

Czerner, Frederick US Air Force

[00:00:16.76] FRED CZERNER: Born in Tampa in February of 1944.

[00:00:20.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Good year. Who were your family members?

[00:00:24.41] FRED CZERNER: I had a mother, a father, and a brother.

[00:00:27.53] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. What did your dad do?

[00:00:29.21] FRED CZERNER: My dad was an appliance repairman and later service manager for International Harvester.

[00:00:36.34] JOE GALLOWAY: And where did you grow up? What do you consider your hometown?

[00:00:40.75] FRED CZERNER: Dade City, Florida, which is nowhere near Miami. Most people think that Dade is down in South Florida.

[00:00:46.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Dade County, yeah.

[00:00:47.03] FRED CZERNER: But, actually, Dade City is up where General-- or, excuse me, Major Jim Dade died during the Seminole Wars.

[00:01:00.68] FRED CZERNER: Well, when I was three years old, I decided I wanted to fly. And I can verify that because my dad was a photographer. And our Christmas card that year had me with an airplane on the front of it. So I've been interested in aviation for a long time. I went through the University of Florida Air Force ROTC program where I was able to get a pilot's license and graduate as a distinguished graduate.

[00:01:23.12] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were commissioned on graduation?

[00:01:27.23] FRED CZERNER: Shortly after graduation. I was working my way through school--

[00:01:30.74] JOE GALLOWAY: What year?

[00:01:31.13] FRED CZERNER: In 1966 in August. My first memory of the Vietnam War is actually when I was in 11th grade. We used to get something called the Weekly Reader, which was kind of a weekly newspaper for schools. And there was a story on there with a picture of Thailand. And Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand was on that picture. And I remember that. And that was my first assignment.

[00:01:52.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:01:57.57] FRED CZERNER: Well, flight training, I went through Laredo Air Force Base, which is no longer an Air Force base. But, in those days, they had four training squadrons.

[00:02:04.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Down on the Mexican border?

[00:02:05.22] FRED CZERNER: Right. Right across the border from Nuevo, Laredo. There was better food in Nuevo Laredo than there was in Laredo.

[00:02:12.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe what other flight training you had.

[00:02:15.72] FRED CZERNER: Well, I went through undergraduate pilot training. One of my fun memories is that I was a disc jockey in college, and it was kind of neat because if I would give the local organization a little plug on the radio, I got an hour of free flying time.

[00:02:31.38] JOE GALLOWAY: There you go.

[00:02:31.77] FRED CZERNER: So every weekend, I had about four hours of time to burn. And it was kind of fun. So by the time I got to pilot training, I had 400 hours of flight time already.

[00:02:41.19] And they start you out in an orientation program called-- well, it's T-41 familiarization. It was taught by a civilian company called Bell Aircraft Training. And so, I'm sitting at the table waiting for my first flight. And I wait, and I wait, and I wait. And now it's about six o'clock in the afternoon. And, finally, this old guy-- I was 22 [LAUGHS] at the time.

[00:03:03.35] JOE GALLOWAY: So he was 38?

[00:03:04.79] FRED CZERNER: No, he was actually about 65.

[00:03:06.56] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:03:06.92] FRED CZERNER: But he came in and said, OK, Cessner? Czerner, Sir. Let's go fly. Now, don't touch anything. OK. We walk around the airplane. We get in the airplane. It's essentially a Cessna 172, a little bit bigger engine and a constant speed propeller. So I didn't touch anything, and we took off.

[00:03:30.91] And he says, OK. Now we're going up. We're going to come through 2,000 feet here. I want you to get on the controls-- very lightly. OK. All right, we're going to level off here at 3,000. All right. Leveled off. And he looked at me kind of funny.

[00:03:45.78] And so, I'm flying along at 2,000 feet. And he says, OK, here in Texas, those are section lines, those long lines you see, they mark off areas of land, and they run north, south, east, west. So that's better than your compass. All right. He says, can you turn to that one? So I turned over and leveled off on the section line.

[00:04:04.29] And he says, OK, turn back north. So I turn back north. Have you flown before? Yes, Sir, a little bit. Oh, OK. Well, let's see what you can do. He gave me the final check right.

[00:04:16.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Right there?

[00:04:16.45] FRED CZERNER: On the first flight.

[00:04:17.65] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:04:17.92] FRED CZERNER: And we went back and bet beers on landing spots. And so, the rest of the 40 hours I flew with him, we never did any of the syllabus. We had great fun, and I graduated number one at the end of that period.

[00:04:28.27] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS] Pretty cool.

[00:04:31.13] FRED CZERNER: It was fun.

[00:04:31.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:04:32.14] FRED CZERNER: A lot of fun.

[00:04:33.22] JOE GALLOWAY: What year were you deployed to Thailand to fly?

[00:04:37.78] FRED CZERNER: I went over in July of '68 to Ubon.

[00:04:40.60] JOE GALLOWAY: '68.

[00:04:41.41] FRED CZERNER: Of course, I stopped in Clark Air Base for about three weeks to go through jungle survival school.

[00:04:47.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, that's fun.

[00:04:48.25] FRED CZERNER: Oh, it was. Yeah.

[00:04:54.19] FRED CZERNER: Well, we landed at Ubon. The base Gooney Bird, C-47, came over and picked up six of us at Clark Air Base. And flew us--

[00:05:03.07] JOE GALLOWAY: The Gooney Bird, C-46, C-47?

[00:05:05.32] FRED CZERNER: C-47. C-47. C-46 was the Commando that was used mostly by Air America in Vietnam. And so, we landed at Ubon. I'm only a second lieutenant. But I noticed this gentleman standing there where we landed. And he was the wing commander. And he says, welcome to Ubon. You are the first members under the new one-year tour policy.

[00:05:29.40] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:05:30.10] FRED CZERNER: I had just bought a new car because I was only going to be there for four months. I mean, it was 100 missions and go home.

[00:05:35.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:05:36.99] FRED CZERNER: Nope, so we're there for a full year, which turned to offer a lot of opportunity but also a couple of complications because the policy for 100 missions was still in force. But you had to fly a full year of time to be there for a full year.

[00:05:52.45] Well, most people completed their 100 mission tour in six months or less. So now we had to fly 100 missions over a full year. That is counters, missions going up into North Vietnam.

[00:06:04.94] JOE GALLOWAY: So they're stretching out--

[00:06:06.79] FRED CZERNER: No, they made it very simple. If you look at my form five today, you'll find about 37 entries where there's only one name on the form entry. And that's because I'd logged Laos time, and the front-seater would log North Vietnam time.

[00:06:20.28] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:06:21.38] FRED CZERNER: So for the official record, I've only got just a little under 100. But I've actually got about 135, 140 missions up north. Because, later on, we did a lot of flying up north.

[00:06:32.41] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on landing, other than finding out your tour had just been extended times three?

[00:06:39.64] FRED CZERNER: Well, you have the one-- the normal things. Let's get in the squadron, let's get oriented. The second surprise was that they had just initiated-- I guess it was just for us-- a program where you had to go to the range a couple of times before you could go fly combat. They wanted to check you out.

[00:06:55.00] Now, you have to see, my first sort-- my first tour, I was a back-seater, the so-called GIB, guy in back.

[00:07:02.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:07:02.78] FRED CZERNER: Now, as a pilot--

[00:07:03.64] JOE GALLOWAY: And what are you flying? What--

[00:07:05.18] FRED CZERNER: F-4s.

[00:07:05.81] JOE GALLOWAY: F-4 Phantom?

[00:07:06.89] FRED CZERNER: Yes, F-4. We had, at Ubon, we had F-4Cs and F-4Ds. The earlier models.

[00:07:14.68] JOE GALLOWAY: So you're starting off as the back seat guy.

[00:07:16.96] FRED CZERNER: I was a back-seater guy. And what we ended up doing was flying 232 missions that year. But less than a hundred of them were official counters.

[00:07:28.12] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:07:30.16] FRED CZERNER: Bureaucracy reigns everywhere.

[00:07:32.16] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:07:37.35] FRED CZERNER: Get up early in the morning to be at flight planning. We normally had takeoffs in the order of five-thirty to six to give us an on-target time. Because from Ubon we flew a lot of sorties, interdiction sorties up in North Vietnam on Route Pack Five and Route Pack Six, which would be the Hanoi area going out to Dien Bien Phu.

[00:08:01.68] And we also flew on Route Pack One, which would be from the DMZ south. We were flying the north-- normally the north-western section there.

[00:08:09.94] JOE GALLOWAY: So you were flying some South Vietnam and Laos missions as well.

[00:08:13.86] FRED CZERNER: Yeah, I ended up on the night team for about half of my tour. So I was flying night bombing and night escort for the Spectre AC-130 gunships. And that was kind of interesting because I got to be on the first mission where the Spectre AC-130 carried the big gun, the 155.

[00:08:31.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:08:32.04] FRED CZERNER: And it-- normally, you would see--

[00:08:33.78] JOE GALLOWAY: They move at about four feet sideways.

[00:08:36.06] FRED CZERNER: I was never in the airplane. So I understand it shook it quite a bit. But usually when the gunfire would come up in Laos, it was mostly 23 and 37-millimeter. The Spectre would roll out and go away from the guns.

[00:08:53.89] This night, he just changed his orbit, fired one shot, there were no more shots fired from the ground that night because they had never seen that. The flame out of the side of that airplane was humongous.

[00:09:03.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Humongous, yeah.

[00:09:04.39] FRED CZERNER: And it got the attention of the guys on the ground.

[00:09:07.00] JOE GALLOWAY: I bet. What were your living conditions like?

[00:09:10.18] FRED CZERNER: Actually, we had great quarters. I started out with a roommate for about six weeks. And then we had separate quarters after that. They were wooden--

[00:09:21.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Hooches?

[00:09:21.99] FRED CZERNER: No, not-- well--

[00:09:23.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Not barracks, though.

[00:09:23.31] FRED CZERNER: --we may have called them hooches, but they were nice buildings, much like a motel you might have seen in the South back in the 1970s with individual cabins.

[00:09:32.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:09:32.52] FRED CZERNER: And the only thing was, the latrine was down at the end of the cabin row. But the interesting thing also was the sidewalks were all slatted wood. We walked on sidewalks or wooden walks raised from the ground because of the grass kraits.

[00:09:47.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Because of-- ?

[00:09:48.54] FRED CZERNER: Snakes.

[00:09:49.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Snakes. Ooh.

[00:09:49.98] FRED CZERNER: Yeah. And every now and then you'd see the grass krait with its head up through the slat, and you just kind of kick it with the boot, and that ended it.

[00:09:57.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Try to kill it.

[00:09:58.35] FRED CZERNER: Well, it usually did.

[00:09:59.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Food?

[00:10:04.31] FRED CZERNER: Food was good. The only-- there is one thing I do remember that was kind of funny. Coming in from a night mission, I would usually eat breakfast. And I love fried rice. So I'd go to the O Club and have a plate of shrimp fried rice.

[00:10:16.55] So I go in there one day. And she says, sorry, there's no fried rice. Well, I could look out the window at the rice paddies where the people were harvesting rice. It turned out that all of our rice, by law, came from Louisiana.

[00:10:28.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Of course.

[00:10:28.86] FRED CZERNER: And so, we're in Thailand, in the middle of the rice bucket, and there's no rice.

[00:10:33.26] JOE GALLOWAY: You can't get any rice.

[00:10:34.22] FRED CZERNER: So you go downtown and get rice.

[00:10:35.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:10:41.57] FRED CZERNER: Strongly competent professional people. There was a lot of playing going on. I mentioned I worked my way through college. I was not much of a player. I was a pretty serious guy. I used to work about 60 hours a week plus go to school.

[00:10:57.50] And because I did-- I was a disc jockey. I was also the afternoon news guy on the television station and did commercials at night and then did record hops on Friday and Saturday night. So it was a pretty busy time, and I was a pretty serious guy getting all that stuff done.

[00:11:12.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:11:12.78] FRED CZERNER: So we were having a party one night. I was in D Flight, called Uptight D Flight. And we had a briefing the next morning at four o'clock. So about eight o'clock, I headed back to the dorm to sleep.

[00:11:26.64] And, well, about two o'clock in the morning, my door came down. Four guys came in, hit the door down. You got a party with us if you're in our flight. And so, it wasn't unusual for guys to go flying in suboptimal states of mind.

[00:11:39.83] [LAUGHTER]

[00:11:41.69] I tried never to do that.

[00:11:43.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial or social backgrounds during your time over there that you might not have had in civilian life?

[00:11:53.25] FRED CZERNER: I think that the pilots are a little bit different group than a lot of the people. First off, there wasn't a lot of time to socialize around. There was also the rank business. You kind of stayed with the guys at your rank, and you went to the club, or you went to the squadron party room.

[00:12:10.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Together.

[00:12:11.18] FRED CZERNER: Yeah, pretty much along that-- . So, as far as meeting people-- actually, not a lot of people from other squadrons either because you almost always flew with your own squadron.

[00:12:18.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:12:19.34] FRED CZERNER: There were a few times at night that we would-- I was in the 433d Squadron, Satan's Angels, very great squadron commander, Lieutenant Colonel Hoot Gibson.

[00:12:30.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[00:12:31.79] FRED CZERNER: Gibson was an ace from the Korean War. And then he led the Thunderbirds. And then he came and was a commander of the 433d Satan's Angels.

[00:12:40.92] JOE GALLOWAY: He's a legendary fellow.

[00:12:42.21] FRED CZERNER: He's a great guy. And after six weeks there, he picked me to be his exec officer because he said he wanted somebody who could write. And with a journalism degree, I was thought to be able to write. So I wrote a lot of awards and decs. I made a mistake, though, I didn't write them for myself.

[00:12:56.97] JOE GALLOWAY: There you are.

[00:12:57.81] FRED CZERNER: [LAUGHS]

[00:12:59.06] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for off-duty or recreation time?

[00:13:03.86] FRED CZERNER: We had the opportunity to go to town at night. Usually the squadron or the flight would have two or three dinners a night downtown. And you go to some restaurant down there and have some local food, then come back.

[00:13:15.51] JOE GALLOWAY: That was it pretty much.

[00:13:17.70] FRED CZERNER: Well, I did have one other thing. On Sunday mornings, for about half of my tour, I ran a radio show on a Thai radio.

[00:13:25.77] JOE GALLOWAY: I'll be.

[00:13:26.28] FRED CZERNER: And so, I would get on a motorcycle and go out there. And one of the women that worked at the radio station had a motorcycle. And so, we would go out into the countryside a little bit. I generally didn't end up flying on Sunday that much because of this.

[00:13:39.69] But that was-- we always had these programs to go out and work with the community. And because I had this, I did an American rock-n-roll morning radio show, which was a lot of fun. And I found out, going out into the countryside, I'd be 60 miles away. And they would learn-- and they've heard the program. It was kind of interesting.

[00:13:58.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Do you have specific memories of the popular culture at that time-- music, books, film, et cetera?

[00:14:07.08] FRED CZERNER: Well, yeah, Gotta Get Out of This Place. I think everybody relates to that. But, yeah, as a disc jockey, I relate to a lot of the music back then. There's not a lot of it that says, OK, this was Vietnam, this was Thailand.

[00:14:22.15] JOE GALLOWAY: But you were a disc jockey. You were playing that music for people.

[00:14:27.04] FRED CZERNER: Yes, I did. The idea behind the show there was to provide language and some radio culture for the kids in that area of Thailand. And that was just my first tour. I did three tours.

[00:14:41.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:14:45.81] FRED CZERNER: Well, I've already told you about Colonel Gibson, just phenomenal gentlemen. And the neatest thing about him was, he and my flight commander, who was Bill Higginbotham-- who unfortunately died just a few months ago-- put on a-- they were both Thunderbirds.

[00:15:03.63] Hoot was the lead and Higgy was the right wing. And so, at Hoot's going-away party, they had all-- four guys from the wing who had flown with the Birds put on a good Thunderbird show for us--

[00:15:18.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Good Thunderbird show.

[00:15:19.32] FRED CZERNER: --without the Thunderbird rules.

[00:15:20.27] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:15:20.65] FRED CZERNER: So it was cool. Leadership varied. When I was at Da Nang, on my second tour, we started to have some problems to be very honest with you. We had people come in to senior leadership positions who had no prior experience in combat. And so, we had some bad decisions made. And that led to probably my worst day in the time that I was over there.

[00:15:47.24] At Da Nang, we had a mission called Gunfighter Alert, where we kept four flights on 15-minute alert to go out and do troop support for troops in contact.

[00:15:58.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:15:58.94] FRED CZERNER: And so, I'm sitting Gunfighter Alert one day. And I'm the lead of this two-ship. And we had been up on one flight and flown in the morning. And so, now it's getting late in the evening. And the horn went off, we go to the airplanes, take off, told to contact a FAC.

[00:16:14.81] And we went up to some of the mountainous area in north-western South Vietnam. And a fire support base was being overrun, literally actually being overrun. And so, we get there,

and it's just before sunset, deep in dusk. And because of the proximity to the DMZ and because of the lighting conditions, we had to run north-south.

[00:16:42.50] Unfortunately, this fire support base was on the eastern side of a mountain at sunset. So we would come down south on the downwind leg, turn to the west, and then turn back to the north and fly into the shadow. You're looking at the sun and then you're looking at the shadow to try to find the base-- very difficult circumstances.

[00:17:02.69] And on top of that the commander, the ground commander at the fire support base, had released the restrictions on the distance for bombing. Different kind of bombs you drop a different kind of distance to provide-- to prevent injury to your friendlies.

[00:17:18.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:17:19.22] FRED CZERNER: And so, our mission that day, we were carrying a combination of Mark 82 500-pound bombs with fuse extenders, high fragmentation, anti-personnel weapons. But the frag goes out for 1,500 meters. [LAUGHS] You can get hurt from a long way away. So we put those bombs down towards the bottom of the hill where the troops were coming up from.

[00:17:42.69] And then we had napalm, four cans of napalm. Unfortunately, it was unfinned napalm. Unfinned napalm can go off left, right, long, short, because it tumbles.

[00:17:53.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:17:53.83] FRED CZERNER: And you have no control of it once you hit the button. So rather than drop that at the required altitude-- we'd had an unfortunate circumstance at Da Nang in that several pilots had hit the trees in the preceding month on low pull-outs.

[00:18:10.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:10.99] FRED CZERNER: So we had had an arbitrary 1,000-foot minimum fly distance. Well, I'm not dropping unfinned napalm with troops within 50 meters from 1,000 feet. So I went down to 100, 110, 115 feet, something like that, made four passes, and then came around and made four passes with the gun. Because we had F-4Es, so we had the Gatling gun, 20 millimeter.

[00:18:39.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:40.90] FRED CZERNER: I come home and, man, the FAC is going crazy. The commander's happy. Everything's good. The helicopters are on the way in. They're going to get out. I come back, I land, I debrief the flight. I go in. I get a shower.

[00:18:51.55] In the middle of the shower, the squadron ops officer jerks the door-- the curtain open and says, get yourself up to the commander's office immediately and put your uniform on. So I get dressed up, and I go to the commander's office, and I get fired.

[00:19:09.34] JOE GALLOWAY: For what?

[00:19:10.00] FRED CZERNER: For flying beneath the minimum release altitude.

[00:19:12.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, please.

[00:19:13.72] FRED CZERNER: Absolutely happened. And the problem was, I had a brand new guy on his third mission in the back seat. And I told him-- I briefed him all the way through. We're going to go down low here. OK, I've got it. I see it. But we're getting kind of close to the ground.

[00:19:27.65] And he was kind of nervous. So he turned me in and I got fired. So here I am with-- I've got close to 350 sorties at that time. Our commander had six.

[00:19:40.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:19:40.94] FRED CZERNER: [LAUGHS] He had flown F-106s. That was his previous tour. And then he comes over, because he's a lieutenant colonel, he gets to be a squadron commander. It was kind of rank-based. And that was the kind of thing I'm talking about. Not a bad guy, but just too--

[00:19:57.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Didn't know.

[00:19:58.40] FRED CZERNER: Well, he wouldn't even let me tell my story. I broke the rule, so you're fired.

[00:20:02.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:20:02.51] FRED CZERNER: So, the next day, I went over to the wing operations center and met with the deputy commander for operations. A fellow who was fairly well known from back then, Colonel Vincent V. Versurah. And he says, well, hang with me today.

[00:20:17.42] And unfortunately that afternoon one of the Stormy forward air controllers-- that was an F-4 Fast FAC, that could go into the areas where there was higher fire. And so, Fast FACs would fly about five hours. We used to say five hours, 500 feet, 500 knots, and five G's.

[00:20:35.03] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:20:35.37] FRED CZERNER: That was kind of our profile for flying, looking for targets, looking for stuff, and then guiding flights in against targets. So, unfortunately, one of our Stormies got shot down.

[00:20:47.34] And so, Colonel Versurah looked at me and says, you want to fly Stormy? And I said, yes, Sir. Have a first Stormy flight the next afternoon. So I finished off my tour as a Stormy FAC, which was pretty exciting, which led to one of my more exciting missions.

[00:21:00.66] JOE GALLOWAY: You were going after SAM missions, SAM sites, and things like that, and the big 85-millimeter-- ?

[00:21:08.70] FRED CZERNER: 85 and 105s.

[00:21:10.56] JOE GALLOWAY: 105s.

[00:21:12.18] FRED CZERNER: Well, the Stormy mission that I came to treasure quite a bit was one where I stayed at Da Nang for 13 months, because Da Nang had Marines and Air Force. And if you wanted to go to Australia you had to be there for 13 months on R&R. And I had gone to Australia on my first R&R. And I was going to go back and see the same young lady that I had met the year before.

[00:21:36.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Sure you were.

[00:21:37.40] FRED CZERNER: And so, I'm sitting in the terminal there at Da Nang. My bags have already been picked up, just waiting to load. And Colonel Versurah walks in the door and goes, come here. I said, this can't be good. He says, well, we have a little problem. I'll tell you about it when we get in the Jeep. I said, Sir, my bags are already on the air-- they'll get them off.

[00:21:54.84] [LAUGHTER]

[00:21:56.29] So we go back over. And we go into the SCIF and I get briefed. And what had happened was, the North Vietnamese had brought some SAMs, SA-1s, down into the DMZ and fired at a B-52. Well, that gets everybody excited.

[00:22:10.44] JOE GALLOWAY: That gets them all excited.

[00:22:11.49] FRED CZERNER: So they wanted all of the FACs, the Stormy FACs from Da Nang, the Wolf FACs from Ubon, and the Tiger FACs from Korat to go up and find the SAM sites.

[00:22:21.36] So I go looking for SAMs that afternoon. Didn't find anything that afternoon. Go out the next day for like two sorties, don't find anything. Third day I'm going to go out and we're told, find something. This is important. And this is all three of the FAC units are doing this-- the Fast FACs.

[00:22:37.17] So they call us up on a STU-II. I was already in the airplane. Call me, I go back to the command post to get on the secure voice. And the three star says, now, Fred, we don't want you to make something up. You've got to really find something.

[00:22:50.81] So we went out, and we were flying along. And we find a karst that's kind of a u-shaped. And down in the center of the karst are two TEL (transporter erector launchers) for SAM missiles with missiles on them.

[00:23:04.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:23:05.96] FRED CZERNER: And so, my back-seater is a very fine gentleman named Jerry Vion. And so, I go around. I come back, I want to take another shot because I want to get good pictures with the KB-44 camera.

[00:23:15.26] And he says, what are you doing? I said, well, we want to make sure we've got this right. So we went through and got the pictures. And it was almost the end of the mission because when the guys looked at the photos, I missed the karst by about 12 feet coming back through taking the shot.

[00:23:30.26] [LAUGHTER]

[00:23:30.68] So we go out to the tanker and we call the airborne command post and tell them that we found to SAM with two TELs, a Fan Song radar, and at least four canisters. They said, all right. Go get your tank. Call us back. Get off the tank, call them back.

[00:23:46.61] And they say, well, we have launched Ubon and Da Nang, so 32 airplanes from Da Nang and 32 airplanes from Ubon. And I looked down to the south. And, yeah, you see these two smoke trails, heavy trails of these 64 F-4s coming forward.

[00:24:04.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, my.

[00:24:04.99] FRED CZERNER: And I said, what am I supposed to do with them? It's one site. [LAUGHS] Put them in. [LAUGHS]

[00:24:10.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Put them all in.

[00:24:12.07] FRED CZERNER: So they come in. I say, OK, Da Nang, you're ahead. You come first. Ubon, you follow behind them. Wheel to the right. Stormy's going to be in. I went up to 12,000 feet, did a vertical approach, fired all my smokes.

[00:24:25.52] As I pulled off, I looked at the smokes. They were close enough. I said, OK. Just hit the smoke. And I went out to the east, full afterburner, did a loop back up, and an Immelmann up to about 20,000 feet. So I come back over to watch it. They were still wheeling for about six minutes, [LAUGHS] dropping bombs inside the dust. And they flew off, went back to Ubon and Da Nang.

[00:24:47.12] And at that time, Cougar calls up. He's a reconnaissance bird, RF-4C, and says, Stormy 3, where's the target? I said, under the dust. How am I supposed to get a picture of that? Your problem, not mine.

[00:24:58.99] [LAUGHTER]

[00:24:59.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:25:01.28] FRED CZERNER: But we went back the next day and looked. The site was totally obliterated.

[00:25:05.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Totally obliterated.

[00:25:06.56] FRED CZERNER: As most of the karst itself.

[00:25:07.88] [LAUGHTER]

[00:25:08.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, I would think.

[00:25:13.59] FRED CZERNER: Well, I would say, one of the most ones would be on the third tour I was at SOS at Maxwell Air Force Base, stationed down at Homestead Air Force Base in-- south of Miami there in the 307th. And the 308th Squadron had been called TDY to go to Udorn up in northern Thailand. And then they called our squadron up.

[00:25:36.49] Well, I'm in school, and the squadron is going to deploy on Monday, and I found out about it on Thursday. So I call my commander. And he says, well, yeah, I'd like you to come, but you're in school.

[00:25:48.25] So I walked into the commandant's office at SOS and said, Sir, I need to be on that flight. He says, well, you don't graduate until this weekend. And I said, well, I know that, Sir, but I need to go down and get requalified and be on that C-141 on Monday.

[00:26:06.45] And they did some talking back and forth. And I called the wing commander down at Homestead also. And he was very good and got me on there. So I, on Friday, I drove down to Tampa, flew two sorties in the front seat-- I was in the-- front-seater in the F-4, got qualified, then flew a night sortie along with my instrument check to have my three sorties requalification, got on the airplane on Monday, and flew to Ubon--

[00:26:30.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Ubon.

[00:26:30.60] FRED CZERNER: --I mean, to Udorn rather, eight hours of crew rest, and then I'm flying combat missions again.

[00:26:35.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:26:36.15] FRED CZERNER: It was an interesting time.

[00:26:38.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:26:38.64] FRED CZERNER: But while I was over there, we did some bombing up north. And I was number three in a four-ship, in a 24-ship package. And the tanker met us far north on the orbit.

[00:26:55.58] And so, dropped us off. And so, we were ahead of schedule. So the flight lead started slowing down. And here we are going over Yen Bai, where two days before, I had seen MiGs taxiing on the runway. [LAUGHS] And we're back at 320 knots--

[00:27:12.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, not good.

[00:27:12.77] FRED CZERNER: --with heavily loaded F-4s going to a target up to the northwest of Hanoi. And so, you'd hear back-seaters every now and then say, push it up, lead. Lead, push it up. Because it would usually be the back-seaters would talk because their voices were not as recognized.

[00:27:27.57] [LAUGHTER]

[00:27:28.79] And this guy kept slow. And then Red Crown, which was the air warning system sitting on a boat out in the Gulf called, MiGs airborne. MiGs accelerating. MiGs have-- tanks are away. MiGs have the aircraft in sight. And so, now we started pushing it up on our own.

[00:27:49.67] And suddenly our number four man says, OK, got MiGs six, break left hard. So you break left, you reach back, you punch your tanks off. Then you drop your bombs so you can accelerate. And as I'm looking back, I see the missile coming, and it went right across the top of the canopy.

[00:28:07.46] Fortunately, the Atoll missiles had a very lousy fusing system. And so, it did not fuse. It didn't explode, but it went right across the top of the canopy. And as I'm rolling out, coming down towards the ground, the back says, did you see that? Yup, I saw that. Of course, some of our other wingman saw it as well. So that was kind of an exciting time to have a missile go across your canopy at about six to ten feet away.

[00:28:35.04] FRED CZERNER: Well, the best day was coming home from that mission I described earlier, knowing that the guys were going to get out in a better circumstance than they had had 15 minutes earlier.

[00:28:46.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:28:47.43] FRED CZERNER: That was a very good feeling. The worst I felt was standing in front of Colonel Trexler getting fired for doing that mission. It turned out later that the commander did come into Da Nang and got thanked in person for what we had done. But it didn't erase this. But now I was in Stormy, so that was a different experience and more excitement.

[00:29:15.38] FRED CZERNER: You mentioned the Aussies, and that was very interesting because when I got to Ubon there were two Australian squadrons of F-86s there as air defense. They were there as part of the agreement-- I guess, as part of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization.

[00:29:31.77] JOE GALLOWAY: SEATO, yeah.

[00:29:32.67] FRED CZERNER: SEATO, yeah. So they were stationed there, and they were providing air support. And they would come out and tap us as we were coming back across Laos.

[00:29:41.70] And we'd have dogfights with them. And learned that, even though it was old, the F-86 was a very capable airplane. And we used to party with the Aussies a lot. In fact, we even went down to--

[00:29:53.58] JOE GALLOWAY: They were good at that.

[00:29:53.86] FRED CZERNER: -- when they left Ubon, they went down to Penang, Malaysia. And so, they called us up. And we took a C-47 full of guys over to Rangoon and then down to Penang to have a weekend with them.

[00:30:06.76] The only difference was, the Australian Air Force can be very formal, particularly at a dance. And they invited us to a dance. And, of course, we had our flight suits and jeans, and they had mess dress.

[00:30:18.42] [LAUGHTER]

[00:30:19.60] But it was a good time. FRED CZERNER: We did have contact with South Vietnamese at Da Nang because they provided guard duty. And now and then, we would get some of them together and provide little gifts and things. But as far as formal contact, there wasn't any.

[00:30:44.35] FRED CZERNER: Well, during the first time I was over at Ubon, I mentioned to you that we had to slow down our flying. So I was given nine days of combat leave. And I got a chance to fly home. It was hard though because I got over-- I went-- so I've got the leave in my hand, I packed the bag real quick, went over to the flight line.

[00:31:02.32] And there was a 141 there. And the young captain who was in charge of the 141, the aircraft commander, says, I can't take you. I'm carrying dangerous materials. I said, what's your-- he said, I got some small arms cartridges. I said, well, how does that compare to a one--

[00:31:21.25] JOE GALLOWAY: 500-pound bomb?

[00:31:22.51] FRED CZERNER: [LAUGHS] Yeah, well, or 37 or 23 Mike Mike. And he says, OK, you can go. So he flew me all the way back to Seattle. And then I took an Eastern Airlines plane down to Tampa and got to see my family there.

[00:31:36.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:31:37.06] FRED CZERNER: We did write letters and we did exchange-- I sent tapes home, mission tapes, until my father says, don't do that. We don't like the language.

[00:31:43.99] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:31:44.74] FRED CZERNER: The truth of the matter is, my parents did not actually support the war. And it was a difficult time talking with them because they felt that what we were doing

was wrong. And there was one time that I thought-- I went over there and said, OK, this is kind of an unusual situation. We have a large nation with all this activity in a small nation.

[00:32:07.24] But then on November 1, 1968, President Johnson started the bombing halt. And on the 4th of November that year, I was in an airplane, we went across the border north of the Mu Gia Pass with permission to photograph the stuff. Looked at the photographs we had. On one eight by ten, there were 104 trucks that we could count.

[00:32:30.22] Now, North Vietnam had no capability to manufacture trucks. And so, it was pretty obvious the amount of support that was coming along that I had not seen up until that time.

[00:32:39.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:32:40.43] FRED CZERNER: And when I was over there, I got a better understanding of what was going on. One of my interesting exchanges-- I was in a meeting as a consultant with a former JCS chair, Secretary of State Colin Powell. I was a member of about 70 of us at a two-hour meeting.

[00:33:01.77] And he explained about the war in DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM, and what we would have done there if they'd started using gas; the same thing we would have done in Vietnam or were prepared to do, and that was to bomb the dikes. And that would have ended the war very, very quickly. And that was a piece of information that I had not gotten.

[00:33:21.39] I felt in many respects that the war was too political. And I'll give you one example, if I may. At Ubon, we would be prepared, we would be stepping out to our airplanes, and we would get a Red Rocket, which is a memo from the JCS stopping the whole mission.

[00:33:38.16] Because at that same time, in Washington, DC, at the White House, the president, after dinner, would go down and look at the maps to see where are you going to bomb them? What's our targets? And would move the pins. Not understanding, I'm sure, that moving a pin changes the type of target, changes the ammunition that you need.

[00:34:02.64] So we would have to take the airplanes back to the weapons barns, change the weapons loads. But even worse than that, the tankers had already launched. And the tankers were going to fly three goes a day, because you didn't do much in North Vietnam without using a tanker from Ubon, Udorn, Takhli, and Korat.

[00:34:22.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:34:22.76] FRED CZERNER: So we'd miss a whole go that day because the tankers were out of sync. And so, that kind of political manipulation is really unfortunately akin to what's going on today with the ROE restrictions and the echelon that you have to go through to get permission in order to execute a mission.

[00:34:40.74] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive from home about the war you were fighting or about the antiwar movement that was going on?

[00:34:49.08] FRED CZERNER: Well, we had the usual channels. I had Time magazine. I took that while I was over--

[00:34:54.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Stars and Stripes.

[00:34:55.17] FRED CZERNER: Yeah, we had Stars and Stripes. But you also had English language newspapers out of Bangkok.

[00:34:59.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:35:00.51] FRED CZERNER: So I didn't feel starved for information. I've always been kind of a news junkie with a journalism background. So I probably paid more attention to that than a lot of the people did.

[00:35:12.99] FRED CZERNER: I remember one incident. When you landed at San Francisco, you took the bus in to the airport. And you stopped at Haight-Ashbury. And so, when we came home, we were wearing our party suits that had all the funny patches on them, like Yankee Air Pirate and that sort of thing. And so, we were in the bus station at Haight-Ashbury.

[00:35:37.28] And a friend of mine and I were standing there. And he was kind of leaning against a post. And this young lady, probably 18, comes up and-- hippie dress and obvious hippie garb-- and hands him a flower, a daisy, saying, peace. He took the daisy and ate it.

[00:35:55.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Of course he did.

[00:35:55.94] FRED CZERNER: She dissolved.

[00:35:56.63] [LAUGHTER]

[00:35:58.55] So that was the only real strong interaction we had. I'll tell you, one of the moving things that I did run across though was after DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM, we had an air power demonstration, a big flyby here in DC, and celebration of the return of the troops after that. And it was a great mission and people did good work over there.

[00:36:17.21] But it was kind of funny because the work that went on in Vietnam was kind of important and was, in many cases, more hazardous than DESERT STORM/DESERT SHIELD, particularly DESERT STORM. And so, just watching the airplanes fly over for almost an hour and a half gave you the feeling like, would have been nice to have been recognized a little bit more.

[00:36:37.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Wouldn't it have been?

[00:36:38.33] FRED CZERNER: But it didn't detract from the feeling of success that you got for participating.

[00:36:45.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, when you finished your third tour, you were still in the Air Force. Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after a war?

[00:36:54.53] FRED CZERNER: I really didn't. Because what happened was during our third tour from the 307th, our wing commander from Homestead Air Force Base came over and flew a few illegal sorties. And I got to talk to him quite a bit.

[00:37:08.46] So when I got home, he says, Fred, what do you want to do? I said, well, I'd kind of like to do that presidential support job. And that afternoon I left on my first presidential support mission, supporting a trip by Spiro Agnew down to-- Vice President Spiro Agnew down to the Virgin Islands.

[00:37:24.29] And then I spent three years working with the White House advance team, working directly for the military assistant to the president at the time. It was a very interesting job. Got to meet all of the Watergate figures.

[00:37:37.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:37:38.00] FRED CZERNER: And most of them were actually good people.

[00:37:41.64] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow veterans over the years, guys that you flew with back then?

[00:37:48.69] FRED CZERNER: Very little, none that I've flown with from back then.

[00:37:53.24] JOE GALLOWAY: They don't have squadron reunions or anything like that, or you just don't go?

[00:37:57.14] FRED CZERNER: It's very interesting. I went through 68B at Laredo. The unit has never had a reunion.

[00:38:03.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Never had a reunion?

[00:38:03.77] FRED CZERNER: Now, I did run into a lot of those guys because a few of them went all the way and became senior generals. Stew Cranston is one that I remember particularly. He had started out at the Air Force Academy and then finished elsewhere and retired as a three star. And I ran across General Cranston a number of times afterwards.

[00:38:23.51] But I'm not much of a reunion person. And I tend to keep my relationships focused on professional stuff.

[00:38:31.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Did your experience in combat affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

[00:38:40.16] FRED CZERNER: It didn't change my thinking. I've always felt that people who fight for their country should be supported by their country. And fighting has a broad connotation. The guy that's humping bombs up to the airplane is just as important as the guy flying the airplane.

[00:38:57.57] And I can remember many times when we'd be going out to our airplane at Da Nang, the Marines and the Army guys would be coming in to go to R&R at China Beach. And they would dump them all over on the Marine side. They'd have to walk all the way around the perimeter road.

[00:39:12.57] And as they were walking up perimeter road, we would be coming from our briefing rooms to cross the road to go to the hardened aircraft shelters where our bombs were. Most of us kept chalk and stuff like that because invariably the fellows would say, you fly airplanes? Yeah. Can I see one?

[00:39:30.30] So we'd take them out, and they'd sign the bombs. And invariably they would say, you don't know how much you get shot at. Well, we did know how much we got shot at, because all of us got hit with some regularity. Fortunately, I never got shot down.

[00:39:47.11] In fact, in terms of airplane difficulties, my most interesting was losing an engine 35 miles north of Hanoi because of an oil failure, [LAUGHS] not enemy action. But then coming back across Hanoi at 17,000 feet at slow speed was very interesting. [LAUGHS]

[00:40:08.94] FRED CZERNER: No, I think people remember Vietnam War. Younger people really don't have an appreciation for what it was. And I think the-- now, this is my personal opinion-- I think the education system that we have generally in the U.S. is deficient at going into the real reasons behind.

[00:40:28.47] Today, you can look back at Vietnam, and even Secretary McNamara said, it was a mistake. Well, there are mistakes of interpretation many times. And there probably was some mistaken identity here. But this was a war of aggression from the North to the South. Did we step in with the right amount of authority and at the right time with the right amount of intensity? I'm not sure.

[00:40:50.50] But, as I said, when I went over, I was concerned. But when I saw what was going on and especially when we went up against MiG pilots that were not Vietnamese, you start realizing that there was probably more balance there than may have initially been evident.

[00:41:06.43] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you would like to pass on to future generations?

[00:41:13.25] FRED CZERNER: Well, I don't know that the lessons from Vietnam are different than any other difficult work. It's pay attention to what needs to be done. Innovate when you can. And always hold a very high position morally about what you're doing.

[00:41:32.16] FRED CZERNER: I can't go there.

[00:41:33.18] JOE GALLOWAY: You can't go there?

[00:41:34.05] FRED CZERNER: I can't go.

[00:41:34.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Why?

[00:41:36.44] FRED CZERNER: Too many people there. When I was at Ubon, we lost nine airplanes that year.

[00:41:43.57] JOE GALLOWAY: All pilots lost?

[00:41:45.52] FRED CZERNER: No, no, no. Most of them were recovered. But my roommate, that I mentioned earlier, Peter Pike, is one of the famous missing guys right now. And Pete's story was doubly, doubly sad. I can't go into all of it because some of it's very private.

[00:41:59.61] But he had an interesting situation that he had been a college classmate of the king of Thailand's jeweler. And so, once a month or so, the king's airplane would-- helicopter would come up, and the gemologist from Bangkok and Pete, who was a geology major, would go off and hunt opals.

[00:42:22.62] And so, Pete had put a shelf all the way around his dorm room and had Mason jars of opals. And he was looking forward to using those opals when he got out. And, on top of that, he was married just a few weeks before he went over. Sad situation.

[00:42:42.03] JOE GALLOWAY: And he's missing still?

[00:42:43.62] FRED CZERNER: Yeah, he and Paul Bannon disappeared on a Wolf FAC mission just about a week before he was scheduled to come home. And then there was another fellow, his name was Jeb Stewart, so he's called Jeb Stewart, but he's from the South. But he was on a mission putting in Mark-36 Destructor mines in Mu Gia Pass.

[00:43:09.19] And the airplane got hit by 23, and he apparently jumped out without needing to, and the front-seater flew the airplane back and landed it. But Jeb died in a very horrible way in Mu Gia Pass. And those are memories that you just don't-- you carry with you, and you don't get rid of them.

[00:43:28.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:43:34.06] FRED CZERNER: I have heard some about it. There's a friend of mine that works on the program and had advised me about it some time before. And I felt honored to be asked to have this interview.

[00:43:44.26] I don't know what the true focus of the effort is. I'm not--

[00:43:47.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Really just-- it's chartered by Congress to thank and welcome home the Vietnam veterans, those who served in the Indochina theater.

[00:43:59.50] FRED CZERNER: Honestly, I'm not exactly sure how we do that. I think one of the better things to do is to have more understanding about what went on in Vietnam. Every war is similar. Every war is different.

[00:44:13.76] What we saw in Vietnam was, in many respects, the beginning of extensive guerrilla warfare. And all we have now is guerrilla warfare, even though it comes to our cities. Guerrillas take many different uniforms, and they have different methodologies. But I still consider a suicide bomber a guerrilla.

[00:44:36.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Sir.

[00:44:37.74] FRED CZERNER: It's my pleasure. Thank you.

[00:44:39.03] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you for coming in.