people who are calling us baby killers and what have you.

[01:01:38.68] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:01:39.55] MONROE BALTON: And what you desire most is support.

[01:01:44.56] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:01:45.46] MONROE BALTON: And I'd say-- my father had died just right after I graduated high school, so I only had my mother and my brothers. And they all communicated with me. My mother would send over care packages that I could share with the guys. It was-- and you know, we got the information on the Stars and Stripes and over Armed Forces Radio.

[01:02:17.06] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Right.

[01:02:17.45] MONROE BALTON: So they kept us up with what was going on, but it wasn't emphasized.

[01:02:22.02] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You didn't let it bother you too much.

[01:02:25.44] MONROE BALTON: Couldn't.

[01:02:25.72] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Couldn't.

[01:02:26.48] MONROE BALTON: Because I got to-- you had to focus. Because if you didn't focus, you could die.

[01:02:30.50] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:02:31.73] MONROE BALTON: I got tapes from my mother and brothers, some friends, one aunt. My aunt Margie, who lived in Houston, she would write on a regular basis. I wrote all my aunts and uncles. My mother had six brothers and sisters-- well, six brothers and one sister-- and the only one I heard from was the wife of one of her brothers. And that kind of ticked me off, but I said, you know, they're busy people.

[01:03:08.90] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Busy.

[01:03:09.44] MONROE BALTON: Got lives to live. And Aunt Margie was-- she was a kind-hearted soul. She was one of my favorite people. We got Time magazine, and Newsweek, and all the others. So you could see all the stuff that was going. We knew about the demonstrations, and what have you, and that there were people who were totally against the war.

[01:03:33.61] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Just didn't let it affect you.

[01:03:36.68] MONROE BALTON: You can't. I mean, you have to take a mindset when you get in a situation like that. The only thing that's important is that you get the job done and you stay alive.

[01:03:49.76] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:03:51.26] MONROE BALTON: And that was-- the last thing my brother told me when he took me to the airport is don't be no hero. So I said-- I took that to heart.

[01:03:59.93] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:04:06.60] MONROE BALTON: Ah, going home was fun. Herb and I left on the same airplane. It was really funny. In the year I was in Vietnam I smoked one carton of cigarettes. The last day-- we left Vietnam out of Saigon. We flew down to Saigon, got put on an airplane there, and I had a pack of cigarettes in my shirt pocket.

[01:04:42.78] And we had changed all our money, and one of the skycaps was trying to help me with my baggage. So I said, yeah, go ahead. Take it. And he took it out to the airplane for me, and the guys turned around and were laughing at me. I said, how are you going to pay him? You can't give him greenbacks.

[01:05:03.78] I said, true. I said, I don't need these anymore. I gave him-- I had smoked two cigarettes out of the pack. I gave him 18 cigarettes. That was probably worth a month of income for him.

[01:05:15.51] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: I bet it was. Yeah.

[01:05:17.04] MONROE BALTON: But when I got-- oh, I was one of the few people who thought to bring a jacket, because I asked what route the flight was taking to get back to the States.

[01:05:30.66] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Alaska.

[01:05:31.75] MONROE BALTON: We came through Anchorage.

[01:05:33.15] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:05:33.99] MONROE BALTON: And when we got off, we had to go through customs in Anchorage. And so that means you had to get off the airplane on the tarmac in Anchorage in May--

[01:05:42.81] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And walk through the snow.

[01:05:43.92] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. And I was the only one of the few that had a jacket. We get to Travis, we share a limo into town, I exit the limo at the downtown bus station, and I had a cousin that lived in Daly City-- in South San Francisco-- south San Francisco. And I get a cab to go to her house.

[01:06:20.34] And when I get in the cab, I'm really jovial. I mean, I'm in a good mood. I've made it back. I kissed the tarmac at Travis.

[01:06:34.00] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And you're alive.

[01:06:35.89] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. And this guy-- I'm in uniform, and the taxi driver says, oh, you one of them baby killers coming back from the war. I said, hey, man, you can't mess with my day. I said, no, I ain't killed no babies. I don't know if I killed anyone at all. But I was asked to do a job, and that's what I did.

[01:06:59.04] So I'm asking you just to take me to this house in south San Francisco--

[01:07:03.24] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And shut the hell up.

[01:07:04.29] MONROE BALTON: --and shut the hell up.

[01:07:05.67] [LAUGHTER]

[01:07:07.35] I spent the next week or so in the Bay area, hanging out with one of my childhood friends. He was a member of the Oakland Police Department, and we went through-- in fact, the day I called and went to his house to surprise him-- his wife worked for AT&T, the telephone company. And he had called me on the field phone in Vietnam from his home in Oakland. Somehow they got the connection hooked up.

[01:07:46.39] So I said, I'm going to surprise him. I showed up at his door. He had taken the day off. His daughter was three weeks old, and we sat down.

[01:07:58.70] He had gone to get diapers and stuff for his wife. When he came back, he saw the rental car in the driveway, and came in. And he said, I thought maybe you were somebody from OPD. I said, no, man, it's just me. He said, well, I got a bottle of Jack Daniels I've been saving. And we sat down we drank bourbon for--

[01:08:23.76] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: A few hours.

[01:08:24.82] MONROE BALTON: --a few hours, and just talked about life and how good it felt to be home. I had 30 days annual leave stateside, and then I had to head-- I went back to Wichita, visited family and relatives there, went down to Louisiana to visit my aunt. I went to Texas to visit Aunt Margie. And then I took off for New Jersey to catch a flight to Germany.

[01:08:58.26] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Germany.

[01:08:58.90] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[01:08:59.13] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You're going to do 30 months over there.

[01:09:01.05] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[01:09:01.77] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah. Now, you just served the one tour.

[01:09:06.38] MONROE BALTON: Just one tour. Now, that was interesting, how I got-- what I did after Vietnam. I was assigned to Fort Wolters initially, and I was assigned a sponsor at Fort Wolters. I guess they were going to have me teach flying. But I contacted my sponsor and explained my circumstances-- number one, by that time I had been promoted to captain. So I said, I'm a captain, African-American, and I don't want to drive 100 miles a day to go to work for the Army.

[01:09:49.92] And he said, so find me a place-- I understood then that there was no on-base housing for single officers. Because at that time they had ramped up the training. They were turning out 600-700 pilots a month. So he wrote me back and says, I've checked. The closest place I can find for you to live is Fort Worth, Texas.

[01:10:15.33] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Good God.

[01:10:17.11] MONROE BALTON: Which was 100 miles. I mean, back and forth would be 100 miles to get to and from work. So I wrote the Pentagon and said, I know you want me-- you apparently don't want me. I had applied for an inter-theater transfer to Germany. They turned that down, and that's when they assigned me to Wolters.

[01:10:39.76] So I said, I understand that there's no job for me in Germany. I said, but you can send me to-- there must be half a dozen other posts in the United States that need a helicopter pilot. And send me someplace else. I'll go to Rucker. I'll go to Fort Stewart. I'll go to Bragg.

[01:11:01.68]

[01:11:02.58] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, any place. They wrote me back and said-- and I just told the guy. I said, when I wrote the person at the Pentagon in my branch, I said, I don't want to have to drive 100 miles a day to go to work for the Army.

[01:11:19.53] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:11:20.52] MONROE BALTON: Unless you're going to pay me. And they wrote me back and said, well, a position has become available in the Federal Republic of Germany. Would you consider accepting an assignment there? I said--

[01:11:34.32] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah, damn right.

[01:11:34.65] MONROE BALTON: --sure. So I spent the next 30 months, after spending a month on annual leave when I got back to the States, I spent the next 30 months in Europe.

[01:11:47.98] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: In Europe. Finish your obligation?

[01:11:51.82] MONROE BALTON: Well, I still had a year or two reserve requirement. But when I got out they put me in an inactive reserve. I didn't do any National Guard time or active reserve time. I went to law school.

[01:12:08.23] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You went to law school.

[01:12:09.45] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[01:12:10.68] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: When you got out of the active duty.

[01:12:13.38] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. Well, I got-- when I signed off active-- they let me off active duty. One of the things was the catch for my re-applying under the regulations, I was designated an obligated volunteer, which means I had no termination date, no release date. I had to apply for a release from active duty.

[01:12:39.39] I applied in '69. They turned me down and told me I had to serve at least 30 months in Europe. So I said, well, that means I can expect reassignment to Vietnam. They said,

no, it's a catch-22. We're keeping you there because you're critical MOS. We need pilots in Germany.

[01:13:02.73] That's the reason we we're giving you for turning down your request for release. If we reassign you to Vietnam, then we no longer need you-- the reason we're keeping you on active duty is no longer valid. Therefore, we have to let you go.

[01:13:20.76] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Turn you loose.

[01:13:21.06] MONROE BALTON: Yeah. So they said, you can count on staying in Germany for another year. That was in the summer of '69. And so when I got off active duty in June of '69-- excuse me, '70-- June of '70-- 1st of June, 1970, I signed off active duty. I took a Volkswagen camper bus and toured Europe. I shipped my car home. After I finished my little vacation in Europe, I sold the Volkswagen bus, caught a flight back to the States.

[01:14:03.05] I had shipped a motorcycle as well to New York. I picked up the motorcycle and rode the motorcycle to Wichita. It took me three days. Didn't encounter any rain. It was like in September too, which is unusual.

[01:14:20.42] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:14:21.35] MONROE BALTON: But I was in Wichita for two years. I started law school at Rutgers University in Newark, New Jersey in September of '72.

[01:14:35.12] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Did you have difficulty readjusting to life after combat.

[01:14:41.67] MONROE BALTON: Probably less difficulty because I was still in the military environment. Less difficulty than people who came back and went directly back to civilian life. Because when I got out of the service 30 months later, I had more difficulty then than I did when I came back from Vietnam, because I had been away from the United States for basically almost four years. A year in Vietnam, almost three years in Europe, with only 30 days annual leave.

[01:15:18.30] The whole time I was in Europe, I did not come back to the States for a holiday or annual leave. I took all my leave in Europe.

[01:15:26.94] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: So it's almost a different country--

[01:15:28.59] MONROE BALTON: Yeah, it was very much a different place. And I came back after all the big riots in the big cities had taken place. Newark, Detroit-- I knew all those things had happened, and in fact they were topics of discussion with my contemporaries when I was in Germany, guys who were officers and who were casting aspersions on the individuals who were demonstrating. I said, hey, look, man, we just fought a war to secure these kinds of rights for the people we represent.

[01:16:14.49] I said, they have just as much right to demonstrate and try to direct the government in the direction they think proper, just as much as anyone else. And I said, we fought a war defending that right. Some of them agreed, some didn't. But that's the way it goes.

[01:16:49.69] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: It is the way it goes.

[01:16:59.21] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: How did your Vietnam experience change you and affect your life afterward for good or for less good?

[01:17:11.85] MONROE BALTON: It made me more secure in my self-confidence. I knew that if I could do the things I did there I could do almost anything I wanted to. It encouraged me to continue my education. One of the things that I sort of focused on was that life has stages, and the military stage was over for me, because I didn't plan-- it wasn't in my plans to seek out National Guard or reserve responsibilities. I wanted to go back to school.

[01:18:09.09] But I also wanted to get my feet back on the ground before going back to school. So when I got out of the service, I went back to Wichita. And somebody approached me with the possibility of running what in those days was called a model cities project. Wichita had gotten money from the feds to do all kinds of socioeconomic things to improve the plight of the downtrodden in Wichita. And one of the things that they focused on was rehabilitating ex-convicts, because there was no established pattern for them to re-enter society.

[01:19:01.50] So one of the projects-- well, the project I was hired to manage-- was a halfway house and residential home for ex-cons and male juvenile delinquents. And I had never had any experience doing that kind of thing, but my experience in the military said, well--

[01:19:29.12] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Heck, if you can run a platoon, you could run anything.

[01:19:32.15] MONROE BALTON: You can do anything. And I said, OK. And I did it from scratch. I hired all the people, I wrote all the programs-- at least the initial programs-- I did the arguing before the state government to get money from the state to do these kinds of things, and to get the whole program established. And I did that for a year and a half, two years, because I didn't start law school until the fall of '72. But when I left, it was an ongoing program. It lasted for several more years, and it was quite successful.

[01:20:26.22] MONROE BALTON: I was there-- oh, when was it. '84.

[01:20:34.86] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: When they built it.

[01:20:35.93] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[01:20:36.41] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:20:38.22] MONROE BALTON: I was there when they had-- when they had the opening, when it was officially unveiled. I didn't attend the unveiling ceremony, but I came later that day,

and I checked to see if my friend's names-- there were only a couple of guys I knew who had died in Vietnam, and I found them.

[01:21:04.80] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:21:05.61] MONROE BALTON: It was a very gut wrenching experience. I mean, even for an old, callous soul like me, it was very moving and very appropriate. I mean, I think it's a beautiful memorial.

[01:21:25.99] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:21:26.68] MONROE BALTON: Yeah.

[01:21:29.24] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: What year did you come back to the States from Vietnam? Your end of tour?

[01:21:34.93] MONROE BALTON: Late '67.

[01:21:36.31] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: '67, that's what I thought.

[01:21:44.45] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: You've heard about the 50th anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration. You're part of it here today. What do you think of that?

[01:21:56.18] MONROE BALTON: I think it's appropriate. I think we should honor the guys who served there. I think to a great extent we didn't get the same kind of treatment as the guys who came back from Iraq or who come home from Afghanistan. There was less appreciation of what we did.

[01:22:20.07] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Sure as hell was.

[01:22:22.96] MONROE BALTON: And less appreciation of the sacrifices we made.

[01:22:29.64] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And if we don't get it, capture the stories now, they going to be gone in 10 years.

[01:22:35.18] MONROE BALTON: Because for many years I didn't talk about my experiences there. Until when I moved to San Francisco in 1980, there was a guy, a native German. He ran a court reporting service. And I met him when I was an administrative judge and I had to use his services.

[01:23:07.22] And he said, why don't you come by the house sometime. We'll just sit and have a drink. And he started drawing me out and getting me to talk about my experiences there. And it was really helpful. And didn't realize that I was suffering from PTSD at the time, because I could get awfully angry awfully quick. But because of my position, I managed to hold it in and not get too overt about it.

[01:23:49.55] But years later, like two years ago, a young lady I was dating, when she found out I had PTSD, she cut it off. She says, no more of that. You people are dangerous. I said OK, whatever.

[01:24:16.14] And I'd known her-- we went to Paris in 2001, right after the 9/11 tragedy. We went to Paris that year for New Year's Eve. And the whole time we had been dating, she recalled one time when I raised my voice at her, and it was because we disagreed over who decided on the color of one wall in my dining room.

[01:24:44.74] [LAUGHTER]

[01:24:46.58] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: And that's enough to break it off, huh?

[01:24:48.64] MONROE BALTON: And she said, you screamed at me. You yelled at me. I said, oh, come on. But anyway. It was a good experience. I don't regret it at all. In fact, I think the military is-- some people need it.

[01:25:10.38] MONROE WALTON: Wow.

[01:25:11.07] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Come on up, if you can stand up. If either one of us can stand up. It's snap, crackle, and pop. And that ain't your breakfast cereal neither.

[01:25:23.88] MONROE BALTON: You said it.

[01:25:24.69] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: There you are, my friend.

[01:25:25.86] MONROE BALTON: Thank you.

[01:25:26.34] JOSEPH GALLOWAY: Thank you for coming in and telling your story.

[01:25:28.74] MONROE BALTON: My pleasure. My pleasure.