

Grahn, Gary US Navy

[00:00:16.70] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:00:19.76] GARY GRAHN: 19.

[00:00:20.64] JOE GALLOWAY: 19. Who were your family members? Were you married?

[00:00:30.68] GARY GRAHN: Oh no. No I was single then. My mom and dad were both still alive, were still living in Stratford and I had two sisters. One that was in college and one that was very young, she was sixteen years younger than me. So, obviously she was about three or four years old when I went to Vietnam.

[00:00:50.42] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your hometown?

[00:00:52.46] GARY GRAHN: Bridgeport Connecticut, was where I was born. And I joined the Navy when I lived in Stratford Connecticut right next door.

[00:00:59.80] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of the Vietnam War before you decided to enter the military?

[00:01:06.75] GARY GRAHN: It looked like it was a pretty big mess from what I saw on television. Because it was the news every night, things that were going on with the Marines up north, not a bunch of what was going on in the Delta or anything like that but it looked pretty busy.

[00:01:22.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Now you, you ended up a warrant officer but you enlisted.

[00:01:27.24] GARY GRAHN: Yes sir.

[00:01:29.85] JOE GALLOWAY: Where you drafted or did you volunteered?

[00:01:32.49] GARY GRAHN: I joined the Navy. I joined the Navy in 1967. I had been a member of the Naval Sea Cadet Corps for many years prior to that through my grammar school and high school days. I knew the Navy was going to be my career one way or the other.

[00:01:53.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you do basic training?

[00:01:55.79] GARY GRAHN: Great Lakes, Illinois.

[00:01:59.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe the training that you received before you went to Vietnam.

[00:02:05.39] GARY GRAHN: Well, aside from my own specialty which was communications we were sent to California for survival training, escape and evasion, survival escape and evasion and resistance, a fake POW camp. We were sent up to the Vallejo neck of the woods for small

boat training, just to get the idea of what some of the operations would be like and the experience of mock firefights and stuff like that.

[00:02:37.01] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on arriving in South Vietnam?

[00:02:41.82] GARY GRAHN: Hot and busy, as soon as we got out of the airport, it was like where did all these people come from? Just busy, busy, busy, with all these little mopeds running around and they seeming all in disarray, and it seemed like they were all flowing in the same direction.

[00:02:57.33] JOE GALLOWAY: You landed at Tan Son Nhut?

[00:02:59.01] GARY GRAHN: Yes.

[00:03:05.27] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your initial duties? Your initial assignment?

[00:03:11.08] GARY GRAHN: Well, we had to wait for our boat. We were the replacement crew for the plank owners on Alpha 111-7, so we had to wait for our boat to come in for us to change off. So we spent a lot of time in Dong Tam filling sandbags while we waited for it.

[00:03:32.32] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your daily routines once you got your boat?

[00:03:38.57] GARY GRAHN: We were slowly integrated into river patrols and assaults because we did work with the 9th Infantry. Alpha boats were habitually at the lead of all the columns, one on either side of a river, dragging minesweep gear, followed by the whole rest of the column of monitors and troop carriers and stuff.

[00:04:00.50] JOE GALLOWAY: What was the food like?

[00:04:04.03] GARY GRAHN: How good are C-rations?

[00:04:05.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:04:07.22] GARY GRAHN: Green eggs and ham.

[00:04:09.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:04:10.06] GARY GRAHN: We had it made in seventh heaven much later in our tour, where long range patrol rations that were dehydrated were put in the field too. So when you started mixing them together, then you really had a feast. We hardly ever almost never ate on a barracks ship.

[00:04:25.99] JOE GALLOWAY: You didn't get ashore that much?

[00:04:28.46] GARY GRAHN: No, we usually lived and ate on a boat.

[00:04:32.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, I'll bet that probably answers this, what were your living conditions like? Your quarters?

[00:04:38.78] GARY GRAHN: Cramped, to say the least, but it was a 50-foot boat. We're not talking something that's a luxury yacht by any chance. And once upon a time, you had two separate bunks down below decks, two separate ones up on the superstructure, and a couple that were on the fantail over the engine cover, so there was enough room to spread around for a five man crew.

[00:05:02.18] JOE GALLOWAY: And that's what you were, a five man crew?

[00:05:05.08] GARY GRAHN: Yes.

[00:05:10.28] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your impressions of the Vietnamese people in the beginning?

[00:05:18.50] GARY GRAHN: I think, leery, for lack of a better term, they all seemed very leery to me. I think we were as leery of them, that we probably maintained our distance when we were ashore, just as well as they did. Particularly, with our initial exposure being in Saigon, through the Annapolis Hotel, and the word that was always given to us, always go out in pairs, when you're even going to the chow hall.

[00:05:44.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Did that impression of the Vietnamese people change over a year's tour?

[00:05:50.79] GARY GRAHN: Yes, yes, I think because we were in the sticks for the most part. There were some that probably didn't appreciate us and I think there were a greater amount that probably did. Particularly when you consider all the water commerce that we kept moving, plus the stuff that we wanted to stop obviously, too. Our crew was really tight, we went through training together and we stuck together the whole year that we were there.

[00:06:21.21] We had-- we suffered one Purple Heart from a dud rocket hit and it was just a minor piece of shrapnel that stuck in the crewman's thumb. Three out of the four of us, three out of the five of us, maintain close contact. One of the boatswain's mates lives in Swainsboro, Georgia, one of the gunners lives up in Zion, Illinois, and one of the other gunners in Marquette, Michigan. And even if it's only by Christmas cards, we at least know where we are and how we are.

[00:06:53.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:06:54.38] GARY GRAHN: We had Vietnamese on the boat later on as the Vietnamization program went along. And one person in particular, was just like a brother, I loved him to death, and we got along great and I think he was a future Vietnamese boat captain after we turned over our boat to the Vietnamese navy.

[00:07:12.59] JOE GALLOWAY: So when you left, you gave your boat to the Vietnamese?

[00:07:16.09] GARY GRAHN: Yes.

[00:07:18.85] JOE GALLOWAY: This is-- what did you do for recreation, off duty activities? Or did you have any?

[00:07:25.92] GARY GRAHN: Wasn't much, I guess the closest off duty type things that we had was a beer call on a pontoon next to one of the barracks ships, but then we had beer on a boat too and probably had as much beer as we did C-rations.

[00:07:47.30] JOE GALLOWAY: What issues, events, and responsibilities, consumed most of your time?

[00:07:57.18] GARY GRAHN: Well, if we weren't out bringing the Army someplace, we were out bringing the Vietnamese army out someplace. For a long time our section supported Operation Giant Slingshot, which you may have heard from some of the PBR guys too, PBR Sailors, because we were all integrated with PBRs, Riverine force, mercenaries, local patrol-- Vietnamese patrol types, and stuff like that, where we went up around, what used to be-- what was eventually called, Parrot's Beak, that part of Cambodia that sticks out towards Saigon.

[00:08:38.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:08:39.42] GARY GRAHN: To interdict all the incoming supplies and things that were coming in through Parrot's Beak, so we were on both sides of it and it created a big slingshot, so that's the name of the operation, Giant Slingshot.

[00:08:52.03] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your job on the boat?

[00:08:54.68] GARY GRAHN: I was a communicator. I was the radioman. But I was also a coxswain. I was also an ammo reloader. Yeah, we were all trained, cross-trained to be able to do the other guy's job if he was ever taken out of action.

[00:09:09.16] JOE GALLOWAY: And your area of operations was--

[00:09:12.93] GARY GRAHN: Primarily Mekong Delta.

[00:09:14.06] JOE GALLOWAY: Mekong Delta.

[00:09:16.48] GARY GRAHN: We saw blue water once, and it was too choppy, I think we turned around and we all went back en masse because the freeboard or the distance between the deck and the water line on an Alpha boat's only a foot, so you can imagine that if you've got big waves that it act's more like a submarine than it does something that stays--

[00:09:33.02]

[00:09:33.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Swamped you pretty quick.

[00:09:34.43] GARY GRAHN: Yeah.

[00:09:35.98] JOE GALLOWAY: How many troops could you carry safely on that boat?

[00:09:43.62] GARY GRAHN: I think we've probably had maybe 15 or 20 on an Alpha boat. And I think the troop carriers themselves, the ATCs, were a platoon size 60, 65, or thereabouts.

[00:09:55.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Can you describe significant actions you witnessed in combat operations in which you participated?

[00:10:08.74] GARY GRAHN: Two, two in particular. The first one and one that happened after-- sometime after that, and all the rest of them are a blur. The first one I think probably sticks in everyone's mind because it's the first and that was when we were hit with a dud B-40 rocket.

[00:10:25.54] The Alpha boat crews were suffering some pretty high casualty rates, and a fix for that was to put a troop carrier on the outboard side of the Alpha boat so that if-- unloaded, no less, not with a load of troops on, because of the bar armor that they had on it, that was felt that they could take a hit and survive better than an Alpha boat could if they took a hit.

[00:10:50.74] As it was, we ended up getting hit with a dud B-40 rocket that ripped the coxswain flat canopy off, just about, and knocked my boat captain and I kind of stupid for a couple of seconds. And the boat beside us, the troop carrier, took several hits and were calling for help on the radio. And one crewman and myself jumped across, both to lend first aid and to maintain the boat's maneuverability through that firefight.

[00:11:19.75] And when we came back after everything-- we had crossed through the ambush zone that we were so spun up, so shaky that we couldn't even light our own cigarettes. You had to hold a light for someone else to be able to suck a light, we couldn't open our own soda can, we had someone hold the can and someone pull the tab because it just-- it was like, Oh, wow.

[00:11:46.30] And another instance, which resulted in a friendship much later in life, it had happened almost 45 years ago last month, that in March of '69, one of the monitors, MIKE 111-1, was sunk up near the Cambodian border and a sister Alpha boat and ours were sent out to lend them fire support and rescue, and they had taken on four rockets, it was also a flamethrower type monitor that had napalm on board, that one of the rockets set the napalm off, so it set it to burning and they all had to abandon ship.

[00:12:29.44] By the time we showed up it was dark, we were calling in fire support from Seawolf helicopters. We tried to dewater the boat the following morning and it ended up rolling over and sinking. But it wasn't probably more than four years ago, I have a model of my Alpha boat that I brought to a Game Wardens of Vietnam meeting, and one of the members started asking me questions about have you been here? Have you been there? Have you done this? Have you done that?

[00:13:01.48] Turned out that he was on that monitor. Turned out the morning after, that he was on the sister Alpha boat taking pictures of the damage on the monitor while I was on my Alpha boat, the two of us were that close together in the river and never even knew each other then.

[00:13:16.86] JOE GALLOWAY: If that dud rocket round had exploded, would it taken you out?

[00:13:25.30] GARY GRAHN: Yes.

[00:13:26.05] JOE GALLOWAY: You and the captain and everybody else?

[00:13:28.09] GARY GRAHN: The captain and probably the 20-- the 20 millimeter gunner also, because he's right up behind us from the coxswain flat.

[00:13:34.12] JOE GALLOWAY: So lucky--

[00:13:35.29] GARY GRAHN: Yeah.

[00:13:36.10] JOE GALLOWAY: A lucky hit that only a minor injury.

[00:13:38.86] GARY GRAHN: Yeah. We kind of thought it was like the shake of the dice.

[00:13:44.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:13:44.90] GARY GRAHN: Our boat number was 111-7

[00:13:46.71] JOE GALLOWAY: All right.

[00:13:47.52] GARY GRAHN: So figure, elevens and sevens and stuff, that maybe that was it.

[00:13:51.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty good.

[00:13:51.41] GARY GRAHN: It was fate.

[00:13:52.64] JOE GALLOWAY: What's your most vivid memory of Vietnam?

[00:14:02.11] GARY GRAHN: I'd like to keep it clean, but I'd say, being scared shitless. That's the thing that grabs me the most, probably the thing that's grabbed me with dreams over the years. It's just one of those things that it-- sometimes it pops up, a lot of times it doesn't, that all of a sudden you think someone's after you. That's probably the most vivid.

[00:14:30.62] Getting on a plane to come home.

[00:14:34.41] Seeing it, seeing Vietnam in the back window.

[00:14:41.73] I think that was that first firefight. After not knowing how it was going to be, what was going to happen, how the crew was really going to react, how we were going to come out of it. From there on, we knew what our capabilities were. And there were times that we were ambushed and we could see the gunfire, we could see the flashes of things being shot at us, we could see rockets coming, but it still wasn't the same as what the first one was like.

[00:15:12.58] JOE GALLOWAY: How much, if any contact did you have with our allies? i.e. the Thais, the Koreans, the Aussies, New Zealanders? And of course, the ARVN, the South Vietnamese.

[00:15:30.31] GARY GRAHN: ARVN-- ARVN, quite frequently, although not as much as probably the troop carriers did, because we weren't habitually carrying troops. We were always supporting the endeavor of getting there and after being there. I think we came across the Koreans one time.

[00:15:53.78] We dealt with Ruff Puffs, the regional forces type things that went out with American advisers that had no rank or badges or honor, they were in black pajamas just like the other guys were, and they didn't interact with us very often, particularly on an Alpha boat, not as much as they might have with a troop carrier.

[00:16:24.10] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact did you have with your family back home?

[00:16:30.42] GARY GRAHN: As often as we could get mail. It always seemed like my grandmother was sending me something, it might have been crumbs by the time it was there, but always something to eat. I had a high school buddy that sent me a box of Playboys once upon a time, that was really the cat's meow, that got spread around. My grandmother's still alive by the way, she just turned 105 last month.

[00:16:52.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow. So it was purely by mail?

[00:16:57.43] GARY GRAHN: Yes. Not, nothing anywhere near what it's like today for the-- today's Navy.

[00:17:02.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, right.

[00:17:03.45] GARY GRAHN: It used to be that even though they thought that on a blue-water Navy that the Inmarsat was great, that you could make a phone call home every now and then, but now you couldn't even get email back and forth out there that--

[00:17:15.94] GARY GRAHN: Wasn't like that then.

[00:17:16.90] JOE GALLOWAY: You get on and do the messenger service too. Live chat.

[00:17:20.51] GARY GRAHN: Yeah.

[00:17:21.13] JOE GALLOWAY: All that stuff. How much news did you receive about the war from home?

[00:17:30.14] GARY GRAHN: Probably more from home than what we actually heard in country. Armed forces, Radio obviously, had their slant on what was happening, and I'm sure that it was sanitized to a certain extent, that you wouldn't want to be telling everyone what you were up to. I remember getting newspaper clippings that my father would send and was essentially asking if I was part of this? And stuff like that, so it's usually more from home than what was actually in country.

[00:18:00.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you, did--

[00:18:01.38] GARY GRAHN: And we saw Stars and Stripes.

[00:18:01.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Get an occasional Stars and Stripes or any-- Yeah.

[00:18:05.35] GARY GRAHN: Yeah.

[00:18:10.02] JOE GALLOWAY: How did that news affect you, or did it?

[00:18:15.20] GARY GRAHN: Can't say as it did, I thought sometimes that if I was reading about things that I knew that we had participated in, that it might not have been exactly the truth, there was a different slant on it. I mean, I've even seen after action reports that are part of the Texas University thing, for the conflict, that record or have documented, after action reports for the task force. And I've participated in some of those things that--

[00:18:47.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Can't recognize--

[00:18:48.54] GARY GRAHN: And it's not, it's not the way it was, but that's the way the after action report was written.

[00:18:53.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:55.03] GARY GRAHN: That-- the action with the monitor that was sunk, for example, the after action report makes no mention of two Alpha boats going to the aid, it was two PBRs that went.

[00:19:09.16] JOE GALLOWAY: When did you return home?

[00:19:11.96] GARY GRAHN: Around June, June of '69.

[00:19:16.91] JOE GALLOWAY: And what was that like?

[00:19:20.95] GARY GRAHN: Hindsight being 20/20, I think it was more covert. I ended up getting a pair of whites to travel in after leaving Vietnam. They hit Travis Air Force Base and jumped on a plane and flew to Milwaukee, where I had a girlfriend. Taxicab driver took me

there, he asked me where I was coming from because of the tan that I had, and I told him I was coming from Vietnam and that was the end of the conversation.

[00:19:54.03] After visiting in Milwaukee for a while, I finally flew back to the East Coast, and my father picked me up in Newark, New Jersey and it was kind of a quiet ride home. My dad was a World War II vet that was a coxswain on small boats during the invasion of Normandy. And one thing he told me was, never get on small boats, and maybe, being a radioman would be good, because then when you're in an operation, you always have radio silence, meaning you won't do anything, which obviously, neither one of them held any water.

[00:20:31.58] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your reception like from family and friends?

[00:20:38.07] GARY GRAHN: Friends were all glad to see me home and my family was too. All my grandparents were alive then. I think the most emotional one of the bunch was my mother. My mother, when she first saw me, just cried and I don't know if that was, I guess, for joy, I guess, because I was home.

[00:21:02.02] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow veterans over the years since coming back?

[00:21:11.47] GARY GRAHN: At least routinely once a year with my fellow boat crew members and several others that live in other parts of the country. The Mobile Riverine Force Association holds a biannual reunion that I try to get to, the past several years it's been in Indianapolis. On one of the off years my wife and I took a trip to North Bend, Oregon, neck of the woods, Coos Bay, where a fellow Riverine force guy lived.

[00:21:43.71] I'd never met him before but we were holding a mini reunion and there was probably, maybe a dozen, a dozen families that all gathered there and we ate and drank and clammed and crabbed, and we had a good time for a week.

[00:21:59.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Was it difficult readjusting to normal life after combat?

[00:22:08.75] GARY GRAHN: I think it probably was. It wasn't until many, many, many, years later that I was diagnosed with PTSD. So I can only imagine that I must have been-- I must have been a real pain in the butt when I was 20 and 21 years old. I burned the candle at both ends, I figured-- I think, I figured that they didn't get me, so I'm going to live, I'm going to live my life right to the brink. So I was probably a pretty foolish looking young man at the time.

[00:22:43.52] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your Vietnam experience affect your life afterward?

[00:22:49.83] GARY GRAHN: Again, in retrospect, I think post-traumatic stress-- stress deal with-- it's probably affected-- of all-- I have-- I've been married four times. There had to have been instances that just kind of compounded themselves, and one thing after another, regardless of the fact that I stayed in the Navy and I was moving here and moving there, and things like, that. but I think it probably had a contributing factor to that.

[00:23:27.45] They didn't get me, they didn't get me in '68 and '69. I'm not going to say I feel like I'm a Superman, but I don't feel like someone's going to get me now. I don't feel invincible, but it's given me that kind of a philosophy, I think.

[00:23:49.39] JOE GALLOWAY: I bet when you were 21 you thought you were invincible.

[00:23:52.65] GARY GRAHN: Oh yeah.

[00:23:53.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:23:57.94] GARY GRAHN: And now I carry a pistol where I can legally, because I can't carry a cop.

[00:24:05.15] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

[00:24:13.29] GARY GRAHN: I'm glad to see that the Vietnam era veterans have stepped up to the plate to welcome those that are coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan. And our VFW post attempts to do that too, and welcome them into our fold, rather than the way past veterans had treated us in years gone by with our attempted membership at the VFW, for example, that you guys didn't fight a war, go away.

[00:24:42.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Go away.

[00:24:42.93] GARY GRAHN: Yeah.

[00:24:45.33] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today, in general society?

[00:24:54.37] GARY GRAHN: I think a lot of them don't even know about it, unless you start talking to some old farts like us. I went through a college class that was all about Vietnam in the '90s, and some of the students in the class had no idea what was what, none whatsoever. But there were three of us veterans in there, and they found out real quick.

[00:25:20.90] And one of the guest speakers during that class was Gunnery Sergeant Carlos Hathcock, who's unfortunately gone from us now, but they were awakened real quick. Never mind textbook stuff, but personal experiences that were told. And I think that's the way it is with the younger folks today. I don't think they know a lot about it at all.

[00:25:46.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful, then you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:25:56.99] GARY GRAHN: I think so. I think so, and it all evolves around the teamwork, the crew, the five of you all pulling together, for each other. And I think it's that philosophy that carried me through the rest of my Naval service too. And I never seem to have any problems with groups, that I was either a leading petty officer, or the chief, or the senior chief, or the

warrant officer, that was a kind of a different magnetism that people just didn't blindly follow me, but they knew they were on the right path when they did.

[00:26:37.94] JOE GALLOWAY: In the end, what did the war mean to you and your generation?

[00:26:48.68] GARY GRAHN: Keep the politicians out of it.

[00:26:54.79] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from the Vietnam experience, that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans?

[00:27:18.66] GARY GRAHN: Support your country. There's times when the country is going to tell you you have to do things that you may not want to, but that's the military. You've got to trust in your leadership, that's probably tough for some people right now.

[00:27:43.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you heard about the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration project?

[00:27:49.64] GARY GRAHN: Yes, I have.

[00:27:51.11] JOE GALLOWAY: What are your-- what are your feelings concerning this effort?

[00:27:56.53] GARY GRAHN: It's probably long overdue. There's a function starting this weekend, I think. If not this weekend, next weekend, it's the Military Tattoo here in Norfolk, that bands, and drill teams, and stuff, from everywhere come. And apparently this year, their main theme is to thank Vietnam vets and several of our fellow Game Warden members are going to attempt to attend. I personally, probably will not, only because, only because.

[00:28:35.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there anything you'd like to add to your story here before we shut her down?

[00:28:51.57] GARY GRAHN: I'm glad to see a lot of our brown-water Navy, particularly, and I'm sure that either other armed forces that have been in Vietnam are still supporting each other in particular. I affiliate myself with the Game Wardens of Vietnam that were the PBR Sailors, and they've opened their arms to me like a brother, as a fellow brown-water Navy River Rat.

[00:29:19.13] And I've bumped into other fellow Riverine force people, one of them just joined our post as a matter of fact, not that long ago. It really surprised me that all of a sudden a guy out of nowhere pops up and it's good, it's good to see those people. And I look forward to my quarterly meetings with them, just to get together and talk, and share a few beers with them too.

[00:29:45.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, well, thank you Mr Grahn. Thank you, thank you.