

Foss, John US Army

[00:00:17.33] JOHN FOSS: I was born in Hutchinson, Minnesota in 1933, 13 February, 1933. That was followed very quickly by the banks closing for one month because we now had a new president.

[00:00:34.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:00:35.00] JOHN FOSS: FDR. And he did an awful lot. When I was about four years old, we moved over to Litchfield, Minnesota where I spent the rest of my life in Minnesota. And that's where my mother came from. And that's-- my dad was a car dealer and he ran the Ford dealership in Litchfield for 40, 50 years, whatever.

[00:00:59.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Your age when you went to Vietnam?

[00:01:01.20] JOHN FOSS: I was 33 years old.

[00:01:04.58] JOE GALLOWAY: You were a major.

[00:01:05.52] JOHN FOSS: I was a major.

[00:01:10.53] I came from Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.

[00:01:15.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Ahh

[00:01:16.89] JOHN FOSS: I had been a tactical officer at West Point. They opened this up. And I said, yes, send me. I want to go.

[00:01:26.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Send me.

[00:01:26.84] JOHN FOSS: It was great. It was absolutely great because unlike West Point, which is primarily academic, Sandhurst in those days was a two-year course. And it was about half academics and about half tactical and physical work. And so it was really a small-- a lot of small group tactics and small unit tactics.

[00:01:49.08] And the Brits were very good at counterinsurgency. And so we learned a lot of counterinsurgency. So I went directly from there, home, set my family up in Florida and went right into Vietnam. There was no going through anything else to say this is it.

[00:02:06.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, what the-- who were your family? What they consist of at that time when you left for Vietnam?

[00:02:12.97] JOHN FOSS: Well, my wife. We'd been married at that time, I think 11 years. And we had a son, nine, another son, seven, and a daughter, two years old.

[00:02:27.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Mm-hmm.

[00:02:29.76] JOHN FOSS: One-year-old.

[00:02:32.63] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of the Vietnam War before you went?

[00:02:37.70] JOHN FOSS: Well, I was living in England for two years. What we got on television-- and that was very different than what you had back here in the States. But I took the Stars and Stripes by mail every day. And you got a bit of it.

[00:02:54.11] And the Stars and Stripes gave you sort of the US view of what was going on. So you had a better sense of it, plus hearing from friends who were over there and doing things like that. So and at that time, it sounded like we were ahead and winning when I got here in '70-- in '67.

[00:03:14.52] JOE GALLOWAY: '67. You went, of course, as a major. How did you come into the military and how did you end up being commissioned?

[00:03:27.06] JOHN FOSS: Well, I joined the National Guard when I was a junior in high school and 17 years old. And what it was-- most of the football team went down and joined the Guard because here was a chance to do something different and sort of exciting. And that was in 1950 and before the Korean War started.

[00:03:46.86] So you didn't go through basic training or anything like that to be in the National Guard in those days. You practiced rifle marksmanship. And then you went to one of the camps and you shot. And you qualified or you didn't qualify or you kept shooting until you qualified.

[00:04:03.19] And so that was in 1950. Korean War broke out. Every unit got activated. And I was not yet 18 and my mother would not sign for me. So I had to stay back. So I waited until I graduated from high school and joined the infantry-- I joined the Army as an airborne infantryman. That's what I wanted to be, a paratrooper.

[00:04:26.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Paratrooper, as an enlisted man.

[00:04:30.09] JOHN FOSS: As a private E-2.

[00:04:32.55] JOE GALLOWAY: And you stayed a private how long?

[00:04:34.98] JOHN FOSS: I stayed a private about nine months, I guess it was and became PFC.

[00:04:44.45] And after I finished-- basic training for infantry in those days was 16 weeks. And it was pretty tough. And we didn't ride in any vehicles. We just marched. If you had something at a training area 8 miles out, you marched 8 miles out and you marched 8 miles back. So it was good. We got I think a pretty good sense of training.

[00:05:06.47] We didn't get so much sense of what was going on in Vietnam, although the techniques they taught us were based upon what was happening in Vietnam. I finished that. And

I was on orders to Jump School at Fort Benning. And I got a second or third alternate appointment to West Point, which I think my mother had a big hand in doing. And I knew if I didn't take that, that was the end of being a member of that family. And so I did.

[00:05:41.15] And I went to the prep school in November 1951 and tightened up my English, tightened up my math-- very good on math, and good on history and that. And it was very good. And we were 200 military cadets came out of the prep school which in those days was up at Stewart Air Force Base just north of West Point.

[00:06:09.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Mm-hmm.

[00:06:10.95] JOHN FOSS: And we had 200, probably 210 or so that went in.

[00:06:15.51] JOE GALLOWAY: And this was class of--

[00:06:17.34] JOHN FOSS: 1956.

[00:06:18.69] JOE GALLOWAY: '56. So you missed Korea by this--

[00:06:23.67] JOHN FOSS: Korea.

[00:06:24.78] JOE GALLOWAY: --hair on your chin.

[00:06:25.98] JOHN FOSS: Yeah.

[00:06:26.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:06:28.23] JOHN FOSS: But when I graduated in '56, I chose infantry because that's-- my father was infantryman. My brother, class of '51 at West Point, was an infantryman, commanded a company in Korea. And that was what I wanted to do. Plus, I'd been an infantryman in the National Guard.

[00:06:49.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:06:49.88] JOHN FOSS: I'd gone through infantry basic.

[00:06:56.96] JOE GALLOWAY: You left for your assignment in Vietnam in 1967.

[00:07:01.79] JOHN FOSS: Right.

[00:07:03.53] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on arriving in Vietnam?

[00:07:07.58] JOHN FOSS: I joined the 4th Division. And the day we joined was the day they had a big fight out by the border down by Dúc Co. And you know that area. And they had captured 12 North Vietnamese. And I'd been-- just been assigned to be the deputy G-2 of the 4th

Division. And I said, I don't know anything about that. But you just asked questions and pretty soon you'll find out.

[00:07:36.32] JOE GALLOWAY: So they handed them over to you.

[00:07:38.45] JOHN FOSS: And we found out what they were. That was an NVA regiment that had come in to attack a US battalion. That was a young lieutenant who got control of the early part of that thing and really held them together and ended up with the DSC. And that's the way Vietnam was. The Vietnamese would-- North Vietnamese would fight you until they weren't going to win. And then they'd moved away.

[00:08:08.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:08:14.65] Your first duties were as a G-2 officer. How long did that last?

[00:08:22.27] JOHN FOSS: About three months as I recall. And then I was going out to be the S-3 of the 2nd Brigade of the 4th Division. When I got there, the brigade commander said, well, I've got this guy I want to be the S-3. So you be the S-2 for a little while longer. And then he's going to go home and then-- so I spent two months as the S-2 and then moved up to be the S-3.

[00:08:44.58] JOE GALLOWAY: As brigade.

[00:08:45.69] JOHN FOSS: As brigade S-3, just before Tet started.

[00:08:54.55] JOE GALLOWAY: What was the daily routine for you in those months?

[00:09:01.14] JOHN FOSS: Once you moved out of the base camp and were out in the brigade, you started early in the morning. And you worked until about 8:00, 9:00, 10:00, midnight then back to bed for a little bit. Then you went again and slept in tents, slept on cots, slept on the ground, whatever.

[00:09:18.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Ate C-rations?

[00:09:20.18] JOHN FOSS: Ate C's, had mess halls and that. I had not been smoking in years and I ended up starting to smoke again.

[00:09:31.20] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your quarters like?

[00:09:33.18] JOHN FOSS: Well, they were tents or air mattresses on the ground. We had a bunker that was about the size that table there. That was the-- when we first started in one of these areas, we moved in. And you could fit about five people across one side and about five on the other side. The brigade commander was there and the three and other people like that and radios. And it was that way for about a week or so. But you just-- were almost like that, trying to get the job done.

[00:10:11.57] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your opinion-- your impressions of the Vietnamese people initially and by the end of your tour, the ones you were exposed to?

[00:10:20.74] JOHN FOSS: Well, you didn't have much exposure, you know? When you were at the base camp, there would be some civilians, Vietnamese civilians working around. But you-- when you worked a long 16-hour day, you didn't get that. You didn't get to see them. We got to-- there weren't-- there weren't very many close periods there with them during that time. You either got prisoners or you got wounded or-- because you didn't get to deal with those people.

[00:10:57.76] JOE GALLOWAY: You didn't have Vietnamese liaison officers?

[00:11:00.53] JOHN FOSS: Well, we had some. And I can remember we captured right up by the Cambodian border down by Ban Me Thuot. This was just after the Battle of Dak To. And so it's about December '67, before Tet.

[00:11:23.02] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:11:23.53] JOHN FOSS: And so we've got a bunch of young prisoners. And we had a Vietnamese liaison officer with us who was also our interpreter. And so he's talking to these young soldiers. And one of them starts to cry. So I said, what did he say? And he said, can I go home now? I said no.

[00:11:45.90] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:11:46.29] JOHN FOSS: You can't go home now. He was young, 18 years old.

[00:11:51.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:11:52.75] JOHN FOSS: So just like-- they'd been sent-- they were trained and came on up. You don't forget little things like that for a year. And he took this kid and he pat him on the back and said, don't worry.

[00:12:06.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Your life's over, but it'll be OK.

[00:12:09.19] JOHN FOSS: You're going to be around, a prisoner for a while.

[00:12:10.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:12:14.14] JOHN FOSS: My impression was with the Vietnamese, at that time and during the first tour, was they had a difficult time fighting the NVA. It would take a battalion to fight an NVA company.

[00:12:34.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:12:36.23] JOHN FOSS: And even then it didn't necessarily mean it's going to work.

[00:12:39.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Their support, air and artillery was--

[00:12:43.13] JOHN FOSS: Well, they didn't have-- they didn't have that. And I think their leadership, if you take II Corps commander on down, was not very strong.

[00:12:53.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Not very strong.

[00:12:55.43] JOHN FOSS: Occasionally you'd find a regimental commander who was pretty good.

[00:13:00.87] JOE GALLOWAY: This is a standard question. What did you do for recreation or off-duty activities?

[00:13:09.21] JOHN FOSS: I think I got to church when they had chapel services. There was a chapel. The priest would just go ahead and set up some place.

[00:13:17.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Set up some place.

[00:13:19.05] JOHN FOSS: Right, that was it.

[00:13:20.73] JOE GALLOWAY: That was it. That and work.

[00:13:28.02] What issues, events and responsibilities consumed most of your time?

[00:13:33.96] JOHN FOSS: Work and that was it, working intel and that period of time both at the division. And then at the brigade as an intel really served me well to be a operations officer and then come back and command a battalion later because you had a great sense of what was going on. You understood the things that were out there. We used to have helicopters that flew over to pick up the smell.

[00:14:00.25] And that-- and sometimes they got Vietnamese and sometimes they got monkeys. It all depends on what-- when you went in there and check it out, what it was. But you get the sense of what their capabilities were and how good they were and how much you really had to look at it and how you use long range patrols and what are-- things like that.

[00:14:22.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Your service was all in II Corps, both tours.

[00:14:27.45] JOHN FOSS: Yup, Pleiku, Kontum, Ban Me Thuot, and An Khe.

[00:14:35.04] JOE GALLOWAY: You were in a combat brigade. And then you-- on your second tour were a battalion commander. Would you describe significant actions that you witnessed, combat operations in which you participated?

[00:14:51.66] JOHN FOSS: Well, in the first one, it was Tet '68 took place. And as far as we were concerned, and this was in the old oasis area just north of the Ia Drang and ran on up towards Pleiku. It was a turkey shoot. I mean, literally. What happened was the VC got the

people up and going. The old VC battalion, the H15 Battalion, which you probably know quite well--

[00:15:24.69] JOE GALLOWAY: I know quite well.

[00:15:26.46] JOHN FOSS: --came in. And we killed them one afternoon. And we got the battalion commander. And he went through the straw where we had him locked up with Americans on one side and ARVN on the other side. And he said there were five people here that I can't find. He said those are the people who were left, all the rest of them are dead. Dead. So that's the last we saw of H15 as a battalion.

[00:15:55.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:15:55.67] JOHN FOSS: Now there is a VC political structure that ran. And there were the NVA structure that ran and-- rather than all just fighters. So we didn't see many black pajama guys at all.

[00:16:17.14] JOE GALLOWAY: What is your most vivid memory of Vietnam?

[00:16:22.31] JOHN FOSS: I guess shortly after I took over my battalion in '69-- it was over at An Khe-- I got chopped to the 1st Brigade-- no, the 3rd Brigade and went over to Pleiku and up in to Chu Pong Mountain which is north of Plei Djereng And we had an exciting period. We went into the base area of 4th Division and tried to go into the base area about a year or six months earlier--

[00:16:57.13] well, during the period I was gone-- and turned around and left. We had a hard time there. We were in the base area and we got into fights. I lost two company commanders. The NVA dumped 100-and-some, 200 rounds of mortars on us in between all of this.

[00:17:21.09] So it was a four-day fight. And at the end of the four days, the NVA backed away. But the cost was kind of high. We had eight soldiers killed. We had one missing because they told me as we're pulling back during one of those fights on a little ridge that they had everybody and they didn't. They left two there. We went back in. I got one of the bodies and the other one we never did.

[00:17:46.72] JOE GALLOWAY: The other one they never got. Those are hard memories.

[00:17:52.17] JOHN FOSS: You learn a lot though when you do intense combat for a period of time and things that helped me be a better officer the rest of the tour and also the rest of the assignments I had.

[00:18:06.10] JOE GALLOWAY: What were the losses like in, let's say, the worst hit company in your battalion?

[00:18:13.83] JOHN FOSS: Well, the battery got beat up on this mortar round. They took out three howitzers out of the six. They dumped a round inside the fire direction center. So we had

probably 30-some wounded out of that and probably two killed. And then the companies you got in these-- with the NVA, you were fighting at very short range.

[00:18:43.53] And so you-- it was difficult to get everything all wound together and tied together. And the leaders were the ones that got hit as they moved forward. Company commanders were the ones who got hit as they moved forward. We lost two company commanders, both of them wounded.

[00:18:59.85] JOE GALLOWAY: Platoon leaders?

[00:19:01.44] JOHN FOSS: Platoon leaders, first platoon leader hit was killed. And we had scout dogs to go ahead and help work. And we lost one of the scout dogs. He got-- but he alerted on the ambush. And we stopped the ambush. It was a very intense four-day period where it just-- well as you know and those sorts of things. It just keeps going and going and going.

[00:19:29.70] JOE GALLOWAY: But when it was over, you policed the battlefield.

[00:19:33.21] JOHN FOSS: And then we went down into the base area. And we scooped a lot of equipment and that, ammunition really. And the assistant division commander came up and said-- well, he came up before just as the fight ended-- and he said, we're going to get you out of here. And I said, we just won the fight. We haven't gotten into the goodies yet. And he said, OK, goddamn it. OK.

[00:20:06.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Let you go.

[00:20:07.55] JOHN FOSS: And so they let us go. And, yeah, it's a little bit slower moving through some of that terrain than what you want. And they got in the base area. And they found it. We hauled stuff out there for two days. And he came back out and said-- after we hauled all the ammo out, he said, OK, you proved your point. We're going to move you over to An Khe. Or, not to An Khe, but Plei Djereng. And so we did. They were in deep trouble. They'd had a mech battalion there that lost the track every day for 28 days.

[00:20:42.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Hmm.

[00:20:44.11] JOHN FOSS: And the NVA were running little hunter/killer teams out there. And so we went over there. The troops were pretty much toughened by this time. And they did very well. What we did was we just kept-- if you understood the flow of how the North Vietnamese moved from Cambodia into their base areas forward on in towards where they were going which-- and their responsibility in that area was always to go all the way over to reinforce and to provide supplies to the other people over there, the NVA who were over there by the coast.

[00:21:22.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Hmm.

[00:21:23.67] JOHN FOSS: And if that didn't work, then it took a long time. So we-- the brigade commander came out one day and he said, here, read this. And it was of these radio intercepts that I was cleared for before, but I wasn't cleared for any more.

[00:21:46.18] And so he said, just read this. And it basically said the North Vietnamese were raising hell with this battalion or this group here of about a battalion plus and said, why aren't you getting your stuff moved through that area? And he went back and said, this is a very tough aggressive battalion. He said they're moving all the time. They aren't like the others

[00:22:11.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty big compliment.

[00:22:12.94] JOHN FOSS: Which made me very proud of it because these were young soldiers-- these were draftees.

[00:22:17.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:22:20.00] JOHN FOSS: And you had-- at the time, we were also starting to lose our NCOs, which is another issue we can talk about later.

[00:22:27.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Shake and bake sergeants were coming--

[00:22:29.69] JOHN FOSS: We had shake and bakes. So we had to use lieutenants a lot. And General Abrams had decided that we would pull American infantry sergeants and infantry captains from the US units to provide training to the RF and PF, which are the regional forces and popular forces. And these people were-- guarded certain areas and they never really took. But I lost these people, I mean, in between a fight and then the draw.

[00:23:09.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Sucking out your best people to go train.

[00:23:11.68] JOHN FOSS: So I had a battalion with five captains. And one was the chaplain. One was the S-5 because I wouldn't give him the battalion. Two company commanders.

[00:23:27.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were commanding your other companies, lieutenants?

[00:23:29.53] JOHN FOSS: Lieutenants, yes. This was in late '69. And so, here, kids from class of '68, been platoon leaders, both have been wounded. And during this flight we had up in the mountains I said, you take over B Company. You take over C company.

[00:23:50.39] JOE GALLOWAY: They do all right?

[00:23:51.38] JOHN FOSS: They did fine.

[00:23:52.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:23:53.90] JOHN FOSS: The things you learned about how to keep going through a long, aggressive fight like that versus-- yeah, what you would do is reestablish things very quickly. You couldn't-- you didn't have time to worry about things. You didn't have time to go ahead and cry about your people who were gone. You didn't have time to do things. You just had to keep-- if the fight is going on, you had to keep fighting.

[00:24:22.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Had to stay in and keep your head in it.

[00:24:24.82] JOHN FOSS: And, of course, in '69, we had the Loach, the OH-6, which was a great command and control helicopter. And I can remember going into the fights with that because the mark to the airstrikes do all the things like that. And I didn't pray that I would live through that. I prayed that I would have the guts to go ahead and do what I had to do. And you don't tell that to very many people.

[00:24:59.60] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:25:05.52] JOHN FOSS: Oh, we had a lot of good days. I was very proud of the way the battalion fought up there in the Chu Pong mountains and when we won that flight and turned and got the things that we had to do out of there. And also I was very proud of the day that the brigade commander came out and said, read this. And the NVA was saying, this is a tough battalion because these were just draftees. I mean, this was not a regular Army.

[00:25:45.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:25:51.07] JOHN FOSS: I think along about day two of that four-day fight, you're trying to patch things together. You-- the NVA are beating the shit out of your-- excuse me, beating the hell out of your firebase, taking two or three of the guns out of there, wounding a whole bunch of those people. That's probably it I think. Although personally, I think it was one event where there was more me and the NVA that they almost got me.

[00:26:28.09] JOE GALLOWAY: They almost got you.

[00:26:30.55] JOHN FOSS: And you didn't think about it till later. And then it just sort of hit you.

[00:26:39.14] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact, if any, did you have with our allies, the Koreans, the Thais, the Filipinos, any of those?

[00:26:48.47] JOHN FOSS: No.

[00:26:49.07] JOE GALLOWAY: None.

[00:26:51.00] JOHN FOSS: Filipinos-- many years later, I was the head of the military adviser group in the Philippines.

[00:27:00.73] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact at that time did you have with your family back home? How did you communicate?

[00:27:06.40] JOHN FOSS: We wrote letters. Yeah, out there in the field, you couldn't have the-- there were people who could make telephone calls. We couldn't make any telephone calls.

[00:27:18.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Not in the field'. You had to get to the MARS station.

[00:27:22.20] JOHN FOSS: Not down in the Ia Drang or some place else, or--

[00:27:24.90] JOE GALLOWAY: So it was all letters, no tapes, that stuff?

[00:27:27.25] JOHN FOSS: No tapes, no.

[00:27:29.93] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war from home?

[00:27:34.07] JOHN FOSS: Stars and Stripes I think was absolutely fantastic. You got them almost every day. You got them close to the day that they were printed. They'd fly them in from Tokyo. They flew them into different big spots like Pleiku and other places. And it's-- until one day I found-- we hit some NVA in Kontum, and they had a Stars and Stripes that was two days old.

[00:28:01.14] JOE GALLOWAY: So they were reading it, too.

[00:28:03.05] JOHN FOSS: Oh, they were-- I'm not sure what they use it for. But I'm sure they got it back to their boss so they could-- or the other great use of Stars and Stripes--

[00:28:11.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, the other great use. How did the news that you were reading about the situation at home affect you or did it?

[00:28:23.69] JOHN FOSS: Well, it was sad when you begin to hear the resistance that a lot of the people back in the States had against the war. And they blamed the Soldiers. And that was more as they went home. They weren't going to get any pat on the back or anything like that.

[00:28:47.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Mm-mm.

[00:28:49.53] JOHN FOSS: It was a-- that was a country that basically decided they didn't like that war. And they didn't like the people that went to fight it, even though the government had sent them to do that. And I got one of the-- I think it was San Francisco when I came back. And this little old lady, nice little lady came up and said, I just think it's terrible what you've done to all those children in there. And that was a way that people turned against it. But it was really Tet '68 that turned the country.

[00:29:27.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:29:30.39] JOHN FOSS: And we thought-- at the end of that first week of Tet, we thought this is great. I mean, it was just, as I said earlier, a turkey shoot.

[00:29:41.92] JOE GALLOWAY: You won it where you were.

[00:29:44.38] JOHN FOSS: And won it. Yeah, we were way ahead. I still tell people we were way ahead when I left Vietnam. I don't know what happened after that, but--

[00:29:57.53] JOE GALLOWAY: When did you return home from your second tour?

[00:30:02.18] JOHN FOSS: July 1970.

[00:30:05.67] JOE GALLOWAY: What was that like, other than the little old lady in San Francisco?

[00:30:14.42] JOHN FOSS: Well, the thing that bothered me more than anything else was the Soldiers who were draftees, who went over there and did their job. There was some deficiencies in the battalion when I took it over. And they hadn't been taken care of as well as they should have. And so I pushed hard to make sure they had the right clothes, they had the food, they had other things like that, that people took care of them, that the chaplains got to see them every now and then.

[00:30:47.82] When they came back in the firebase, we had a real professional barber who was one of the riflemen who cut hair. The division commander used to come out and get his haircut, the ADC, because he-- but he was just like a barber. So you had to do those things. You had to make sure you had enough clothes to change. And it sounds simple, but not so.

[00:31:12.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Not so.

[00:31:14.65] JOHN FOSS: What I did-- we took some AK-47s, and my property book officer, and put them on an airplane. And he came back with a whole bunch of-- I think about 6,000 uniforms, which were things that people have been left out somewhere else in here and there and that sort of thing.

[00:31:35.86] JOE GALLOWAY: You had to have a few such people on your payroll.

[00:31:39.46] JOHN FOSS: Oh, yes, and the property book officer in those days was a warrant officer in the battalion. And this was great because he knew what was going on.

[00:31:48.37] JOE GALLOWAY: And he knew how to trade.

[00:31:49.93] JOHN FOSS: And he knew where to go and what to get.

[00:31:55.47] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your reception like from family and friends when you came home from that second tour?

[00:32:02.27] JOHN FOSS: Great relief by my wife when I got home. I went up to my brother's wedding. And my other brother, Pete, who was a class of '51 from West Point, had come home a couple months before I did. And he also went to that. So we were both there.

[00:32:28.75] We were in Vietnam actually at the same time because one of the four stars came through and visited me and then went up and dropped in to his battalion up in the Americal and said, I just saw you down at Pleiku. What's going on? So we had a chance. And it was what happened.

[00:32:55.01] You can't really talk to people about combat. You can talk a little bit, but not much. Yeah, I can remember as a kid, my dad was a rifleman in World War I. And combat was very heavy in those days because really the US Army did most of their attacks starting in September and October of 1918. There were some units that did a few earlier, but that was the big Army. That was Pershing's Army.

[00:33:29.11] And he had close things where they shot his web belt off, things like that. And he never forgot that. And so as a kid, we'd say, daddy, what you do in the war? And he tells a few little things, but not much.

[00:33:48.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Not much.

[00:33:50.01] JOHN FOSS: You can't really talk about combat very much to people who don't understand it. In the last couple of years, I have had a fair number of Soldiers and young officers who served with me in Vietnam who've gotten a hold of me, one of them by finding my wife's name because we had one firebase named Gloria Ann. And that was her name.

[00:34:18.29] And he said, I knew Foss, so-- and he tracked me on that. And he was an engineer who in this fight that we had up there we were trying to clear-- to get some wounded up. And the NVA shot the last jungle penetrator in the central highlands off. And so that was your way of getting people in and out as you well know.

[00:34:45.53] And so we had to take some engineers and rapel them in, then cut the hole out so they could go in. And this young officer did that and-- but he got hold of me by saying Foss, Gloria, and found my wife's name somewhere. And they found my telephone number and he called up.

[00:35:07.55] And he just wanted to tell me the story he had about how he remembered working with our battalion and how he got the Bronze Star. And he was very proud of that and things like that. And he went back and stayed in the Army for a year, got out, then decided he was going to go in business for himself.

[00:35:27.74] He tried a couple of other things. And then he went into business for himself. And he was very-- worked it out very well. And he wanted to let me know that he was-- but he also wanted to let me know that he really enjoyed the time that he served with us.

[00:35:44.79] JOE GALLOWAY: That's great. Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after the war?

[00:35:56.43] JOHN FOSS: No, and that sounds strange. I don't think I carried things with me as much as a lot of people did. Right after I turned over my battalion, my replacement did something that wasn't very-- wasn't very smart.

[00:36:22.31] And he let the S-3, the sergeant major, all these guys that wanted to go with him on a recon and they got into a fight. And the helicopter got shot down and it took out the fire

support officer, the S-3, the sergeant major who was a great sergeant major. One door gunner got out. So, I mean, that just really whacks you when you--

[00:36:53.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:36:58.44] How did your Vietnam experience affect your life afterward?

[00:37:07.74] JOHN FOSS: I found that I resented the leadership that we had. And I found that out when I was being interviewed to go back over my career by a very bright young officer. And you had to go through and explain all these things. And I found out how basically angry I had been at the lack of leadership we had in Vietnam at the top level.

[00:37:36.89] JOE GALLOWAY: We're talking military leadership.

[00:37:38.84] JOHN FOSS: We're talking military leadership. We're not talking brigade commanders and things like that.

[00:37:44.65] JOE GALLOWAY: At the very top.

[00:37:46.09] JOHN FOSS: Although I served for five 4th Division commanders. And there were two who were pretty good.

[00:37:54.19] JOE GALLOWAY: I take it Charlie Stone is not one of them.

[00:37:58.72] JOHN FOSS: He was-- on some things, he was very good. On other things, not so good.

[00:38:04.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your service in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life or changed you in any way?

[00:38:17.33] JOHN FOSS: Well, I think I became a much better commander having commanded there. I was given very much authority. And at one time I was the only infantry battalion west of the Mang Yang Pass. And basically the division and brigade commander let me do what I needed to do and supported me.

[00:38:48.64] And so I carried that forward. I mean, command has a lot to do with authority and responsibility. You are given the authority to get certain things done. And you're also given the responsibility to get them done. And I've noticed through the years that a lot of people have a misunderstanding of that. They want to be told what to do all the time versus understanding what to do.

[00:39:15.95] And I think what I came away from combat in Vietnam was that understanding that you have to do both of these things. And you can't wait to be told.

[00:39:28.72] And the other great thing was the Soldiers, who were draftees, who did these things, who hung together. And as long as you took care of them and they understood that there weren't any big problems as far as they were concerned. They didn't want to be there. They wanted to go home. But they wanted to go home and not in a box.

[00:39:53.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:39:54.94] JOHN FOSS: And so they stayed together and fought quite well. And the young officers we had were good, too.

[00:40:05.09] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans returning from combat today?

[00:40:15.32] JOHN FOSS: I think the country turned their back on the Soldiers of Vietnam. And they haven't now. I think it's very difficult for somebody to go and fight like that and then come back without any recognition of anything of value that they've done, whereas I understand clearly their value. They understand what they did.

[00:40:47.00] JOE GALLOWAY: What they did.

[00:40:47.81] JOHN FOSS: They know what they did. But it wasn't-- it wasn't so much they want a parade and that. You don't need a parade.

[00:40:59.30] JOE GALLOWAY: No, you just need a little respect for what you did.

[00:41:04.28] JOHN FOSS: And that-- I think that's the thing that's hurt the most. See, I went right from Vietnam to Germany. And so I didn't see that so much on a daily basis.

[00:41:16.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, I'm surprised at how they aren't more bitter than they would be. They've forgiven very easily. I'm still angry at that.

[00:41:33.39] JOHN FOSS: Well, I am, too. And I'm angry that as I read more and more about what happened-- I don't know if you've read the book on Kontum and that-- that they had a better insight into what was going on with the NVA and what we ever had, in my opinion, that I ever heard of during those battles that started in '67 and went through '70-- went into Cambodia, and--

[00:42:07.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:42:08.13] JOHN FOSS: We didn't get to stay there very long and they were pulled out, politically they got out. There's that. There's a lack of understanding of how to fight the North Vietnamese, how they operated, where they worked. There just-- there was not a good feel for a lot of that. And they were supposed to be professionals.

[00:42:32.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Did it make you determined to be a better high commander?

[00:42:37.95] JOHN FOSS: It made me determined to make sure that the Soldiers that were under me-- and I was very fortunate in having a lot of command time-- were given all the support they needed and didn't want to be dog robbed, put these guys. You go into Can Ranh Bay and there are lots and lots of NCOs and go out to the 4th Division. And in my battalion, I had one killed, one 11 Bravo E-7 in the whole battalion, one.

[00:43:13.60] And General Abrams-- and I have a lot of respect for General Abrams for what he did for the Army after Vietnam. But he had set up the policy that we're going to take infantry NCOs from the infantry units in combat. And we're going to take it to the captains. And we're going to put them out training the RF and the PF. And that's what happened. This was part of the disintegration I think of the discipline of the Army in Vietnam.

[00:43:46.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Which carried on into the Army in peacetime after Vietnam.

[00:43:50.67] JOHN FOSS: It took a while to undo that.

[00:43:53.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Certainly did.

[00:43:56.73] JOHN FOSS: It was pretty bad, yeah.

[00:43:59.97] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today in society in general?

[00:44:06.28] JOHN FOSS: Oh, that we lost a war to a bunch of guys in black pajamas. And I have a lot of respect for the North Vietnamese. I mean, they were good hard soldiers, even though one pried you over, you'd probably be there. It just-- there was an awful lot of good combat that went on that was good and well done by the US. And it wasn't-- you weren't just killing people for the sake of killing people. You were trying to win a fight.

[00:44:46.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:44:47.69] JOHN FOSS: And I had an opportunity to-- I captured an NVA soldier one day. And it would have been just as easy to shoot him, probably easier. But you looked at that 18-year-old kid and his eyes were that big. And he had an AK across his lap. And he wasn't going to touch that thing. Yeah, and that's-- I think that's a difference that you make is some people say I would have shot him. But no.

[00:45:20.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Shoot him, you can't talk to him.

[00:45:22.94] JOHN FOSS: You can't talk to him, you know. And you don't have to do that in order to make the situation come out right.

[00:45:35.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:45:44.84] JOHN FOSS: I think I personally took a lot with me. I never felt it was a worthless thing. I did come away with the feeling that you can't win in somebody else's insurgency no matter what. And as we try that in Iraq and Afghanistan, what goes around comes around.

[00:46:09.35] JOE GALLOWAY: It comes around. What are your positive lessons, learning, and wisdom that the war gave you for the rest of your life?

[00:46:25.24] JOHN FOSS: American Soldier is very good Soldier. And I've served with a lot of other armies, the Brits and the Germans and Koreans and other-- Filipinos. But the American Soldier is unique. And we have had Soldiers that have provided the country with the capabilities that a lot of other people can't.

[00:46:56.47] I think certainly in Vietnam, where it was one tour and then-- for the infantry guys it was a tour over, tour back, tour over, tour back, not unlike the thing we've had in Afghanistan and Iraq, I think that showed that that capability really carried us through. We came out and developed a more professional Army after that. The country did not want to have draftees going. We had to build a professional Army. That took a fairly long period of time. And what we learned out in combat told us what we had.

[00:47:43.89] JOE GALLOWAY: In the end, what did that war mean to you and your generation?

[00:47:50.67] JOHN FOSS: We've been asked to do that command position or other things like that. I think-- my experience was that the Soldiers responded when properly taken care of, even though we brought into the Army all the things that were taking place in the US. It still worked.

[00:48:23.96] And I think you learn more in combat about how to take care of Soldiers than anything else, how to treat Soldiers correctly, how to make sure that they get all the things that they need in order to get the job done and that they do their job, and that you train them and make sure they're ready for that. So when I commanded the 1st Brigade of the 1st Cav and then when I commanded the 82nd Airborne Division, we did a lot of hell of hard training.

[00:49:04.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you think it's a good idea?

[00:49:07.33] JOHN FOSS: Yes.

[00:49:08.41] JOE GALLOWAY: It's a chance to say thank you to a bunch of kids who did their job and came home to no welcome.

[00:49:17.84] JOHN FOSS: To no welcome. I think it's an opportunity to tell the country how much they really did. And there are an awful lot of people in the US at the time the war was going on who wanted to point out all the bad things, whether it's Jane Fonda with the North Vietnamese anti-aircraft units or whatever, that these Soldiers did great things. Our leadership started to fade.

[00:49:59.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Sadly.

[00:50:01.19] JOHN FOSS: And I have great respect for General Abrams, but I will never forget the lack of support that we had as he decided-- he trained these other people first.

[00:50:17.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Anything else that you want to say before we shut the cameras off?

[00:50:27.80] JOHN FOSS: That I was proud of my service. I was proud of my units. And those things I learned there I think probably helped me be a little bit better as a commander as I moved on up.

[00:50:43.10] JOE GALLOWAY: We thank you, General.