

Cayler, Russ USAF

[00:00:17.06] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:00:19.15] RUSSELL CAYLER: I was a college graduate, and I spent a couple of years in. So I was a little older, probably, than the average. I think I was 26 when I actually went over.

[00:00:28.01] Born and raised in west Des Moines, Iowa. Went to Drake University, in Des Moines, right close. Commissioned through their Air Force ROTC program and then to pilot training, went through jet pilot training, T-37s, T-38s, then went to helicopters. So I was dual rated both in fixed wing and then in helicopters, which at the time--

[00:00:49.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you a married man at that time?

[00:00:52.23] RUSSELL CAYLER: In fact, when I proposed to my wife in '64, I told her I was a professional military man, and that there was a war coming. This was before it really kicked off. So she went into that knowing that she's going to lose me someplace along the line, and so we had two or three years before I actually went over.

[00:01:16.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:01:22.00] RUSSELL CAYLER: I hadn't traveled much outside of Iowa. I think I got all the way to Washington once, but so to me it was exotic-- the sights, the smells, the sounds which were just not like it was in the Midwest, and I wasn't turned off by anything. Thailand was just where I ended up, was a beautiful country with beautiful, friendly people, and in peace time, it would have even been a better assignment.

[00:01:53.65] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your initial duties?

[00:01:56.26] RUSSELL CAYLER: Well, I was in the first HH-53s, the rescue model, Super Jolly Green, that went over. So we had to go get our airplanes. When we had trained on them, we actually trained at the factory. So you'd watch your helicopters being manufactured, going down the line.

[00:02:16.24] At any rate, we had to go over to Cam Ranh Bay and actually pick them up and fly them back. So it took us-- before we were really flying a lot of missions, we were there several months. So we did a lot of training, of course, but that was it. Everybody in the squadron generally had some kind of an additional duty, and I was the admin officer.

[00:02:45.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you volunteer for the Jolly Greens.

[00:02:48.17] RUSSELL CAYLER: Well, yes. I did. I was an H-19 flight instructor. I did not like the H-19, nor did I like to be a flight instructor. We had moved from Stead Air Force Base, Nevada, Reno, to Sheppard Air Force Base, Texas, not the best part of Texas.

[00:03:04.62] So some other places were kind of nice. That was not one of them. So three volunteer statements later, I ended up with a 53, in the 53. So I went from the oldest helicopter in the fleet to the newest, from an H-19 to an H-53.

[00:03:20.06] JOE GALLOWAY: The Jolly Green mission is rescuing air crews.

[00:03:25.46] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yes. Technically, it's long range combat air crew recovery. That was the mission, and it required every feeling. Many, many times it required that. Just to get back, would have to go so far north sometimes, particularly if it was in North Vietnam, or something like that.

[00:03:46.94] It's a long trip, and you would frequently have to refuel coming back. But every feeling was part of the mission, an inherent part of it, and the H-3s also did it, the smaller H-3 Jolly Greens. There was Jolly Greens and Super Jolly Greens

[00:04:03.03] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:04:03.50] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yeah, and so it was necessary.

[00:04:06.02] JOE GALLOWAY: This is one of the most dangerous missions of all.

[00:04:09.27] RUSSELL CAYLER: It has its moments, yes.

[00:04:11.39] JOE GALLOWAY: You lost a lot of crews, a lot of birds.

[00:04:14.57] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yes. The Air Force had a lot of POWs, guys that we couldn't get to, but we rescued a number, a very large number.

[00:04:24.05] JOE GALLOWAY: But you yourselves, the Jolly Greens, lost a lot of crews.

[00:04:28.67] RUSSELL CAYLER: We did. We did.

[00:04:30.24] JOE GALLOWAY: A lot of birds.

[00:04:32.51] RUSSELL CAYLER: We were lucky. In the time that I was there, we got some shot up pretty good, but we didn't lose any. And a couple of guys wounded, but didn't lose any for that particular period of time in our base. But that's not true over in Nakhon Phanom where the H-3s were. I think they lost at least one, maybe two birds.

[00:04:57.28] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions, your quarters like?

[00:05:00.01] RUSSELL CAYLER: Actually pretty good. They were kind of row, single-story BOQs, Bachelor Officers Quarters. They're not very big, and there were two of us to a room, but you had a desk and a chair and a bunk. And if you took a picture of it, it looked a lot fancier than it really was, because this mahogany that they put on everything just shows up better on film. And it was close to the officers club, so you didn't have that far to go.

[00:05:35.84] RUSSELL CAYLER: I liked them. We had a good squadron. Are there some foul balls? Yeah, there were some in the squadron. But generally, I'm here in Fort Walton Beach at the 45th Jolly Green reunion, and some of the guys that I was there with then are here. So we have maintained a friendship basically our entire lives, from that point.

[00:05:58.96] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for recreation, off-duty time, if you had any?

[00:06:04.08] RUSSELL CAYLER: We did. It was Udorn Royal Thai Air Force Base, RTAFB. So they had facilities there, and of course, town wasn't that far away, and it was not off limits to us.

[00:06:16.17] This was not like Vietnam. Thai, you had-- Thailand, although, we were attacked during Tet, a minor skirmish compared to what went on in Vietnam. But so we could go downtown and did.

[00:06:30.78] One of the interesting things, the survival gear that the Air Force gave us, it put the pistol up under the armpit. OK? When you went in for a pickup, you had an armored thing that went over the top of that. Useless. The pistol up here you're not going to get to, ever, and one of the fears was, if you crash, you might be trapped in the helicopter. You couldn't defend yourself.

[00:06:51.49] So we all went down, the entire squadron, bought Western gun belts. Because with a Western gun belt, your pistol is down here on your thigh. You can get to it. So you see somebody coming off the airplane in a flight suit, he's got cartridges and his Western gun belt and his .38 combat masterpiece slung on his right thigh.

[00:07:17.98] RUSSELL CAYLER: There were two or three of us aircraft commanders that ended up getting a lot of missions, and I was one of those guys. I got the first pickup, period, by an Air Force rescue H-53, HH. But it was in Thailand, so it was not a combat mission, but it was a midair collision between two 105s.

[00:07:39.76] So we got the guy out, but it took them 45 minutes just to cut their way to him. He was still in his seat, streamer had come out between his back and the seat. Broke about everything a man can break and not die, and-- but still conscious through all of this. And we ended up getting him out of that, getting him back to the hospital. Two weeks later on the hospital ship, he died, after all that.

[00:08:06.94] JOE GALLOWAY: All that.

[00:08:07.24] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yeah.

[00:08:08.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, one of your missions, very curious, you picked up on Air America civilian pilot from a crash site, near the Chinese border, in northern Laos.

[00:08:23.53] RUSSELL CAYLER: Correct.

[00:08:23.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me about that mission.

[00:08:26.92] RUSSELL CAYLER: Well, we knew there was one down. We have been dispatched up there. Again, we were pulling alert out of Lima 36.

[00:08:33.58] JOE GALLOWAY: This was a helicopter?

[00:08:34.90] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yeah. Yeah. He was flying a helicopter, and of course, we were in a 53 there. So we went to the coordinates that we had and couldn't find much. There was a lot of tall elephant grass.

[00:08:45.28] And we were just about ready to leave, and one of the crew members saw a guy, had a T-shirt, waving his shirt in this elephant grass. Aha. So we went and picked him up, and they were starting to shoot at him, as we did that. Yeah. That was a-- I think that went into the books as the first combat rescue of the 53.

[00:09:08.23] So we just happened to see him, and we were able to pick him up, and there were apparently some other KIA on his helicopter. I never really got a firm number of how many there were and so forth, but he was the only survivor. And I think in a Bell 205, and they had run out of gas. So you have to think about that for a while, where they came from.

[00:09:30.63] JOE GALLOWAY: Wonder where they were coming from.

[00:09:31.62] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yeah. You wonder about that. So we were able to pick him up, and we did not send a PJ down, because he was hale and hearty and could-- but he had tied him into that thing so securely with the strap, he was not going to fall off. So yeah, and he's the one who gave me a Carl Gustaf-- Swedish guy-- 9 millimeter. They called it an assault rifle, but it's more of a machine gun, submachine gun.

[00:10:02.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Submachine gun.

[00:10:04.00] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yeah. Yeah, which I carried the rest of the war, because it would fold up. The stock would fold up, and I could put it down by the seat, where it would be useful. JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:10:16.53] RUSSELL CAYLER: That's a hard one to answer. I guess the most vivid memory for me was the Lima Site 85 mission, where I was the low-- you flew in pairs, high bird and low bird. The low bird was supposed to go in first to do the pickup, or whatever it was.

[00:10:36.91] And then the high bird would stand by in a slightly safer place, in case he got nailed. So you could go in and perhaps get the crew out and whoever they were after. So that was kind of the situation, but the low bird had gone into 85, had picked up over 30 indigenous troops, Hmong guerrillas that were defending this radar site.

[00:11:05.19] And there was one left, one American left alive that was shot and had played dead, so he didn't get executed with the other people that were executed around him. And they knew where he was. He was not an unknown. So they had a location on him.

[00:11:21.78] But at any rate, when we went into that site-- so they have now committed the second of the two of us. Nobody saw him on the crew, because he was blended into the rocks and the foliage on the side of this 3,000-foot sheer cliff. And it was like the curtains were pulled, and everything came into focus. And I saw him up on one elbow, flashing a flashlight at me.

[00:11:51.09] And that's one of those things that sticks in my mind to this day, along with my hover reference, unfortunately, which was a dead enemy soldier. And I can see his face to this day off to the side. He was slumped against something and upright. He wasn't laying down or anything, and I can still see his face. That stuck with me.

[00:12:17.41] RUSSELL CAYLER: It was probably that one, because we successfully got the guy. They knew 24 hours before, it probably was going to get overrun, but they didn't commit then. Because they were trying to keep this radar site going as long as possible, because it controlled radar bombing of North Vietnam. It was the highest point in that whole area that could see all of North Vietnam.

[00:12:41.54] So they could do-- this was before smart bombs. So they could do radar-directed bombing of those areas. So they sent an entire enemy regiment over to take this site out.

[00:12:51.67] So it was only a matter of time, and they waited just a little bit too long, and they got overrun. They didn't know it, but there was a trail up this cliff that the locals knew about, but we didn't. And they climbed it at night and got up there at night and were able to secure the site.

[00:13:13.60] JOE GALLOWAY: The man you rescued, did he not later get a Medal of Honor?

[00:13:18.07] RUSSELL CAYLER: No. That was another gentleman. The one I rescued is Jack Starling. And in rescue you rarely know how the story ends. And he was rescued, he recovered from his wounds, lived his life as, I think, a hospital manager or something like that, and died. And I never met him.

[00:13:41.30] I saw this shadowy figure out in front of me. We came into a hover over him. The PJ went down on the penetrator to a ledge about this long that went along that thing. As he's crawling over-- and he no longer sees this guy up on an elbow.

[00:13:56.23] All he sees is numerous dead bodies, and then that cliff goes way under him. It drops away. So he starts to slide down and off this 3,000-foot peak. He managed to get ahold of himself. He still has the penetrator, the cable attached to him. So he's not going to--

[00:14:13.63] JOE GALLOWAY: He's not going to go far.

[00:14:15.43] RUSSELL CAYLER: He's not going to go far. But he dropped his rifle. So he scrambled back up on this gravel path and gets up over there, and he can't see any live people. Then, one of them grabbed him by the shoulder. He said, it's probably a good thing I dropped my rifle, or I would have shot the guy I was supposed to be picking up.

[00:14:34.85] So anyway, he grabbed him, and there was only the one. We knew that, even though there were some other American bodies there. And he grabbed him, and at that point, they didn't shoot at us.

[00:14:45.88] Now, one of the guys on the crew said, sir, there's enemy troops down there. There's troops down there. I said, if they don't shoot at us, we don't shoot at them.

[00:14:54.52] And I found out why later on, when I was able to read the enemy mission report really, the after-action report. They thought that if they identified themselves, if they tried to shoot at this big helicopter, that they would be attacked, and they didn't want to at that point. So they didn't shoot. So we had people that we could throw rocks at and hit, but they never fired on us.

[00:15:17.59] So we grabbed-- the PJ grabs this guy, and we just backed up. So this poor guy that's been up there wounded laying on this ledge is now 3,000 foot in the air, and we kept it really slow, until we could bring him in. But we wanted to be out of the way from that thing and that ground fire that possibly could nail us. Because we were not moving. They wouldn't have had to lead. They could have just fired directly at us and had us.

[00:15:45.52] RUSSELL CAYLER: I got the first-- I lost two engines. I lost two engines and the hoist came unwound as we were rescuing the Jolly Green crew that had crashed trying to rescue somebody else. And they'd been up there three days, I think. And this was in North Vietnam.

[00:16:07.91] And we were almost about to leave, and one of the Sandy escorts, A-1s, that would normally do some searching for us found him. And I went back, because we were very close to bingo fuel, meaning only enough fuel to get back. So we went into a hover over these guys, and it was again a karst peak, pretty sheer, and they had run into this thing, the granite buildup as it were, trying to get under the weather.

[00:16:34.83] So the copilot ended up about 20 feet in front of the helicopter, with a gash on his arm, bad, down to the bone. And he went through the front of that H-3, and the pilot, the aircraft commander, had at least one broken leg. I want to say two, but I think one broken leg. The PJ, the guy that does the medical, had a broken arm and a broken leg.

[00:16:57.53] So he taught the flight engineer who was uninjured, and they had another passenger on. It was not a PJ, but it was another passenger, some part of the mission. And he instructed them, wounded though he was, on how to fix him and these other two guys.

[00:17:15.74] So they set up there for a couple of days waiting, and we finally got in there. PJs went down on the forest penetrator. Fuel was siphoning from the aircraft for some reason. The weather was coming in on top of us. It was just one thing after another.

[00:17:30.45] And I had to ask my co-pilot, pick a heading, because if we go IFR here, we're going to have to make a rudder turn and go between these other karst peaks that are around us. So that's exactly what ended up happening. The hoist held together long enough to get this other crew up into the helicopter, and then the PJs actually went down to do the work. Before-- it's not

that it was totally useless, but it needed a lot of maintenance before we really wanted to use that again. The cable actually started to come unwound on the doggone thing.

[00:18:05.84] OK, home free, right? So we make a turn to this heading, and we head out. And we're in the soup immediately, because like I say, it's coming in on us. We broke free of that, and we had a double engine failure. Both engines just quit.

[00:18:22.08] I need to explain that. In a 53, you have two systems that have lines to the fuel tanks. They have fuel pumps, separate, not interconnected. They have fuel pumps on the engines, and it took that particular time for both of them to simultaneously die.

[00:18:42.44] Well, I was an old H-19 pilot. So, down on the collective, you go into autorotation. You only have one engine in the H-19. So it's a natural reaction.

[00:18:50.94] So autorotation, I yell, mayday, mayday, mayday, lost both engines. And I reached up and slapped an engine into cross-feed. OK. That's the only connection between the two sides. There is a cross-feed, so that you can get fuel out of another tank.

[00:19:05.87] OK. We go into cross-feed. Both engines are unwinding, and the right engine stops at about 50% and then gradually starts to build back in. And we're still in full autorotation, but this is a pretty high peak. So we were able to slow down and eventually got the power back in to arrest our descent.

[00:19:34.04] And talking with some of the pilots in back who, again, I've known for many years, they said that was the sickest feeling in the world. You have just been rescued, and now it got real quiet in the helicopter, because you no longer have engines. They said, oh, here we go again.

[00:19:51.39] JOE GALLOWAY: How low did you go, before you got--

[00:19:52.87] RUSSELL CAYLER: We got down to about 400 feet or so. And we had, like I say, escorting Sandy's with us, and we had a couple of pretty heavily defended roads that we had to cross to get back out. Not into Thailand but into northern Laos, so that we could recover at a site up there.

[00:20:10.29] So we were heavy. We have all these people aboard. We have fuel in both tanks, so it wasn't fuel starvation. That inter-- cross-feed was not in the emergency procedures. I have no idea what caused me to do that, but it saved that one engine at any rate.

[00:20:28.73] At any rate, so we threw everything that wasn't nailed down. There's porta-potties and cases of oil and hydraulic fluid and clothes and anything we could do to lighten the load, because we had mountains to cross. And we found that we could, indeed, cross those mountains.

[00:20:44.82] JOE GALLOWAY: On one engine.

[00:20:45.77] RUSSELL CAYLER: On one engine, yeah. So the 53 was pretty good for that. And to help us with the navigation, because that was a problem with that low of an altitude, an HC-130, a wet wing transport, or tanker, came into North Vietnam to help us with the navigation to get out there. Now, that took courage too.

[00:21:11.57] RUSSELL CAYLER: Letters, wrote letters virtually every day, and this was open reel, those little tapes. So we would send tapes back. And occasionally, if you were willing to wait until whenever you could get through, you could get through on MARS.

[00:21:26.34] JOE GALLOWAY: MARS.

[00:21:26.91] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yeah. I love you. Over. He says he loves you. And you would have to talk through a third person. But yeah, so once in a while, we would talk that way as well.

[00:21:39.87] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war from home?

[00:21:44.55] RUSSELL CAYLER: From home, I don't know. We had Stars and Stripes, and they were pretty straight with what was going on. So I never felt any kind of a lack for it. We were aware of the demonstrations and the antiwar movement, things going on.

[00:22:00.72] JOE GALLOWAY: How did that news affect you, or did it?

[00:22:03.42] RUSSELL CAYLER: Well, kind of pissed us off. We're there fighting a war for our country, and we've got people on the other side. It more honest times some of that would have been called what it really was, which is treason.

[00:22:23.82] Well, I still won't go see anything that Jane Fonda is in. And I know she's apologized for it, and she's just-- what they really did to the troops, and the effects of her efforts-- and I knew there were some others that are not in good odor with a lot of-- good odor with a lot of veterans. And there's good reason for it.

[00:22:52.26] RUSSELL CAYLER: I had intended to be a career military guy. So it was basically another assignment. I got a concurrent assignment to Okinawa, and we went from-- I went from Southeast Asia, from Udon, Thailand, Udon to Naha. There was a base at Naha, an Air Force base, Naha Air Force Base, Okinawa, which was at the time an American protectorate with a high commissioner that ran the place.

[00:23:23.91] So I signed in there. I knew I was going there fairly early in my tour, consecutive overseas. So Kay and I were there, and Kay was able to join me over there, my wife, over there. And we were there for like 3 and 1/2 years. So we extended basically a year and a half. We liked it. It was good duty and-- well, it was real good duty.

[00:23:47.79] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow veterans over the years?

[00:23:52.80] RUSSELL CAYLER: Well, in Dixon, California, where we live, I'm in the VFW there and American Legion, both actually, and through the Jolly Greens. And there's another organization that I also belong to called the US Air Force Helicopter Pilots Association, and through those both, we keep in touch with a lot of the guys that I was with, again, from the very beginning, learning how to fly these things. So over the years, we maintained the contacts, and I did do 20 years in the Air Force.

[00:24:23.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Was there any difficulty readjusting to not civilian life, but life-- peaceful--

[00:24:32.12] RUSSELL CAYLER: Ordinary life. Yeah. Not really, because there was kind of an intermediate step there, as I went from Southeast Asia, to Okinawa. And then went back, actually for training, to convert to the H-3, and the H-3 is what we had then in Okinawa. When I got to Okinawa, we had the last couple of HU-16s that flew off into the sunset, and then they replaced those with H-3s.

[00:25:08.68] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your Vietnam experience affect your life afterwards?

[00:25:17.41] RUSSELL CAYLER: It made me a little more suspicious of government, in that we really-- you never really got a complete picture of the background, why we were there doing what we're doing. Now, we were fighting communism, and that was-- at the time, that was a big deal. They had appeared to be on the march. So to us, it was part of the job that came with the blue suit that you got issued when you came in the Air Force.

[00:25:51.06] You're going to go to war. You're going to fight it on behalf of your nation. And that's what we did. It was disappointing to us that some people sympathized with the other side, and that was kind of hard to swallow. That was not pleasant.

[00:26:07.14] As far as personally, I was never attacked, I was never spit on, and I know a lot of people had that kind of experience. I wasn't one of those. Okinawa, 3 and 1/2 years, except for TDYs back to the States, temporary duty. And then later, after that, we were reassigned to Hamilton Air Force base, in California, 53s again, so 53s, 3s, 53s.

[00:26:34.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your time in that war that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence?

[00:26:45.69] RUSSELL CAYLER: Well, that Lima Site 85 mission turned out to be a biggie. We did not know that at the time, because it was highly classified. It was one of these clandestine operations where we had Air Force people that were magically civilians, while they were over there. Unless they got wounded or killed, and then they magically became Air Force again.

[00:27:05.64] So it was a clandestine mission that we couldn't talk about for another 20 years. So we didn't, except in very general terms. We did not know, at that point, the whole history of Chief Master Sergeant Richard Etchberger getting the Medal of Honor, because it had not been upgraded, and it was so classified

[00:27:25.74] they gave him the highest medal they could, which was an Air Force Cross. And by that point, he even had a son that was in the Air Force, and they told him that he had been killed in the helicopter crash. Well, helicopter crashes and Air Force Crosses don't go together. So he knew that dad had done something pretty significant, but the children were not told much either until way later.

[00:27:54.09] So 42 years after the fact, the Medal of Honor was presented to the sons, to the family. And we were honored by-- they asked us, Joe Panza and myself, to come to that Medal of Honor ceremony at the White House. So there's one of those things where you did get the final end of the story.

[00:28:16.80] Because in the rescue world, you rescue somebody, you deliver him to the nearest medical facility, Air Force base. The meat wagon shows up, they take the survivor away, and that's the last see of him. This one, we know how it ended over that 42 year period, and that's unusual. That's very unusual to be able to look at that from that perspective, and that stuck with me for a long time. It still does.

[00:28:44.52] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered generally in our society?

[00:28:53.07] RUSSELL CAYLER: I hate to say this, but it's pretty much not anymore. With the other wars that we've been in since then, most of the kids-- we talk about them. And I had nieces and nephews that are now in their 50s that were pretty young, but remember it, and nobody even talks about it. Scholars work on that, and some of those guys don't do a real good job, to me, of analyzing what actually went on and what we-- the collective we, the US military-- the handicaps we had to fight under.

[00:29:28.56] There were certain areas, even when we were traveling in northern Laos, trying to rescue people, where we couldn't go. I had a little circle on the map, and you do not go over this town, and they were normally not anti-aircraft guns. We had those marked also. They were for political reasons why you didn't go to these areas, because there was some government official that had a resort or something.

[00:29:57.64] If you've ever read the book One Day Too Long-- and I recommend it, if you haven't-- it tells that whole story of that theater of the war. Not so much Vietnam but northern Laos, the activities that went on there and the political machinations that went on in that whole theater. The enemy had 40,000 troops that weren't there. We didn't have anything close to that, but of course, we had troops that weren't there either.

[00:30:25.16] So there were sites that were on our side. There were other sites were on their side, and there were other sites that were neutral. So you had to be careful where you went sometimes.

[00:30:33.02] JOE GALLOWAY: We got almost no American POWs back from Laos.

[00:30:38.33] RUSSELL CAYLER: That is correct.

[00:30:39.20] JOE GALLOWAY: And we know that there were 300-odd who were taken alive.

[00:30:46.19] RUSSELL CAYLER: It was a very almost medieval treatment of people. There was one of the sites that we used to work out of, Lima Site 36. And there were some prisoners there, and they were held in a pit with barbed wire around it, an open pit, to give you an idea. And if they got fed, it was because somebody took pity on them and threw them down some food.

[00:31:11.36] So it was not-- it does not surprise me that we didn't have more that came back, and that's a sad thing. And it was such a jungle-- that's not a proper word, I know. But it's so much jungle cover to that that you could very easily be lost under that, and it would be very difficult to find you, very difficult.

[00:31:35.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from this combat experience more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:31:48.02] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yeah. Yeah. I think so. There were not many jobs in the military where you get to rescue people, and over the years, I've rescued far more civilians than I ever did military.

[00:32:03.77] But I picked up a number of local people that had been downed in an Air America cargo aircraft. That was a Pilatus Porter. He lost his only engine. He managed to-- it was a good piece of flying because it was a stump-covered, small area, and he put that thing right down in the middle of it. And the wings were broken down, which means he basically stalled it into the ground, and no injuries. And there was the pilot and about--

[00:32:32.57] JOE GALLOWAY: That Porter is a beautiful airplane.

[00:32:35.48] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yes.

[00:32:35.81] JOE GALLOWAY: In the end, what did the Vietnam War mean for you and your generation, our generation?

[00:32:45.68] RUSSELL CAYLER: I'm not even going to say it was our first political war, because it wasn't. All of the conflicts that the country has been in, from the Revolution on down, had a political element to it, but we didn't handle the political element in this one very well at all. And I think one of the things that we do not excel at as a nation is looking pragmatically and purposely at the future for whatever we're doing militarily. We don't necessarily connect all those dots and have a good strategy, a good exit-- any kind of an exit strategy.

[00:33:22.59] And they tend to drag on, as the current conflict is doing in Southwest Asia. But I think that was our first modern, we'll call it, political war, because it had all of the elements. And they didn't win over there, they won here, the enemy did, and they managed to change public opinion. Also, this is one of, I think, the first times that we encountered a combination of asymmetrical warfare, the Viet Cong and the Viet Minh, and standard, stand-up combat with NVA regulars, with regular elements of the North Vietnamese Army.

[00:34:03.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Two or three different wars.

[00:34:05.18] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yes, going on simultaneously. And I didn't know, until years later, that those were not-- the Viet Cong and the Viet Minh were not the only-- we had guerrillas over there too, Chinese-based Vietnamese that had guerrilla units, that helped the Army. I didn't know that.

[00:34:25.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Nungs.

[00:34:25.94] RUSSELL CAYLER: Yeah.

[00:34:27.71] JOE GALLOWAY: The Hmong.

[00:34:28.49] RUSSELL CAYLER: Well, Hmong was over in our area. JOE GALLOWAY: In Laos, yeah. RUSSELL CAYLER: And then Montagnard. Yeah. So there were lots of different elements there that all kind of interconnected, and it was kind of a combination. And if you're going to get in one of those conflicts, you better have some pretty clear goals. I think as a nation, we're not very good at that.

[00:34:55.08] RUSSELL CAYLER: I think it's probably a good idea. One of the reasons I did museum work, and that I enjoyed it, is because corporate memory is short. The national memory is just not that long, and we cannot forget the lessons we learned in such a hard way. I think it's relevant to what we are doing now, that they already forgot some of that stuff. And so for me, it's probably a good thing to put that back out there, so that people-- oh, yes, we were in this other war back there.

[00:35:30.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, thank you, Major.

[00:35:31.95] RUSSELL CAYLER: You're welcome. Thank you for having me.

[00:35:35.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.