

Christian, Stephen US Army

[00:00:17.59] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I was born in Buffalo, New York on 6 November, 1940. My father is Stephen T. Christian, and my mother Marian T. Christian. I have two brothers younger than I, David T. Christian and Jay Daniel Christian.

[00:00:34.60] JOE GALLOWAY: What did your dad do?

[00:00:35.92] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: He was a banker.

[00:00:37.03] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. And do you consider Buffalo your hometown?

[00:00:40.59] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Nope.

[00:00:40.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Is that where you grew up?

[00:00:41.56] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No, not at all.

[00:00:42.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Not at all.

[00:00:43.78] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: My hometown I consider to be Frewsburg, New York. It's where I spent most of my time.

[00:00:49.57] JOE GALLOWAY: You went to school there?

[00:00:50.98] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yes. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: After finishing high school, I went to John Carroll University. They had an ROTC program there. And after four years, I was commissioned in the regular Army.

[00:01:09.06] JOE GALLOWAY: That was-- what year were you commissioned?

[00:01:11.19] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: 1963.

[00:01:12.81] JOE GALLOWAY: '63, OK. Vietnam was not really on the radar at any place.

[00:01:20.00] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No.

[00:01:21.33] JOE GALLOWAY: The Cold War was. What was your sense of what was going on at that time?

[00:01:26.82] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Very little. As a regular Army officer, but commissioned in the transportation corps, I had to spend two years in a combat arm. And I did that in the armor branch. And I eventually got to Europe. And I was assigned to a tank battalion there for 18 months. And all we did was train. What was going on in the outside world had very little--

[00:01:52.05] JOE GALLOWAY: You didn't know.

[00:01:53.30] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: --knowledge. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Part of the basic training occurred between my junior and senior year in college. And as a transportation officer, we went to Fort Eustis. Then after I was commissioned, I went to Fort Knox and attended the Armor Officers Basic Course.

[00:02:17.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Attended their basic there?

[00:02:18.71] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yes.

[00:02:20.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Did all the training that you got prepare you for what you faced in Vietnam?

[00:02:28.87] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Not really. No.

[00:02:32.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Not really.

[00:02:33.91] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No. I'm not saying it was deficient. I'm just saying it wasn't there. As a transportation officer, I understood the transportation business. After I had completed my 18 months in the armor branch, I transferred, while still in Germany, to transportation. Worked first as a staff officer in a truck battalion, and then I became a company commander. And then following that is when I went to Vietnam. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I got to Vietnam on a commercial charter. And we landed at Tan Son Nhut Air Base. This was in 1967.

[00:03:20.14] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on stepping off the plane?

[00:03:23.81] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Get undercover. We were having-- a guy came on the plane and said, we're in the middle of a mortar attack, hustle. And we did. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I was assigned to the 507th Transportation Group, Movement Control. And my duty station was with the District Traffic Office in Qui Nhon. I was the operations officer and the commander of the 133rd Transportation Detachment. And essentially, we served all services and-- including the ARVN and Koreans, and made arrangements for all modes of transportation for them or their cargo, except for truck transportation.

[00:04:10.55] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. Did you perform those same duties for your entire tour, or did you get changed--

[00:04:18.48] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No.

[00:04:18.68] JOE GALLOWAY: --around?

[00:04:18.94] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No, I had those for my entire tour. I was there from January through December '67. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Working with customers and checking on the operations at the port in Qui Nhon where the majority of our business--

[00:04:42.93] JOE GALLOWAY: --took place.

[00:04:43.77] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: --took place, right.

[00:04:44.88] JOE GALLOWAY: You were having ships coming in, ships going out.

[00:04:48.04] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: That's correct.

[00:04:49.08] JOE GALLOWAY: You weren't running truck convoys. You--

[00:04:51.45] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No, I had nothing to do that.

[00:04:52.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Had nothing to do with that.

[00:04:54.27] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No.

[00:04:55.56] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like?

[00:04:58.42] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, we started out, I lived in-- Madame Nhu had a summer place in Qui Nhon.

[00:05:05.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh.

[00:05:06.00] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: And there was a club there as well as-- we'll call them billets for the--

[00:05:15.00] JOE GALLOWAY: BOQs.

[00:05:16.23] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, that's right. It was a two story masonry building, and we stayed there. The downside was there was no protection there. And eventually, Qui Nhon Support Command built tropical wooden buildings for BOQs. And we moved into the Quincy Compound.

[00:05:45.04] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: There were three of us, three officers in the District Traffic Office. There was a commander who initially was a major. And then there was me. And then I supervised the first lieutenant who was in charge of a rail detachment who worked with the Vietnamese Rail Service.

[00:06:04.60] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. You, by now, were a captain?

[00:06:07.66] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yes, I was a captain.

[00:06:08.85] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. Now at this time in America, there are beginning some social tensions and racial tensions. Any of that come to your notice--

[00:06:21.33] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No.

[00:06:21.68] JOE GALLOWAY: --in Vietnam?

[00:06:22.22] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Not in that tour.

[00:06:26.33] JOE GALLOWAY: In your next tour?

[00:06:28.01] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yes.

[00:06:28.64] JOE GALLOWAY: We'll come back to that. What did you do for off duty and recreation time, if you had any of that?

[00:06:38.79] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I had one day. I went to the beach, got terribly sunburned. And the boss says, that's the last time I'm going to give you a day off. That was it.

[00:06:54.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe the quality of the leadership in your outfit and above, if you saw it?

[00:07:04.20] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Above, I saw very little. We had-- our District Traffic Office fell into the 2d Movement Region, which was located in Nha Trang. And it was a lieutenant colonel in charge. He was there a couple of times, and that was about it.

[00:07:22.41] JOE GALLOWAY: That was it.

[00:07:22.96] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yeah, and the first boss I had was a major, Jim Carrasco. And he was fine. He knew a lot. And I learned a lot from him. But he was only there for three or four months, and then he left. And then the lieutenant colonel, Jim Penn, came in. And he was quite elderly. And he was only there maybe two months, and he left. Then they got another lieutenant colonel in, whose name I can't recall offhand. And he was there for the rest of my tour. And he was pretty good.

[00:07:57.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty good.

[00:07:58.31] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yeah.

[00:08:00.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Now your second tour would have been '71-- '70, '71?

[00:08:05.65] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: '70, '71, yes.

[00:08:07.66] JOE GALLOWAY: What had changed in that time?

[00:08:12.18] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: It's hard to say, because my view during my first tour was so limited that I couldn't really tell you what had changed by the time I came back. There wasn't anything-- I had nothing to compare it to.

[00:08:28.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Right. When you came back, were your duties different?

[00:08:32.39] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yes.

[00:08:32.93] JOE GALLOWAY: You were assigned to a different outfit, a different location?

[00:08:37.10] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: That's correct. I was assigned to the Da Nang Support Command. And initially, I served as the secretary of the general staff for six months. And then another six months as the deputy assistant transportation officer.

[00:08:51.89] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were working there with Army, Marines, the whole--

[00:08:56.45] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No.

[00:08:56.71] JOE GALLOWAY: No. Just Army?

[00:08:57.74] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Just Army, because we-- the support command was established while the Navy and the Marines pulled out. And so it was all Army by the time--

[00:09:09.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, beginning in January of '71, Operation Lam Son 719 got underway. Did you have a part to play in that?

[00:09:22.90] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, yes, the whole support command did. It was called-- the U.S. operation was called DEWEY CANYON II. The Vietnamese operation was Lam Son 719. And our headquarters was very much involved. That area of operation came under the support command's area. And our 26th General Support Group located up north was the primary logistics support activity involved in supporting them.

[00:09:56.17] JOE GALLOWAY: My recollection is the forward base was Khe Sanh. And they were going into Laos from there.

[00:10:03.46] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, that's right. And there were a couple of other places where they came in from as well. One of the biggest problems that we had was the operation was so secret that there were-- in our headquarters, which was commanded by a colonel, there were only like two or three people that knew what was going on, had the big picture. We were all scrambling but we didn't know why. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No, I was aware there was an Army concept team there and a rapid response thing. But I had no idea what they were doing.

[00:10:38.86] JOE GALLOWAY: No idea what they were doing.

[00:10:40.38] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Probably R&R.

[00:10:46.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Where did you go?

[00:10:48.67] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: We went to Hawaii. My wife met me there.

[00:10:51.63] JOE GALLOWAY: Your wife met you there. Both trips?

[00:10:54.24] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Both trips. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, on my first tour, we got rocketed one night in Qui Nhon at 2:00 in the morning, and we were scrambling for the bunkers. We did not suffer any casualties there. And I didn't have any comparable experience in Da Nang. STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: It was all with the first tour, and had some with the Vietnamese from the 2nd Log Command, and some from the Koreans. But I don't recall anything with the Thais, or Filipinos, or-- at all.

[00:11:47.06] JOE GALLOWAY: How about the Koreans, how are they to work with?

[00:11:51.35] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: They were fine, very businesslike. They'd come in and present their documentation, tell us what they want to move, and we took it from there. The Koreans had a camp not far from our support command headquarters. And in the evenings, they would do sort of combat training. It was all just physical man on man. If somebody didn't do something right, one of the Korean soldiers or the NCOs that were running this thing, they'd just come over and hammer him, pow, right in the face. They kept Highway One out of Qui Nhon open in their AO with two signs in Korean, English, and in Vietnamese that told them that if you mess with us in here, you're going to get killed.

[00:12:43.04] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I didn't really have any contact with the civilians other than the maids that maintained--

[00:12:51.73] JOE GALLOWAY: --made the bed and washed your clothes.

[00:12:53.86] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yeah, made the bed and did your laundry, yeah.

[00:12:54.58] JOE GALLOWAY: The military side?

[00:12:58.51] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: The only one again was with the Vietnamese. And they were in the transportation business with the 2nd Log Command in Qui Nhon.

[00:13:05.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Were they efficient?

[00:13:06.89] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I don't really know because everything that they had, or wanted, or whatever, went through there adviser to us.

[00:13:20.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Hmm. So you were really dealing with another American.

[00:13:23.35] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: That's exactly right.

[00:13:24.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:13:33.52] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I wrote home once a week. I called home once.

[00:13:37.15] JOE GALLOWAY: One time.

[00:13:38.02] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yeah, on MARS. A little different than what I'd experienced before because you had to say "over" all the time.

[00:13:47.75] JOE GALLOWAY: And getting your wife to say it must have been a little--

[00:13:50.23] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Same thing. She picked it up pretty quick.

[00:13:52.54] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you get from home about the war you were involved in, or the politics and social movements?

[00:14:01.18] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: None. None.

[00:14:02.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Stars and Stripes, Armed Forces Radio?

[00:14:04.54] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yes, I got the-- all I got was the Stars and Stripes.

[00:14:07.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:14:14.00] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, the first one when I came back, came into-- it could have been Travis.

[00:14:23.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:14:24.21] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: And then got a flight out of San Francisco back to Chicago where my wife was staying.

[00:14:32.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Any demonstrators?

[00:14:33.51] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No.

[00:14:34.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Nothing like that?

[00:14:35.30] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: None.

[00:14:35.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Second tour?

[00:14:36.77] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Second tour, I left from Cam Ranh Bay and went into SeaTac. And there were people there handing you things. It was not an unpleasant experience.

[00:14:52.50] JOE GALLOWAY: They weren't being nasty to you. They just--

[00:14:54.47] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: No, none, never saw that. But I read about people that did.

[00:14:57.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:14:58.70] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: After the war, well, after the first Vietnam assignment, I came back to Fort Eustis, had the-- attended the Transportation Officer's Advanced Course and then was assigned to Oakland Army Base and the Military Traffic Management Command. And then from there, I went back for my second tour. That second tour being over, I went to Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, and then to graduate school after that.

[00:15:28.46] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with people you served with in Vietnam in the years since the war?

[00:15:35.65] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: A fair amount. Yeah.

[00:15:37.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Go to reunions, or anything like that?

[00:15:39.85] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, transportation corps is relatively small, and we kind of had a way of getting together. Many of the officers, myself included, ended up having other tours at Fort Eustis which was the home at that time.

[00:15:51.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Brings everybody together there.

[00:15:53.61] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yeah.

[00:15:58.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about our troops coming back from our wars today?

[00:16:07.77] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I don't think so. My experience was very positive. So I can't relate to it if it's--

[00:16:17.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today?

[00:16:24.78] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Less and less each day. The current generation, they don't have any idea. It's just a name to them. It's only older folks.

[00:16:34.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Us old folks are dying off too.

[00:16:36.70] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: That's right.

[00:16:37.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Are there lessons that you took from your time in Vietnam that you think are worth passing on?

[00:16:48.21] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: I can't say that I can, or that I can recall any because I was so far down in the chain. And I was a captain on my first tour and a captain on my second tour, all but the very end, and I got promoted to major. And my duties were the same. They didn't change.

[00:17:12.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial here in Washington?

[00:17:16.86] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Yes. Yes, I have a couple times.

[00:17:19.10] JOE GALLOWAY: What are your thoughts when you go?

[00:17:20.44] STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, I have some friends whose names are on the Wall.
STEPHEN CHRISTIAN: Well, I think it's appropriate that it's done. I think the oral history part is very good. We didn't start this whole thing on previous things until it was almost too late.