

Bleier, Robert US Army

[00:00:16.97] ROCKY BLEIER: I was born in Appleton, Wisconsin back in 1946.

[00:00:21.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Good year.

[00:00:22.43] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah.

[00:00:23.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were your family members?

[00:00:25.47] ROCKY BLEIER: So my family-- so my dad was a Robert Bleier, and my mother was Ellen Grandpre, who came from Minnesota. And so at the age of 18, she left the farm-- you know, had to get off the farm-- and went over to-- and got a job in Neenah, Wisconsin, which happens to be a neighboring city of Appleton, Wisconsin, up in the Fox Cities. They dated. They were working in the same offices, and so they dated, although he had to travel by bus to pick her up and then drop her off and go back home to date her.

[00:01:08.05] So anyway, so they got married. In 1945, my father left the company and decided to open his own place of business, which happens to be a tavern in Appleton, Wisconsin. So it was on the corner of Walnut and Lawrence in Appleton, Wisconsin, right across from the brewery, catty-corner from St. Joe's Catholic Church, one block from down Main Street. And it was an old inn at the turn of the century.

[00:01:41.44] So I've got some pictures of it from 1912, but actually this is 1945 now. And so they had, at that time, men who were working in the factories that-- or rented a room above the bar. And so when I grew up early-- so I grew up with gentlemen that were a part of our family that had rooms down the hall from my room, which was upstairs at the time. And so there was actually four--

[00:02:15.60] JOE GALLOWAY: So your family lived above the bar.

[00:02:17.25] ROCKY BLEIER: Well, they lived behind it. And then by 1957, they remodeled the bar, and then we moved and made an apartment upstairs. And the renters were asked to leave. And so--

[00:02:31.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Exiled.

[00:02:32.05] ROCKY BLEIER: They exiled and found rooms someplace else. And so that was my upbringing. So I grew up in that atmosphere.

[00:02:40.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Brothers and sisters?

[00:02:41.61] ROCKY BLEIER: Brothers-- so I was the oldest, and I have a sister that came along-- Patricia-- Pat-- and then my brother Dan, and then my younger sister, Pamela.

[00:02:54.60] JOE GALLOWAY: All right. And Appleton is your hometown? That's where you went to school.

[00:03:00.51] ROCKY BLEIER: So Appleton was the hometown. Went to St. Joe's Catholic grade school at that time from first grade up through eighth grade. So this was right then at the time the baby boomers were coming on to their own. So schools are starting to be built because they had to educate these young people that are coming up.

[00:03:21.12] So they built a brand new Catholic high school in Appleton called Xavier High School. And so it opened in '59, and then I was there as a freshman in '60 and went through '64 as my siblings went through that high school. And they developed whole new Catholic conferences. Catholic schools were then popping up around that area. And so it was a legacy that we'll talk about later, that eventually evolved from that school.

[00:04:00.94] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you enter the US Army? By invitation?

[00:04:05.88] ROCKY BLEIER: By invitation, like the majority of those who served during the Vietnam War. And so my invitation came after my college career. So after high school, after Xavier High School, I got a football scholarship and went to the University of Notre Dame. So from 1964 until I graduated in 1968, I was playing football at the University of Notre Dame under the famed head coach Ara Parseghian.

[00:04:37.16] My junior year, we won the national championship, which put us on the map, as Ara turned that program around. And so we graduated, as I said, in 1968, and I got drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers. So I was a very highly touted 16th round draft choice, but as I told people, I said, fortunately, you have to understand there were 17 rounds. At least I was not the last guy picked. I felt pretty good. I was not the last guy.

[00:05:08.72] For some reason that Heaven knows, I got a chance, and I made the team. And so I played. I already started that season. OK, so in the back of my mind, obviously, like everybody else, was this overhanging draft. You know, Vietnam War was going on. Some buddies from high school, who, after high school, either enlisted-- some dropped out of college and then were drafted and went over there and were there previously.

[00:05:43.87] OK, now, you have to understand from my perspective is that what I viewed was this: following the Green Bay Packers, during those years of Lombardi coming in-- the early years-- and they started to win, and so on and so on. Obviously they became big news-- all about the players as well. Well, Vietnam was still going on, but I saw all the players be put into Reserve units or National Guard.

[00:06:20.21] And all of a sudden, you don't pay much attention to it except for the fact that you go, oh, I guess this is the policy. You make the NFL, and they get you in the Reserves.

[00:06:31.61] JOE GALLOWAY: You get a slide.

[00:06:32.83] ROCKY BLEIER: They let you slide because you're playing, because they know people, they know how to get you in, and so on and so on. Well, obviously, that was my thought, and I suppose the happiest day of my life, as I reflect back on it, was the last day of training camp or towards the end of training camp. Bill Austin was our head coach.

[00:06:51.14] After a meeting, he pulls me aside. He said, listen, we got this letter in the mail, and it was opened accidentally. And he said, don't worry. We'll take care of this for you. We think you're good enough to make the team. We'll take care of you. It was my 1-A classification. So now I was back into the system. Oh my god. I'm going to make the team, and they're going to take care of this.

[00:07:18.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Make another team.

[00:07:19.51] ROCKY BLEIER: And make another team. So things were moving along well until October came, and, you know, I hadn't heard anything, and so I checked in with the office-- have you heard anything about taking care of this obligation? Now, don't worry. Said, don't worry. We talked to your draft board, and they're not drafting. This was back in Appleton. My draft board was back in Appleton. They're not drafting until at the end of the year.

[00:07:51.44] So I thought, oh, they talked to my draft board, which meant it's like, well, you are now on the list somewhere along the way. And so I hadn't heard, I hadn't heard, and then all of a sudden, it was like, OK, maybe I better transfer draft boards, which takes like 30 days. And so I drafted--

[00:08:15.73] So to make a long story short, by December 2, I'm at practice. I'm at old Pitt Stadium, sitting in front of my locker, when all of a sudden, one of the equipment guys says, hey, Bleier, there's a letter over here for you. So in the locker room, there's a table where all the fan mail goes.

[00:08:40.95] Well, it's a place I'd never visited from my first day of training camp up to the last-- not when you're the 417th person picked in the draft playing on a losing team. I mean, nobody knows you exist. So I finally got over there, went through the mail, picked it up, unfolded it, and it said, greetings.

[00:08:59.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Your friends and neighbors.

[00:09:01.98] ROCKY BLEIER: We'd like to inform you that you've been inducted into the armed services-- [GASPS] of our country-- and to report tomorrow morning at 7:00 AM to be inducted. Oh. I go, you're kidding me. I thought we had a week to help get your personal-- tomorrow morning. So it was postdated. By the time I got it, it was postdated-- I gotta go.

[00:09:28.04] Well, I went to see the powers that be. So we went down to the AFI station, and the next morning-- or that afternoon, I went to say, OK, fine. Well, there's nothing anybody could do, obviously. And so then I went down to be inducted. So they said, OK, we can do this-- we can hold you for 24 hours. Get everything in order, OK, because you are going to go.

[00:09:57.46] Yeah, so the next day, I was on the plane, flying down to Fort Jackson, South Carolina, where it was--

[00:10:07.87] JOE GALLOWAY: For basic training.

[00:10:08.68] ROCKY BLEIER: No, I went just to process in, then I went down to Fort Gordon, Georgia and put my basic training into Fort Gordon, Georgia and put my advanced infantry training into Fort Gordon, Georgia. And I got my orders to report to San Francisco in two weeks.

[00:10:26.68] JOE GALLOWAY: To Vietnam.

[00:10:27.52] ROCKY BLEIER: To Vietnam. So that's how I got inducted.

[00:10:32.32] JOE GALLOWAY: They certainly took care of your file.

[00:10:35.02] ROCKY BLEIER: They sure did. [LAUGHS]

[00:10:39.61] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your thoughts about this?

[00:10:43.43] ROCKY BLEIER: Well, you know, my thought-- I suppose my thoughts at that time were it was just a defensive reaction, you know. It was, OK, there was nothing I could do. Our options at that time-- our options, meaning anybody's options-- were you could leave the country, OK. And you weren't going to do that.

[00:11:03.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Because you weren't a hockey player.

[00:11:05.24] ROCKY BLEIER: [LAUGHS]

[00:11:07.40] Or you could not report. I mean, you could not report and, ultimately, they'd prosecute you, put you in jail.

[00:11:13.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Put you in Leavenworth.

[00:11:16.48] ROCKY BLEIER: No, I wasn't going to do that. You can become a conscientious objector. That wasn't my makeup. That wasn't me. I could enlist. That was another thing, you know. You could enlist, go to the Navy, go to whatever it is. You can not be an infantry guy.

[00:11:37.93] JOE GALLOWAY: That was three years.

[00:11:38.71] ROCKY BLEIER: No, that was four years. Four years-- I'm going, oh, no, I have things to do. That's too long. At least being drafted is only two years at that time-- six years in the Reserve thereafter. So I said, well, I'm going.

[00:11:53.68] JOE GALLOWAY: You're going.

[00:11:55.63] ROCKY BLEIER: And so you kind of just get on automatic. And here you are.

[00:12:06.38] JOE GALLOWAY: You land where?

[00:12:07.61] ROCKY BLEIER: I land in Saigon.

[00:12:09.29] JOE GALLOWAY: In Saigon.

[00:12:09.91] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah. Eventually, we landed in Saigon. And so-- OK, so here's my thing. I didn't know anything about Vietnam. I didn't know anything about what was taking place except for those stories that you would read about or hearsay when you were in training and so on. And it wasn't as if there was a experienced, enlisted, or-- coming back and saying, yeah, I spent three tours over there-- this is what you're going to be-- no, you didn't--

[00:12:44.95] JOE GALLOWAY: You didn't get that.

[00:12:45.79] ROCKY BLEIER: You didn't get to that kind of--

[00:12:47.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Not even in advanced infantry.

[00:12:49.63] ROCKY BLEIER: Not even in advanced, you know. And so a lot of the techniques you were learning was what we-- came from Korea, in fighting that kind of a jungle warfare in Korea-- kind of techniques where we had to-- but yeah, you still weren't prepared. But you did hear-- I mean, you'd hear stories on television, or you'd read stories about what took place.

[00:13:10.63] And I'm flying into Saigon. So you flew in to Saigon. I didn't know whether they were bombing the runway or you're under harm's way as soon as you get off that plane. And there was 150, 200 of us, maybe more, pushed in this plane, your duffel bag underneath your feet. And you're sitting shoulder to shoulder. But anyway, so you get off, and you get onto a bus. You get onto a bus, and the bus has got--

[00:13:41.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Bars.

[00:13:42.07] ROCKY BLEIER: --bars on it. You got wire in it so that you can't throw grenades inside. And you hear those stories. This is what-- oh, and it was dark at night, and you land, and you get to where you're processed in and processed--

[00:13:55.62] JOE GALLOWAY: They send you to a repo depot.

[00:13:58.09] ROCKY BLEIER: Right. Very much so.

[00:13:59.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Where were you assigned?

[00:14:01.33] ROCKY BLEIER: I'm going up to the Americal Division-- 196th Brigade.

[00:14:06.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Light infantry.

[00:14:08.33] ROCKY BLEIER: 4th of the 31st-- Charlie Company. OK, so I--

[00:14:15.38] JOE GALLOWAY: At least you know where you're going.

[00:14:16.73] ROCKY BLEIER: That's right. So I'm flying up to Chu Lai. So I get to the Americal Division-- boom-- they get me, and they process me, then they put me-- they go, OK, fine. You're going to 4th the 31st. Today, you're going to Charlie Company. OK, I got that. So I was there maybe, I don't know, four or five days, a week, before they--

[00:14:34.25] so I fly out into the field. I have no idea. I fly out and get a helicopter, and I land. They drop me off on LZ West.

[00:14:43.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Drop you in the jungle.

[00:14:46.25] ROCKY BLEIER: They drop me on top of this landing zone-- boom-- jump off. And so I meet the guy who-- I met the sergeant-- whoever's there. I said, OK, fine. Now, my unit is not there. They are coming up out of the field. They've been in the field for 10 days as we rotate in and up and then around.

[00:15:10.46] And so I meet them coming up. And I thought to myself, oh my god-- I mean, they walked up--

[00:15:21.59] JOE GALLOWAY: A little rough around the edges?

[00:15:23.56] ROCKY BLEIER: They were just-- it would look like they were-- they had that 1,000-yard stare. They were coming up. They were muddy and dirty and sweaty, and nobody shaved. It was, to some degree, like the war movies I remember watching from World War II as a kid growing up. And I'm going, oh, this is like the reality of-- and they all looked like they were 20 or 30 years old, when they were only 18 or 19 at the time.

[00:15:55.22] You go, oh, man. So that was it. I met my commanding officer, Captain Tom Murphy, at the time. And so I met the first sergeant-- boom, boom, boom-- put me in the platoon, put me in the squad. And so I was with 1st Platoon. I was in the 1st Squad with Charlie Company. So that was my introduction to Vietnam.

[00:16:24.50] ROCKY BLEIER: So the interesting thing throughout that whole period of time is I was the first new guy to come into this unit, like in three months. And so I was the new guy. And so, where am I going? So I'm a regular, pretty fresh guy, coming in-- pretty good shape. And so they go, OK, fine. Well, what are we going to do with him? Well, I don't know.

[00:16:50.93] Well, should he carry the M60? I mean, should we give him, you know, the machine gun? No, no, no. They said, what we need is, oh, OK, we'll make you a grenadier. So they go, oh, OK, well.

[00:17:03.22] JOE GALLOWAY: M79.

[00:17:03.68] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, M79, the old M79-- break it. And the 60 rounds of grenades that you have to carry with you. 60 rounds-- you got to think about that. That's 60 rounds. It's probably like 30, 40 pounds. Yeah, that's right. And plus, your own rucksack that you're carrying on top of that, plus all the water. You're going, oh. Yeah, that's right-- you're humping that stuff.

[00:17:29.33] JOE GALLOWAY: You're glad you're in good shape.

[00:17:30.70] ROCKY BLEIER: [LAUGHS] Thank god, you're able to do that. So I met my squad leader in the squad where I was. And the shame of it was this, it was that the only thing that we have in common is that experience, not that we grew up together, not that we know one another-- we were from all over this great country of ours.

[00:17:58.22] And so you got nicknames. And that's how you remember guys. You just remember them from their nickname, not where they're from or their real name or if they're married or some-- sometimes you might find out if they're married, if they get something from their wife or a care package of some nature-- nothing. So it was kind of disjointed, but yet the only thing that we had was that commonality of where we were.

[00:18:23.90] JOE GALLOWAY: The areas where you are.

[00:18:25.55] ROCKY BLEIER: Right.

[00:18:32.41] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like?

[00:18:34.87] ROCKY BLEIER: Well, there-- so the living conditions there at the time, when you're pulling bunker guard because that's what the infantry did when they're up in the LZ--

[00:18:42.44] JOE GALLOWAY: This is a fire base?

[00:18:44.05] ROCKY BLEIER: There was a fire base. Yeah, there was a fire base. So that's where all the heavy artillery is. Right. And so how it happened there-- and I'm sure that other people explained it-- so we had an area of operation-- the regiment did, and so-- or the battalion did. So we had four companies making up that battalion. So we worked out of LZ Siberia, which was north of us, and LZ West.

[00:19:12.31] So there was always two companies in the field, one on each of the landing zones to pull bunker guard during that period of time. So you'd rotate down, and then you'd rotate up, and then you'd rotate down, and then you'd rotate up.

[00:19:24.34] Now, when you're on the LZ, every day, a squad from your company then went off the LZ--

[00:19:34.72] JOE GALLOWAY: OP.

[00:19:35.80] ROCKY BLEIER: --down to an area-- and whatever we had to go and check and so on, just to make sure that things-- and then we'd come up that night. And all the next day, the next squad would go down. And we'd rotate. But at times-- oh my gosh-- you'd go down, and then you had to hump back up.

[00:19:58.00] Sometimes you were lucky, and you got a ride up with the helicopters, and that was pretty good. If they weren't in the area or they were busy and so on, now you've got to hump all the way back up. Oh my god, through the jungle and everything-- that's where you get to know about all the wait-a-minute vines, and elephant grass, leeches.

[00:20:15.94] JOE GALLOWAY: The little red ants.

[00:20:17.24] ROCKY BLEIER: The red ants would just eat you to death. And so that was kind of our routine. And so when we were in the field, we had a bigger area of operation, obviously, and so we'd get up in the morning, we'd go to a point that we need to cover, and we'd break kind of a day camp, OK, send out a squad from the day camp, come back, break, then go to another position for the evening, set up, and you'd set up your Claymores, and you'd set up your defensive positions for the night. Then you'd get up and you'd rotate, you do that through that whole period of time.

[00:20:53.80] JOE GALLOWAY: And this is what your life was going to be like for a year.

[00:20:57.46] ROCKY BLEIER: That's right. That's what it's going to be like, yeah.

[00:21:05.18] ROCKY BLEIER: So the guys I was with in my squad-- OK, so you get to know, and you get-- I thought that they were always-- they were good, stand-up guys. I mean, they were afraid, much like I was and everybody else that was there. You know, you'd share some of their letters when they'd get them, either from the girlfriends and so on. There weren't any-- at least in my group-- any screwups. There weren't any guys that were bagging it or any-- so here's one of the things--

[00:21:42.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Or stupid enough to get you killed.

[00:21:44.44] ROCKY BLEIER: Or stupid enough to get you killed. They were all pretty reasonable about their responsibility and having one's back and what needs to be done. So I remembered the first time-- I remember when I first got in. So one of the first questions I remember somebody asked me, hey, are you a head, or are you an alchie? So I had to kind of decipher what that mean-- meaning was I a head, was I a pot smoker, was I smoking marijuana? Was that my bent?

[00:22:18.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Or were you a juicer?

[00:22:19.13] ROCKY BLEIER: Or was I a juicer? Well, in my mind, I'm thinking, OK, yeah, let me see-- a nice martini, iced over. I guess I am a juicer. [LAUGHS] Anyway, but what the great thing about-- well, anyway, so the great thing about it was that juicing became warm beer--

if you liked warm beer-- oh my god-- or you'd get soda. So you'd get replenished with beer sometimes out there.

[00:22:48.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Old Milwaukee.

[00:22:49.59] ROCKY BLEIER: Old Milwaukee, my god. And warm, I couldn't stomach-- even though I grew up in a bar, I couldn't drink warm beer.

[00:23:01.30] JOE GALLOWAY: This is what year now?

[00:23:03.22] ROCKY BLEIER: This is 1969.

[00:23:05.53] JOE GALLOWAY: '69.

[00:23:06.03] ROCKY BLEIER: '69-- it was like in the country--

[00:23:07.35]

[00:23:07.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Back home, the country is in turmoil-- racial tensions, antiwar protests, assassinations-- you name it, it's happening. Any of that come over with you to where you are?

[00:23:22.81] ROCKY BLEIER: No. Not from my point-- you know, one of the things was that we put men on the moon in 1969. I have no recollection of that happening at all until afterwards, until after I got back.

[00:23:40.26] JOE GALLOWAY: So you weren't hearing nothing.

[00:23:42.27] ROCKY BLEIER: I wasn't hearing anything.

[00:23:44.19] JOE GALLOWAY: You'd get no Stars and Stripes or Armed Forces Radio, none of that?

[00:23:49.59] ROCKY BLEIER: Not on the boonies-- not out there. All those guys who were back in Da Nang or Saigon or in the rear-- I mean, they got information more than we did out in the boonies.

[00:24:01.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:24:01.59] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah.

[00:24:01.95] JOE GALLOWAY: You didn't even hear about the moon landing.

[00:24:03.87] ROCKY BLEIER: [LAUGHS] No, I didn't know about the moon landing.

[00:24:09.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you get any stand down time, any recreation, off duty?

[00:24:15.66] ROCKY BLEIER: So I did. Right after I got there-- so maybe a week, two weeks after I joined in my company did we have a stand down. And it was a rotated stand down. It was issued. It was time to do. So my stand down was three days. It was like a weekend, so we went back to Chu Lai, to the headquarters.

[00:24:40.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, to the beach.

[00:24:42.99] ROCKY BLEIER: We went back to Chu Lai. [LAUGHS] But I don't remember getting to the beach.

[00:24:48.75] JOE GALLOWAY: You don't remember the beach, huh?

[00:24:50.28] ROCKY BLEIER: I remember getting off that bus. I remember a USO tour came in.

[00:24:55.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Pabst Blue Ribbon-- you're living large.

[00:24:58.17] ROCKY BLEIER: Living large back then was nice to take a shower, you get a bunk to sleep in, and so on. But that was only a couple of weeks after, again. So the guys that had been with me hadn't been on a stand down for a while. But at this period of time as well was that a lot of-- or some, I should say-- of my fellow Soldiers were now there for four or five months, or five or six months. And they were up for leave time so that they could take a week.

[00:25:33.77] JOE GALLOWAY: R&R.

[00:25:34.82] ROCKY BLEIER: R&R. And so it was-- and not that I-- but it was, OK, where are you going to go to R&R? So then now, all of a sudden, R&R is on the back of your mind. Well, where am I going to go to R&R? You know, what am I going to do? So you get guys that come back from Bangkok and go, oh, you got to go to Bangkok, or from Thailand, oh, you gotta go to-- or are you going to go there. All the married guys went to Honolulu. Yeah, Hawaii.

[00:26:00.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Some went to Australia.

[00:26:01.91] ROCKY BLEIER: Yes, I'm going to Australia. But anyway--

[00:26:04.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Hong Kong.

[00:26:05.48] ROCKY BLEIER: So I just never got there.

[00:26:14.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe the quality of the leadership in your outfit up to battalion commander?

[00:26:20.67] ROCKY BLEIER: You know what? OK, fine. So it's all about immediate leadership. So you've got your squad leader, got a sergeant. Then you've got your platoon sergeant and your platoon lieutenants, and then Captain Murphy. So out of all that, Captain

Murphy plays a very important role in my life. But he had been there before. This was his second tour.

[00:26:48.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Second tour.

[00:26:49.30] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, to run a company. He'd been there as a platoon lieutenant-- right, as a second lieutenant. Came back, now become a company-- And so-- not that I had a lot of interaction with him, but I thought he was a very good commander. I mean, he wasn't a buddy-buddy. He wasn't afraid. He'd been there before. He knew what needed to be done, how it should be done, which was very important to us.

[00:27:20.65] Now, you had your second lieutenants. Jim Simms was a lieutenant with us. And he was in charge. I mean, when he was running things, he could take charge, and you had confidence in him. There were some people that you didn't have any confidence in them. They didn't know where they were going to go or what they were doing.

[00:27:51.40] You've got to put it in perspective of you're just a ROTC guy and/or second lieutenant, or you're coming out of the Academy-- I don't care where. But all of a sudden, this is new stuff as well. You haven't been there, and now you're in charge of human lives, and you're in charge of your responsibility. Some people--

[00:28:07.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Sounds like you got lucky in both--

[00:28:09.46] ROCKY BLEIER: In both those cases, yes. In both those cases, I felt-- because ultimately later, when we get hit and run into a resisted force, that leadership becomes very important in taking charge.

[00:28:34.81] ROCKY BLEIER: I don't know if it's the best day, but it will come to my-- this is the one that comes to my memory, which is that care packages become very important because it's your only contact with home, and in care packages that your mom or family or wife sends you are the things that you ask for and you don't get within your rations or from the Army. So you ask for chocolate, and you ask for--

[00:29:03.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Kool-Aid.

[00:29:04.30] ROCKY BLEIER: Kool-Aid-- that's right. You can mix with water. So one of my things was chocolate-- not chocolate-- so chocolate milk-- not chocolate milk-- powder-- chocolate powder, where you can make--

[00:29:18.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Where you could make chocolate milk.

[00:29:20.38] ROCKY BLEIER: --where you could make chocolate milk with water, you know, because that's all you got.

[00:29:23.80] JOE GALLOWAY: That's all you got.

[00:29:24.69] ROCKY BLEIER: You can carry it and so on. So it was an interesting thing was that somehow, some sense that-- it was like a sixth sense or seventh sense or an extra sense that your friends knew you were getting a care package way before you knew you were getting a care package. All of a sudden, they're hanging--

[00:29:49.36] JOE GALLOWAY: They're available to share.

[00:29:50.98] ROCKY BLEIER: [LAUGHS] All of a sudden, they're hanging around you. They're being a little more friendly. And then you go to-- mail call would come. And so everybody'd go to mail call. And who got what letter? Who got anything? So then all of a sudden, oh, they're all, Bleier, there's a package here for you. And so you go, oh. And they're all around you, so now you're got to--

[00:30:11.35] JOE GALLOWAY: You got lots of friends.

[00:30:12.40] ROCKY BLEIER: OK, here. You can have one, you can have one. So that was one. Now, I had been waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting for my hot chocolate to come. So it was after we're up on LZ West, and it was after dinner. And we're sitting around, pulling our little security. But we're outside. We're just sitting there. And it was like cocktail time-- you know, where you go, ah--

[00:30:42.34]

[00:30:43.69] hot chocolate-- I'm going to have that hot chocolate. So we're sitting there, just much like we're sitting here. We're BSing. We're talking. And I thought, OK, fine. So to make hot chocolate, you've got Sterno--

[00:30:57.89] JOE GALLOWAY: C-4 works for you.

[00:30:58.15] ROCKY BLEIER: C-4. That's right. Yes, sir. You get a little C-4. You break it off. You put it underneath, and you get your little cup. You've got water. You get-- and so it was like, boom, instant flame with the C-4. You got something. And you're sitting, and we're talking like this. When somebody hollers, incoming.

[00:31:18.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Uh-oh.

[00:31:20.03] ROCKY BLEIER: Everybody dives. Obviously, they run. They run. And then when we get into our foxhole-- we run over to our foxhole-- we go, OK. But incoming means that they're walking it up the hill, so the first-- and they sync. It's one Vietnamese who's got a-- yeah, and it just, boom, shoots the first one. Oop, a little further. Shoots the second.

[00:31:47.63] So they're walking it up the hill, OK? That's incoming. I'm going, damn, damn, damn. That hot chocolate's sitting right out there, and I said, you know, it's going to be my luck, and those lucky bastards are going to hit my-- and I've been waiting for it, and I don't have any more, and that was it. So I'm going-- oh, I'm timing how long it takes them to drop another mortar in.

[00:32:16.37] And it's like, eh, seven, eight seconds-- boom, they drop it, shoot another one, adjust, shoot another one. So I'm going, eight seconds. Yeah, that can't be more than 30 yards away. I can make it there and back within that period of time. And so I do. It hits-- boom, I go. I grab it, pick it up, slide back in as the other one comes back and hits again. But, obviously, they did not hit our spot, you know. But I felt very gratified that I could sit there while I had my chocolate as they're dropping mortars in on us. [LAUGHS]

[00:33:02.44] ROCKY BLEIER: So the worst day, obviously, that I had, was the day that we got hit. And that--

[00:33:13.36] JOE GALLOWAY: This was out on patrol?

[00:33:16.66] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, out on patrol. What had happened, if I may-- and the story was this-- that we were up in LZ Siberia, and our sister company, Bravo Company, was in the fields. They had made contact with the enemy. And all of a sudden, they're in a heavy firefight in the fields. So we ultimately-- our company-- is coming down.

[00:33:48.07] OK, so we helicoptered. They pick us up. We've got ammunition. We're going down to the field. We land in a field. And so we break up out of that, and so our company, our platoon-- reinforced platoon-- was to go and help get them out, OK. So everybody else was to set up a place up on Million Dollar Hill which was where we were. And so it was about 10 o'clock at night. 10 o'clock at night, we're walking through the woods.

[00:34:31.77] And so now there's tracers going on. There's a firefight going on in front of us. There's helicopters coming in. You can see a helicopter getting hit, bending down. Smoke's coming out. Another one's coming in. They're picking up whatever wounded or dead that they have over there. So we get there. It's got to be about 11 o'clock at night. We get to their position. All of a sudden there's a lull-- there's nothing happening, nothing taking place. So it's men very quiet.

[00:34:59.21] So the enemy withdrew, not knowing what was taking place at that time. And so all of a sudden, it was a full-front-and-rear security. That was our-- to get that Bravo Company out of that position because they already know what their coordinates are. They're going to get mortared if they stayed there. So we're pulling them out. And so we pull front, and then we pull rear security on our way out.

[00:35:29.69] Also, there was about five or six dead Soldiers. And so we had to take them with us. I can remember giving my M79 to somebody behind me, a friend of mine. I said OK, fine. So we had bamboo poles, tied them up, and I got somebody else to grab the front. And we're carrying out the body. And so we got to come across a little river, but, actually, it's a low river and it's a creek as we go.

[00:35:59.12] And when we come to it, all of a sudden, there was a machine gun aiming down that river. So as he saw bodies, that opened up. We stopped. Now we're in a quick firefight that takes place, and now the word comes-- leave the bodies. We'll come back and pick them up later. So the rest of us move out, and we run across the river best we possibly can. And we head back

to Million Dollar Hill, where we set up our position. So that's where we were. Now, two days later--

[00:36:40.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you gone back and got the bodies?

[00:36:42.57] ROCKY BLEIER: That's when we're going back to get the bodies. So now, it's the platoon I'm in with Captain Murphy, and his head-- and his five or six people-- his radio man, and medic, and so on, and command post. And we're heading back. So we started humping the hills, you know, about the break of dawn as it is, and we're trying our get our look.

[00:37:07.62] And we stop at this location. Find our location, and we stop at this place, a little wooded area looking out onto an open rice paddies that were-- and so we found out where we need to be, and he said, now we're heading out of the rice paddy. Now we're heading out into the open rice paddies. So, obviously, the word was to keep eyes and ears open and five yards distance between one another.

[00:37:40.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, don't bunch up.

[00:37:41.64] ROCKY BLEIER: Don't bunch up as we're moving out. And I was eighth in line. As I said, I was carrying my grenade launcher. And I took a couple of steps out into that rice paddy, when all of a sudden-- and here's a mistake-- and all of a sudden, our point man sees movement across the berm.

[00:38:00.21] JOE GALLOWAY: In the tree line?

[00:38:01.23] ROCKY BLEIER: In the tree line. So, if I can say, it comes down, and then it takes a left, OK. So he was down right where it takes the left and drops down. But in the tree line, he saw movement over there. Rather than halting everybody and stopping us in position, in his excitement, he hollers, gook, gook, across the berm. Shots break the stillness. They start to run. He starts to run after them, pulling everybody out in the middle of that rice paddy.

[00:38:36.77] So all of a sudden, in the tree line, machine gun started to-- you could just hear it-- boom boom boom boom boom. And like normal reaction, guys are just hitting the rice paddies, getting out of that, getting into a wooded area that was on the far end over here. I'm in the middle, so I hit the rice paddy. I kind of, best I can, crawl up to the little berm.

[00:39:02.17] And now I see four of my Soldiers down in another rice paddy below us. Then I see the machine gun, or I see where it's coming from anyway. So being an M79er, I got to get--

[00:39:15.10] JOE GALLOWAY: You got to get some rounds off.

[00:39:16.09] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, I got to get some firepower on that. So I roll over my side, breached a grenade to get ready to-- and when I felt a thud in my left leg. And it started burning, bled. And so I got hit for the first time that day. So I tied a wrap around it. So as we're coming out, there's a little hedgerow that was separating a drop in the rice paddies. And so I pulled behind that, and everybody else--

[00:39:50.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you able to stand on this leg?

[00:39:51.88] ROCKY BLEIER: Well, I crawled. So adrenaline pumps in, you know, I mean-- so you're just, OK, what do I have to do? What's my responsibility? So I'm getting behind some protection now. And so we start lobbing grenades over the hedgerow as best we possibly can. I got a spotter over here, which was like Kentucky windage-- bring it back, bring it back, OK, fine, that's good, bring it back, get some more. So I went through, I don't throw, 30 grenades out of one pack. You know, I was just dropping them in, shooting, dropping them in, shooting.

[00:40:21.85] The four guys who were pinned down-- well, they got out of there. So we decide-- everybody else is to the right of us-- our guys. They're all in the wooded area. And the rest didn't make it out after-- they just stayed back here-- so we decided to crawl back to the command post and Captain Murphy. So the medic and I-- we did. So we crawled back, and we set up another defensive position.

[00:40:50.28] And about-- who knows-- about 20 minutes later-- 20, 25 minutes later, the rest of that platoon out in the field comes crawling back in. So we sent up a defensive position. Now, we didn't know-- or at least-- what we ran into-- what we ran into. And I don't know whether they knew what they ran into. But all of a sudden, they probed our perimeter or got close enough.

[00:41:16.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Where you were in the woods?

[00:41:17.43] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, we're in the woods, and so we're in the woods, looking out. They probed. And so all of a sudden, it was like this-- somebody hollers, incoming. And so I'm sitting on this little berm, just like we're talking here. Captain Murphy is lying prone, trying to see what he can see out into that open rice paddy. I'm kind of sitting here. We're kind of just BSing, not knowing what's taking place. And they go, incoming. And so your automatic reaction is just to dive. So I roll to the ground.

[00:41:59.01] And it goes off, and I look up, and it went off right where I was sitting-- I mean, right behind me. It was a big hole right there. So all of a sudden, now we're in a little firefight, and a second one comes flying. And I can see it.

[00:42:15.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Is it a mortar, or--

[00:42:17.01] ROCKY BLEIER: No, it's a hand grenade.

[00:42:18.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Hand grenade.

[00:42:18.54] ROCKY BLEIER: It's a hand grenade. It's an old ChiCom with the handle on it.

[00:42:22.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, the ChiCom wooden handle.

[00:42:23.13] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, wooden handle. Going, vroom, vroom, vroom, vroom, vroom. And it-- boom-- hits Captain Murphy right in the middle of the back. But it doesn't go off because it's timed. So it goes, it bounces off of him, and it rolls to where I am. And I'm about like

three or four feet. So all of a sudden, your reaction is get out of the way, and I went to jump the opposite direction. And as I got up, it blew up and blew up through my right foot and knee and thigh.

[00:42:55.21] JOE GALLOWAY: And so you're shot in the left leg and now the right leg's blown up.

[00:42:59.80] ROCKY BLEIER: Now my right leg's blown up. Oh, man. OK, fine. So we're lying there. And it also--

[00:43:06.18] JOE GALLOWAY: How's the captain?

[00:43:06.94] ROCKY BLEIER: So the captain catches it. So he scrambles as it hits him. You know, he's laying on the side, so he scrambles, and he tries to cover himself like this. And I'm trying to jump out of the way, and it blows up. And he catches it between his legs. I mean, there's just shrapnel coming-- vroom-- this way. And so he catches it here in his lower body. And I'm now on top of him as I'm blown up on top of him. He pushes me off.

[00:43:36.56] And so now we've got a medic coming over, checking the captain, making sure that he's not dead or-- but he's in pain. But he's not functional. And so he was the one that was on the radio. He was talking to helicopters. He was talking to a gunship that was coming in. He was talking-- he knew our coordinates. He knew where everybody was. Now, all of a sudden, he's out of the picture.

[00:44:03.86] So I'm lying there. Medic comes over. He said, how are you? And I go, oh my god, my foot hurts, my knee. So where else did you get hit? Well, I got hit here. So he takes off my boot and said, OK, fine. Ties a gauze bandage that they have, a wrap, around it. And he said, OK, there's nothing I can do, and he moves on.

[00:44:27.41] So now we're in a firefight with the North Vietnamese. And so, I can remember the sergeant came over. He got on the phone from a leadership point of view, so he took over. He took over, and he said, OK, fine. I'm talking to the helicopter-- where are you? Where are you? We don't have-- I don't know where our coordinates are. Captain Murphy-- you know, he's been hit. He's out of action.

[00:44:50.03] So we'll pop smoke. We'll pop smoke. Don't come in any further than the tree line. Don't come into the tree line. We'll pop smoke, and don't come into the tree line because we have our Soldiers in the tree line. So the gunship comes in and-- it does, but it comes in at an angle. And ultimately, it hits our last position and wounds three guys and kills another one in that action.

[00:45:22.30] So we're all-- now, we've got this firefight that's taking place in front of us and so on. And I don't know how long it lasts. I mean, it lasts, it seemed like, for a long time. And then there was a rush. I know this feeling that was like all of a sudden, everything opened up. I mean, they were firing into our position, and it was like-- and I thought, well, here it comes. It's like the last charge. I mean, they're coming in and then it stopped, just like that.

[00:46:00.69] Afterwards, we don't know what took place or what happened, why. And the only thing that we could possibly discern is that we had wounded or killed their commander or their captain or their leader. And so they withdrew at that time-- thank god. We had another platoon finally get there. Our sister platoon finally got there to get us out of there, and which they did.

[00:46:31.96] Probably the most-- what would be discerning was that one of the guys from the one-- from the other platoon-- he came flying in. He goes, boom. And I'm laying over here. He comes flying in. He said, you all right? Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. I said, yeah, I'm fine. Oh, he said, good, only because of the fact that we heard both you and Captain Murphy got killed. I said, well, no, I didn't. He said, OK, fine. Don't worry. Don't worry about it. We'll get you out of here. You'll be the first guy to get out here. So they're dragging--

[00:47:09.49] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard this before, though.

[00:47:11.14] ROCKY BLEIER: Huh?

[00:47:11.50] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard before you're going to be the first guy.

[00:47:14.56] ROCKY BLEIER: [LAUGHS] I'm going to be the first guy. He said, no, Captain Murphy is going to be the first. You be the second guy-- [LAUGHS] -- to get us out of there. To answer to your question, that was probably my most dramatic period of time. So now they're dragging us. Now they're dragging us, and we're going back to Million Dollar Hill, where we'd left. And it was-- my goodness gracious, I don't know-- it seemed like forever. By the time they got us, they dragged us-- we didn't get there till late at night.

[00:47:48.43] JOE GALLOWAY: No helicopter?

[00:47:49.87] ROCKY BLEIER: No, no. No, they finally came in. Helicopters finally came in. So this story kind of goes-- so they're carrying me on a grenade-- on a poncho liner. So I couldn't walk, it was both legs, so they were dragging me out on this poncho liner. Now, the Soldiers from the other platoon-- they'd been up as long as we have.

[00:48:12.28] They've been fighting their way down. They're carrying their rucksacks. It's been a long day for them. Now they're got to carry this jerk, who got himself shot-- 170 pounds at that time of dead meat that they're dragging through--

[00:48:26.44] and all they could care about is themselves. I mean, I don't give a-- it's my responsibility that I could really-- so anyway, they put me down. So they put me down. [PANTS] Catch their breath. Two guys would pass, three guys, carry me some more, put me down. Four more guys would-- ultimately, I ended up at the end of the line.

[00:48:44.11] JOE GALLOWAY: You're rear guard, yeah.

[00:48:45.82] ROCKY BLEIER: The rear guard, thinking to myself, what am I going to do if they-- what am I going to-- I don't have a weapon. What if we get hit from behind? Those are all those--

[00:48:55.00] JOE GALLOWAY: You make a good sandbag, Rocky.

[00:48:56.17] ROCKY BLEIER: [LAUGHS] That's right. They would've left me behind. So eventually, they get me to Million Dollar Hill, and the helicopters come in. And I got my first shot of morphine at that time. Ooh, I was not kind to the medic at all when he gave me the first shot. So it's been probably a good eight hours, nine hours, before anything--

[00:49:21.55] JOE GALLOWAY: You got a shot.

[00:49:22.60] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, before I got shot. So the adrenaline was finally wearing off, and so it started to hurt. And so I got my first shot, and I told him-- I said, give me a second shot. This one's not working. Give me a second shot. He said, no, we can't, we can't. He said, because you've got to be lucid when you talk to the people when you get to the hospital. And so I said, OK, fine.

[00:49:46.16] So we got on the helicopter. And like the captain-- or I should say not like the captain, but like his leadership-- is that he waited. He was the last guy that was going to get on. I mean, he told them, I'm the last guy that's going to get on this helicopter. And so we were the last two guys to get on the helicopter. I got on before. So we've got a big door. So the big door's here. They throw us in. And we got about eight guys in here and so on.

[00:50:14.98] And so I'm inside the door. Oh, OK, fine-- sitting up. And so Tom, Captain Murphy-- they bring Captain Murphy on. So he's moaning, and he's lying next to me. And so we take off. We take off. And so we've got to bank to the left. We're banking to left, and all I could see was Captain Murphy going-- [WHISTLES] sliding out the door.

[00:50:44.39] JOE GALLOWAY: No, no, no.

[00:50:45.24] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah. Yeah. I grabbed him and held on to him until they leveled off. And so I mean, they didn't know. But he was just-- I mean, he was lying. He was out of it. I could just see him-- I said, oh my god, get a hold of him here. So that was my experience in Hiep Duc.

[00:51:05.79] JOE GALLOWAY: All right, you get to Charlie Med or something like that.

[00:51:09.94] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah. So we get to the first spot. So I get to the aid station, and that's basically, they come in, cut your pants. OK, what do the wounds look like? What needs to be done? All right, where are you hit? You know, and so on-- collect your personal items, whatever you might have. And one of the incidences that--

[00:51:29.97] JOE GALLOWAY: How bad are you hit now?

[00:51:32.40] ROCKY BLEIER: Well, so I got shot through this leg. OK, fine, I told them that. So I got hit through the foot. foot blew up. Hit through the knee. Hit my groin. A lot of it was just flesh wounds and--

[00:51:44.14] JOE GALLOWAY: A lot of shrapnel.

[00:51:45.33] ROCKY BLEIER: --a lot of shrapnel. So they do that-- give me--

[00:51:48.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Are you looking at this and thinking that you're done with football?

[00:51:52.44] ROCKY BLEIER: Oh, no.

[00:51:53.27] JOE GALLOWAY: No?

[00:51:55.15] ROCKY BLEIER: I'm not even thinking about football. I'm not even thinking football at all-- not at all. And so I'm going, OK, fine. So they give me another shot of morphine, which is really nice.

[00:52:04.92] JOE GALLOWAY: This is much better.

[00:52:06.00] ROCKY BLEIER: Much better. Things are under control here, and so it wasn't as if I'd lost a leg or any of that kind of stuff. Gave me-- all right, fine. So that was-- so this is an interesting part of the story, and I never knew what had happened. But before I left to go to Vietnam, we had a good family friend who was ordained a priest after his service in World War II.

[00:52:38.23] And so he gave me a wooden cross that his mother gave him when he went to war and said, you know-- and she said, you bring this cross back to me. And so he gives it to me, and he said, all I want you to do is return this cross.

[00:52:57.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Bring it back.

[00:52:57.91] ROCKY BLEIER: Bring it back. And I lost it.

[00:53:02.65] JOE GALLOWAY: During all of this.

[00:53:03.91] ROCKY BLEIER: During all of this. And so I was in the aid station. Somebody took it because they're getting rid of your personal stuff and so on. And, you know, I never--

[00:53:15.78] JOE GALLOWAY: You never got it back.

[00:53:16.96] ROCKY BLEIER: I never got it back. So it's a little sad story that was-- but I got it back eventually.

[00:53:25.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Where are they taking you now?

[00:53:27.10] ROCKY BLEIER: So now-- so I go from the aid station to Da Nang.

[00:53:30.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:53:31.00] ROCKY BLEIER: OK, so now I go to Da Nang-- to the field hospital in Da Nang. And I'm there for two days, three days. So what they're doing is cleaning the wounds. They're bandaging the wounds so it doesn't get infected because there's nothing they can do. And then they're going to get you out of country. And so from there I went to--

[00:53:52.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Where are you headed?

[00:53:53.11] ROCKY BLEIER: 7th Field Hospital in Tokyo for a couple of weeks. So I was in Tokyo for a couple of weeks. Actually, at that time, they were going through, OK, what's the damage, and so on. So the first time I met my doctor, my orthopedic doctor, who was coming through the ward. Now, the ward was three rows of beds, OK. So I'm here in this third row, OK. And so he comes in, and he goes down one side, and then he comes up the middle, OK, and then he's going to come down this side.

[00:54:31.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Row three.

[00:54:32.89] ROCKY BLEIER: You always knew where he was because you would hear, oh, oh, no, damn, son of a-- what are you doing?

[00:54:44.50] JOE GALLOWAY: What are you doing?

[00:54:45.60] ROCKY BLEIER: Well, I finally figured out what he's doing by the time he gets to me. So he's getting me. He's got to look at-- yeah, so he's got--

[00:54:53.82] JOE GALLOWAY: He's got to rip them off.

[00:54:54.24] ROCKY BLEIER: He's got to rip them off, you know, so he's cutting through the bandages, and-- there's no easy way, he said. This is all I can do. So I can go, OK. And so I grabbed the bedposts behind me, and he takes off my-- so he looks at me. He looks at this-- looks at my foot. He looks at my foot and he said, oh-- he said, listen, I have to check and see whether there's any broken bones in your foot.

[00:55:21.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, we've got to probe.

[00:55:23.52] ROCKY BLEIER: Now we've got to probe. So he pulls out his surgical scissors. And he's got it in my hand, and he takes it and puts it into that wound all the way up into my foot.

[00:55:37.11] JOE GALLOWAY: [GROANS]

[00:55:39.03] ROCKY BLEIER: I think I bent the bars. I think I bent the bars, or I wanted to. I was holding onto them.

[00:55:44.92] JOE GALLOWAY: That smarts.

[00:55:45.97] ROCKY BLEIER: Oh, that was very painful. I called him a couple of things that he wasn't used to.

[00:55:53.07] JOE GALLOWAY: A little morphine would have helped.

[00:55:54.74] ROCKY BLEIER: It would have. So his name was Dr. Laorr His name was Dr. Laorr. And I tell you that only because of the fact that from there, I asked Dr. Laorr, after a couple of weeks I was there in Tokyo, what do you think about my injuries? I mean, do you think it's-- can I play football? And I asked it because I wanted to know, can I play football given this? And his response at the time was, eh--

[00:56:31.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Probably not.

[00:56:32.54] ROCKY BLEIER: --probably not because of the injuries you've got. Don't worry about it. I mean, you're going to have a normal life, OK. You're going to do the things that normal people do. Just don't expect to get back playing football.

[00:56:42.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Playing pro football.

[00:56:43.66] ROCKY BLEIER: You go, oh. He was like my authority figure, you know, so he just kind of sucked that hope right out.

[00:56:51.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Pulled that other scab right off of there.

[00:56:53.56] ROCKY BLEIER: He sure did. And I tell you, so-- and eventually I come back to the States, and I end up at Fort Riley, Kansas, at the Irwin Army Hospital there.

[00:57:09.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Why Fort Riley? Ain't even close to Appleton, Wisconsin.

[00:57:16.66] ROCKY BLEIER: I know, I know. And I don't know except this, is that my uncle was a colonel in the 25th Division, and they were stationed at Fort Riley, Kansas. And so--

[00:57:28.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Family.

[00:57:29.07] ROCKY BLEIER: Family was there.

[00:57:30.54] JOE GALLOWAY: They pulled a string.

[00:57:31.08] ROCKY BLEIER: They pulled the strings that got me at Fort Riley, Kansas. That was it. Now, to finish the Dr. Leorr story is that Dr. Leorr ends up practicing in Indiana, Pennsylvania, outside of Pittsburgh.

[00:57:51.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Outside of Pittsburgh.

[00:57:52.72] ROCKY BLEIER: And so we became friends.

[00:57:54.54] JOE GALLOWAY: I thought you were going to tell me he became the team doctor.

[00:57:56.52] ROCKY BLEIER: No, he didn't get that close, but it was close enough, so we became friends thereafter. So anyway, so I'm at Fort Riley, Kansas, and I spent until I get out of the service at Fort Riley, Kansas, going through the healing process and--

[00:58:11.88] JOE GALLOWAY: How long does that take?

[00:58:15.49] ROCKY BLEIER: That takes nine months.

[00:58:17.97] JOE GALLOWAY: In the hospital.

[00:58:18.61] ROCKY BLEIER: In a hospital and outpatient.

[00:58:21.60] JOE GALLOWAY: And outpatient.

[00:58:22.25] ROCKY BLEIER: Outpatient, you know, because they're-- yeah.

[00:58:24.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, the end of the story is that somehow with all of this, you still managed to go back to playing football.

[00:58:32.94] ROCKY BLEIER: Well, you know, so it was-- OK, so the injuries were healing. They were healing. There wasn't much they could do. It's a healing process, you know. But I started-- and was feeling pretty good. I mean, I started working out, getting back into the gym there at Fort Riley, Kansas. I was living off base at the time. I was working for the hospital.

[00:58:58.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Had you made up your mind you were going to play football again?

[00:59:02.33] ROCKY BLEIER: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, I was going-- yeah, so that was my-- it really was my driving force, to come back. I mean, you had a goal, what I wanted to do, and that becomes very important in your rehab and your recovery and even getting through that period of time of serving the country in Vietnam. You know, what are you coming back to? So my goal was to come back to this. And my process was this-- OK, fine--

[00:59:26.13] JOE GALLOWAY: And you had been sort of cheated out of your pro career.

[00:59:29.61] ROCKY BLEIER: [LAUGHS] Sort of, but that happens. And so yeah, I wanted to-- one of the things was that being an athlete-- and not even being an athlete, but just growing up, playing in the neighborhood, pick-up sports-- whatever it is. As a kid, we all have bumps and bruises and sprains and broken fingers, or whatever it is. And there's kind of a lesson that you learn, and that lesson is, you know, ultimately, those injuries kind of heal, and you're back in the backyard again playing the pick-up ball.

[01:00:02.65] And so it was kind of the same thing, and I'd go, OK, fine. You know, I didn't lose an arm, leg, or anything, damaged as it may be. It's rehab. OK, start working out again. It takes time to heal. Go back to the gym. Start running as best you possibly can.

[01:00:20.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Nine months, you're out of the Army.

[01:00:23.16] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, nine months I'm out of the Army.

[01:00:24.93] JOE GALLOWAY: And how long does it take you to get back to football?

[01:00:28.62] ROCKY BLEIER: So I come back, and-- so I write Mr. Rooney, saying, what do you think about me coming back to play for the Steelers? They opened up their arms, and they said, yes, come on back to training camp. Come on back to training camp. So they kept me all through that training camp. They should have cut me, but they kept me through that period of time.

[01:00:54.16] And then Chuck Noll was the head coach at the time. He released me, obviously, and rightly so because I couldn't really play. But the Rooneys put me on injured reserve. And I had another operation. I had more shrapnel in my foot. They took that out and so on. So I came back the following year and tried to make training camp again, and they put me on the taxi squad, or the developmental squad, as it's called now. And so they bought me-- basically, they gave me two years.

[01:01:26.29] JOE GALLOWAY: They gave you two years.

[01:01:27.40] ROCKY BLEIER: Two years to heal and come back. So it took me that period of time.

[01:01:31.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Did it work?

[01:01:31.78] ROCKY BLEIER: And it worked. And so it gave me a chance to heal, get stronger, work on my speed-- all the stuff that was necessary. And so they paid me a salary, and it wasn't as if I was destitute, and so I could focus on-- and being very selfish, I wasn't married. I didn't have a family, so I could be very selfish and focused on me at that period of time when I came back. And it was 1972, and I made the team in 1972.

[01:02:00.37] JOE GALLOWAY: How long did your career last?

[01:02:02.23] ROCKY BLEIER: Then it lasted through the 1980 season.

[01:02:09.22] JOE GALLOWAY: So an eight-year run.

[01:02:11.05] ROCKY BLEIER: Eight-year period of-- run. And in that eight-year--

[01:02:14.38] JOE GALLOWAY: For a guy who wasn't going to get to play football again, that ain't bad.

[01:02:18.37] ROCKY BLEIER: So it's all about picking the right players and the right team, which I did. Obviously, did my homework, and I said, I want to be here. No, but during that period of time, all of a sudden, it becomes a magical team, and you get a chance to start. You break yourself into the lineup. And we win four Super Bowls and become the team of the decade. And you get recognition for your contributions and so on.

[01:02:41.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after combat?

[01:02:48.40] ROCKY BLEIER: I didn't. And I say this, somewhat, only because-- now, we've got to take the Vietnam veterans, as we're talking to-- I mean, so, that Vietnam veteran who came back during that period of time was disdained. I mean, he was spat upon as a baby killer.

[01:03:05.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Disrespected.

[01:03:06.34] ROCKY BLEIER: Disrespected. You had a uniform. At some time, for some, it was said, I think it'd be best if you changed into civilian clothes when you get off the plane in-- here. And so that Soldier, in experience, came back, repressing everything that he had just gone through, his feelings, went back to school, or got married, got a job.

[01:03:33.40] Nobody talked to him. Nobody ever said thank you. Nobody ever hugged him. He got no respect for having served his country, losing friends over there. And so years, I'm sure, of emotion and-- just was repressed. There wasn't groups. No one identified with the Vietnam veteran. American Legion didn't accept him-- VFW-- nobody. You weren't--

[01:03:59.11] JOE GALLOWAY: You lost your war. We won ours. Yeah.

[01:04:01.57] ROCKY BLEIER: That's right. And so-- except I had to talk about it because all of a sudden, I became a story. So here's this young kid that's trying to come back to make football-- Vietnam veteran got wounded. So what was it like? What was your feelings? So all of a sudden, I had to come up with answers to what that was.

[01:04:26.87] So to me, part of it was a catharsis. Part of it was allowing me to tell the story, or at least my story. And how do you compare it? What was your difficult points? And so I came up with those answers. And the majority of Soldiers didn't have--

[01:04:42.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Never had that chance.

[01:04:43.27] ROCKY BLEIER: --never had that chance.

[01:04:51.57] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think that war is remembered in our society today?

[01:04:57.93] ROCKY BLEIER: I think that war is remembered-- I think-- I think it is remembered as, what were you doing there? It was a senseless war. What was our reasons for being there in all honesty, as you compare it to what had taken place? It wasn't sanctioned. How we get there because of a treaty with France, that we needed to support them, and they asked for

our help because they wanted to go back after they got kicked out, and they wanted to establish what they had before? And did we learn anything from that? No, well, we'll send some advisers in there, and we'll help in that regard because we have this treaty.

[01:05:42.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Then we sent half a million troops.

[01:05:43.93] ROCKY BLEIER: Then we've got a half a million troops in there. Half a million troops--

[01:05:47.14] JOE GALLOWAY: The Vietcong are not attacking Los Angeles.

[01:05:50.44] ROCKY BLEIER: No, they're not. There's nothing here.

[01:05:52.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Never made it to Honolulu.

[01:05:54.73] ROCKY BLEIER: They never attacked anything. But it's interesting-- and I really feel this-- is from the American point of view, or the American Soldier-- the average American Soldier, who did not necessarily want to be there but was there, who did his job as best he possibly can under the circumstances, who served his country, even within the flames of all the protest that was taking place and how you were perceived coming back, but yet went, whether he believed in the war-- I know that he didn't believe in the war, you know.

[01:06:31.21] JOE GALLOWAY: He believed in the guy next to him.

[01:06:33.61] ROCKY BLEIER: True. That was it. You know, you're here. That's all we got. We got this little group. This is it. We've got our backs, with protecting one another. And that was it. So, you know, I was there. I was back recently to Vietnam. And so it was like, really? Really? So 50 years has gone-- in my experience, 49 years. So I go back, and I go, things have changed. I mean, you go back to--

[01:07:06.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Nobody's shooting at you.

[01:07:07.74] ROCKY BLEIER: Yeah, nobody's shooting at you. You go back there.

[01:07:09.42] JOE GALLOWAY: They're very beautiful.

[01:07:10.33] ROCKY BLEIER: It's going very beautiful, very prosperous. I went to Da Nang basically. I didn't go any further, we were in Da Nang, but Da Nang is humming. I mean, people are all over. Buildings that are taking place. Downtown Da Nang is busy and so on. And the further you get out, it becomes a little more rural, and you can see-- but houses are being built. People are working or whatever it seems to be. And you go, really? I mean, really?

[01:07:39.60] JOE GALLOWAY: They couldn't have got there 50 years ago--

[01:07:41.82] ROCKY BLEIER: 50 years ago.

[01:07:42.45] JOE GALLOWAY: --except for us.

[01:07:43.18] ROCKY BLEIER: And the thing is that everything's changed. So there's jungles. Whatever you might remember isn't there anymore. I mean, it's just all overgrown, or it could be something else. I can remember we drove by LZ West, and so we're on like a highway-- or not a highway, but a two-lane road. We're going two lanes. And so it's all built up. What were little villages are now towns. So they've got a center.

[01:08:11.23] You go, god, we swept through this stuff. I mean, we went through all this stuff over here and through the jungles and so on. And then you look back, and you go, why? So then you start thinking about, OK, fine, wow. I mean, we lost 58,000 guys during that period of time. Vietnamese lost hundreds of thousands of people. Futures, families have been disrupted.

[01:08:36.30] Not only that, then the casualties of war thereafter-- Agent Orange affected both sides, then post-traumatic stress, suicides take place, and so on and so forth and so on. And you go, yeah. It was tough.

[01:09:00.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you been to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC?

[01:09:04.32] ROCKY BLEIER: Oh, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

[01:09:05.67] JOE GALLOWAY: What do you think when you go there?

[01:09:08.16] ROCKY BLEIER: I remember the first time. I actually went through the dedication. Jan Scruggs is a good friend of mine, so I went to the dedication. And emotionally, it's a wonderful-- I mean, it isn't wonderful-- but it's very impactful. Probably the best story I can remember about the emotion of that Wall was through the eyes of my older kids.

[01:09:39.65] And they were probably five. Maybe they were four and seven, or right around there. So we're in Washington, DC. You know, it's during the summer, and we're looking at the monuments and going around. It's a hot day in Washington, and dragging the kids because they got to walk every place throughout that whole mall. So there's an ice cream-- all they wanted was ice cream. All they wanted was something to eat and so on.

[01:10:07.86] So we just were getting to the Vietnam Memorial. And they're in there going, oh, I'm tired, carry me. You know, I wanted-- no, no, you're going to walk, you know. And so they're whining. They're fighting with one another as we start the walk down through the monument.

[01:10:28.30] Nobody said anything, but it was just maybe the vibrance or the sense of what that monument gave off because all of a sudden, my kids, who were fighting, fighting, all of a sudden became quiet, more quiet, to they didn't say anything, to we walked all the way through and got up at the far end and walked out, and they started arguing again.

[01:11:00.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Started arguing again.

[01:11:04.91] ROCKY BLEIER: So they had no reason for being there or have any relationship to it. They didn't understand it. But yet, it was the vibrance of, or the feeling of, that I'm sure affected them, as it does everybody else. But as I look at that Wall, I mean, unlike-- the Wall is a vivid remembrance of those 58,000. It's not a monument with somebody on a horse or something. It's the names of each and everybody that made the ultimate sacrifice.

[01:11:43.45] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard about the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration. What do you think about that? About time?

[01:11:51.54] ROCKY BLEIER: [LAUGHS] It's about time. Well, you know, it's about time. And what the commemoration is is a simple thank you. I mean, really the commemoration is a simple thank you. Now, it's interesting, I think, and I've found in talking to veterans, is that if-- and I don't know why-- maybe I do-- I thank veterans, as we all thank veterans, but for their service.

[01:12:23.97] But they go, well, yeah, but I wasn't in-country. I wasn't in Vietnam. It's like if you weren't in-country, you didn't really fight in Vietnam or through the Vietnam period that we're trying to honor. I keep telling them-- I said, well, no. I said, the fact is that whether you served in-country or not, you served. You could have been in-country.

[01:12:52.91] You could have been-- gotten orders to go over there, but you didn't. You ended up here or there or so on. But the fact is that you served for whatever reason. You enlisted, and-- or you were a patriot because your family served, your dad served, and your grandfather served-- whatever it is. That's all fine stuff. You ended up where you ended up. And so you served. Just understand that. You didn't have to be in-country.

[01:13:19.91] So given the fact, it's said, for those 20 years from '55 to '75, there's nine million Soldiers-- seven million alive, or men and women that served our country. And they just need to be thanked. That's all. And it's as simple as that. And get a recognition. And so over the years that we've been able to do this from my own personal experience, sometimes it's the first time that anybody said, thank you. And give them a pin. But it's their pin. It's a Vietnam veteran pin. It's not an Army pin or service pin. It's their pin, and they take great pride in having served.

[01:14:02.40] JOE GALLOWAY: You've received your pin?

[01:14:04.17] ROCKY BLEIER: Yes. I've received my pen, yes.

[01:14:06.63] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Rocky.

[01:14:07.62] ROCKY BLEIER: Joe, you're welcome. Thank you.