

## **Isenburg, Thomas USMC**

[00:00:13.02] THOMAS ISENBURG: Mom was an Irish immigrant. Dad was German, lived in Cleveland, Ohio. Started in Illinois. I have a brother and sister, Jim and Nancy. They live in Colorado right now. I was born just outside Cleveland, Ohio, but my folks moved around a lot so we had many different towns that we lived in.

[00:00:33.08] It was about every five years we would move, so we had an opportunity to see a lot of places. You know, New Jersey, New York, Florida. Lived in the Middle East for a while. And then I always kept in touch with my next door neighbor. She and I grew up together, knew each other when we were five years old. Stayed in touch over the years. Matter of fact, when we got into high school, we were writing letters back and forth, comparing who we wanted to date and either voting yes or no regarding the date.

[00:01:02.76] Ultimately married her. Actually, she told me to marry her. And then after 24 years living in Cleveland, Ohio, I dragged her all the way out to California. So yeah, I'd say Livermore, California is our home.

[00:01:21.87] THOMAS ISENBURG: I had one year of college. And my dad wanted me to be a mechanical engineer, and I just wasn't hacking it. And so I was complaining about it a lot. My roommate was a former Marine tank driver. And I was explaining my problem-- I'm conflicted, what am I supposed to do? And he says, well, if you're conflicted, join the Marine Corps. They'll solve that problem for you. So I did.

[00:01:44.93] MARC HENDERSON: What year was that?

[00:01:45.90] THOMAS ISENBURG: 1964. I joined them in June, but they didn't want me until August. So I was at a YMCA camp helping some kids out. And then this was from Akron, Ohio. And then took the train down to Marine Corps base at Parris Island. And that's where I went to boot camp.

[00:02:06.51] And then the Corps shipped me out to California, to Camp Pendleton, where I joined the unit that I went to Vietnam with in January 1965, the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines. But the guy was right. When I left the Corps, I was no longer conflicted about what I was going to do with life. Of course, I married my nurse, hippie wife, and she sent me back to college, you know, to get a good job because she wanted children and was not going to have some sloth living around the house. So she's been controlling my life for 49 years.

[00:02:44.56] MARC HENDERSON: Congratulations.

[00:02:45.64] THOMAS ISENBURG: Yeah. She did a good job. THOMAS ISENBURG: Why did I think the draft was later or something? I just-- I mean, my issue was I graduated from high school in Tehran, Iran. My classmates were kids from all over the world, including two Russian kids I played basketball with. So coming back to Florida, in 1963, I didn't know how to react. You know, I was 18 going on 35 kind of feeling.

[00:03:18.45] And I was really worried about this because I didn't want to disappoint my dad about not finishing college, but I just couldn't hack it. And having this roommate that had been through all that, and now is back in college to get a degree, I thought, OK, maybe that's the deal. I go in the Corps, and then maybe the GI Bill will help me go to college.

[00:03:35.82] But no, the draft was not an issue. Matter of fact, it didn't really come up in a conversation until some of the guys that joined us in June of '65 were part of an initial draft. I just know that I'd now got this new little card that would categorize me as A-1, or whatever that stuff was. But no, I mean, I played Army guys and stuff like that in forests for years. I'm a big John Wayne fan, so sure, why not? Why not go into the military? And it was a good choice.

[00:04:15.50] THOMAS ISENBURG: Really just focused on boot camp. I mean, before I went in, there was some discussion about the Russians helping the folks in the Dominican Republic. You know, it was kind of an extension to Cuba. And coming from Florida, you know, that was a big issue to us. But no, I thought I'd be going to the Dominican Republic to stop the Russians from going into there, or going to Venezuela, or something like that. It wasn't until I got out to California and, really, halfway through our training, did we stop trying to learn Spanish and Portuguese and began learning Vietnamese and Russian, that we thought, OK, we're going someplace else.

[00:04:57.58] And then they started talking about Vietnam. And our battalion commander had this philosophy that he garnered from small units operating during the Civil War. My platoon commander felt the same way, so we were doing all those kinds of tactics. And he was planning for some kind of an island attack, not necessarily a country attack. But it wasn't until I'd say about April when President Johnson activated the Marines to go into Vietnam and sent the 3rd Marines from Okinawa that we knew we weren't going to Dominican Republic, which made sense to us, right? Why would the Corps take a West Coast Marine unit and send them all the way to the East Coast?

[00:05:39.34] Then we understood what was going on and we learned our Vietnamese, we learned our Russian, and got ourselves set up for dealing in that kind of a country. Now, the luck we had was our training sergeants were World War II veterans that served in the Pacific. Our platoon sergeant served in Korea and was at the Chosin Reservoir. So they were training us in a lot of tactics on how to hit the beach, how to climb up in the mountains, how to get down in the arroyos, to sort of imitate what a jungle might be, because Camp Pendleton clearly is not a jungle.

[00:06:15.04] But their training in the things to look out for was amazing. And we spent five months training before we even got to combat. THOMAS ISENBURG: I wanted 0-311, which is Infantry Marine. I've always loved building airplanes, wanted to be in aviation. But I knew I was too tall. I mean, even the recruiter had to put me through exercises so I could squeeze down an inch just to meet the minimums to get in the Corps. So I think from day one, at boot camp, yeah, I was going to be a rifleman-- and shot expert, so I guess I knew how to actually fire the weapon too. But yeah, always 0-311, rifleman.

[00:07:01.23] THOMAS ISENBURG: January '65, transferred to California. In this general barracks, we were pulled to join 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, which was being activated for the first time since it was deactivated in 1953, coming out of Korea. We were introduced to these NCOs, master sergeants, sergeant majors-- all World War two veterans, and our platoon sergeants, who were the ones that were going to actually organize our platoons and help with building the company.

[00:07:31.90] I was assigned to Echo Company, and I was assigned to 2nd Platoon in Echo Company, a rifle platoon. Jim Little, our Korea Marine, made sure that we were lined up. We had experienced NCOs, had three or four years in the Marine Corps, who took over as squad leaders or as fire team leaders. So most of it was just getting used to what our jobs were. And Sergeant Little strongly believed that you must learn every person's job, regardless of their rank so if we lose them, you know how to take over. And of course, that experience came from him from Korea, because he lost so many of his unit when he was over there.

[00:08:14.11] So we would get to know each other. Some of the guys were married. We didn't know that early on, but then we learned that later. They were all-- came from all over the country. Some East Coasters wondering why they're all the way on the West Coast because the Russians are in the Pacific-- I mean, in the Atlantic. Smart guys. Some of them, a couple of them, had a couple of years of college. Most were high school graduates. One 16-year-old from Canada and one 17-year-old from China. So we had our own Chinese communist as part of the platoon.

[00:08:54.38] But he kept reminding us that he was third generation, and third generation means he knows how to build railroads, and so he would explain to us what Leland Stanford was, and we never knew that kind of jazz. So a lot of it was talking about where we came from and what we were doing because the rest of it was training. It was 18 hours on, six hours off kind of thing. And it was constantly trying to understand these tactics, spending a lot of time out on ships and submarines, learning how to sneak ashore in rubber boats. What a stupid idea that was.

[00:09:27.40] We'd come ashore, sneak across, go up on a hill, do a little operation, come back to the boats. The California surf would be 20 feet tall. We kept getting thrown back on the beach. And the training sergeant would keep doing that. He said, OK, fine, you guys actually won the battle. Good enough. But we were terrible in those rubber boats. And we took those things to Vietnam with us and only used them once, thank God.

[00:09:48.19] The rest was the Higgins boats, how to go over the nets and make those drives on the beach, which, to a lot of us who grew up with all the World War II movies and the John Wayne stuff and what have you, we thought we were in a movie. I mean, here we are in California, and we're getting in these boats and we're running up on the beach and yelling as we go up the beach and stuff like that. And sure enough, we used it in the latter half of 1965 because we were Raider Battalion, and our job was to sit there with the 7th Fleet, parked off the beach, we'd make an assault onto the beach while some of our other guys from the battalion would come in a helicopter.

[00:10:28.27] And the idea was to borrow the village chief to see if they were pro NVA or whatever, and also to secure railroad lines and roads and stuff up and down the coast from roughly Chu Lai up to the DMZ. Every morning, going down those nets, climbing into those boats, I mean, it was like a movie. We did four of those raids, and we only saw return fire action on two of them.

[00:10:58.40] MARC HENDERSON: Do you remember what those raids were called?

[00:11:00.02] THOMAS ISENBURG: Oh, yeah. They were called Dagger Thrust. And they were just parked roughly 50 miles apart from roughly the coast side near Saigon, all the way up to just north of Hue. Years later, we bumped into one of the S2 guys, the intelligence guys, working with the battalion. He was saying, well, you realize, of course, there were actually six Dagger Thrust raids planned. And we said, oh, really? That's pretty cool. And where were they?

[00:11:28.90] Well, the two of them were up north of the DMZ. Snatch and grab of village chiefs and stuff like that. To which our platoon sergeant said, well, that would have really been something. That would have been a glorious set of raids. We'd be all dead, but it'd be a glorious set of raids. You know, so--

[00:11:44.73] But yeah, that was our experience in Vietnam. And then talking to the sergeant major, we were also a backup force for Operation HIGHLAND, which was the support of 1st Air Cav as it came into the country, and then started moving inland and got themselves in trouble there. And we couldn't go in and help them, but we knew what was going on.

[00:12:07.29] And we were really impressed because all the aircraft carriers were bringing in all our helicopters. All the helicopters were wrapped in like this white shrink wrap. We thought, oh, OK. So this is how the Army goes to war, right? It's spotless, clean helicopters. And they were doing those new fancy Huey helicopters, and we were still dealing with helicopters made during Korea.

[00:12:31.79] THOMAS ISENBURG: When the Dagger Thrusts were over, I was made corporal and given my own fire team. And that's what I had going into what we called Operation HARVEST MOON, which was over Christmas, just in the Qui Nhon Valley. And halfway through that operation, my lieutenant said, I can't get radio contact. Goofy-- that was my call sign-- come over here and take the radio because you're tall and you'll get better contact, plus you speak a little Vietnamese. And then he found some frequencies from North Vietnam radios that he wanted us to listen in to. So we would use the ARVN officer that was with us, and me, and we'd try and translate if we heard where they were moving and what we had to do. That was a two-week operation that we were in.

[00:13:18.53] THOMAS ISENBURG: We were told early that the armed forces of South Vietnam were weak and really not interested in solving this problem anyway. Some of them were actually protesting the government and thought the United States should take over South Vietnam as a territory, if you will. But when we were in combat with them, they did very well. They fought well along us. We could trust them covering our backs. So, no.

[00:13:45.04] And then the villagers-- I mean, we spent a lot of time in villages. We were assigned, when we were up near Hue, to all these winning hearts and minds deals. They'd put a squad in with a village. We'd spend two or three weeks with them, and the corpsmen, of course, had a blast, right? Because they were checking everybody's health.

[00:14:05.11] In one village, he helped give birth to a baby girl. He talked about that thing for months. This was the good thing about Vietnam, was the birth of that kid. We'd learn how to draw rice out of the fields to do harvest, and we found these people to be wonderful. And the mountain people, in particular, the Montagnards, their version of Native Americans, they hated everybody. They hated people in the north, they hated people in the south, but we got along with them great. And they had this barbecued pig and rice. Oh, gosh, it tasted wonderful.

[00:14:41.08] But no, I liked the people of Vietnam-- at least the ones we saw. And yes, they went through hard times. And our platoon commander would always remind us of that, is imagine if this happened in your town. Imagine if it was in San Clemente, California and all of a sudden, somebody invaded your town from overseas. How would you react? What would you do? How would you feel? That's what they're going through, and you need to take care of them. He was excellent at that. He was a good commander.

[00:15:16.90] THOMAS ISENBURG: The battalion was formed specifically, we thought, for the Dominican Republic. And then in March, they changed orders and said, no, you're going to the Pacific. And so the orders came down, pick six out of every platoon to go to these language schools for a month. As a matter of fact, when we had our final deployment gathering, I would guess-- was about a month before we went aboard the ships, July of '65-- General Krulak, who was the current commander of the Marine Pacific Fleet, told us how much he was impressed with our ability to learn these foreign languages. So I'm beginning to think, yeah, it came from up high.

[00:16:03.24] Our training, too, was based on being in villages, small units. We played the aggressors in most cases. So we weren't in uniform. We were against the regular force. One time, we actually thought we surrounded a platoon of guys from Chicago, Marines from Chicago. And then they told us to look up, and we were surrounded by tanks. So we got this abject lesson about how, OK, if you're an insurgency fighter and you don't have a tank, it makes it a little tough to say you won. And that actually helped us when we were in Vietnam, because occasionally we would get tanks. We certainly had artillery and air cover.

[00:16:45.93] The NVA basically had mortars. That was it for them, for us. So most of it was-- one of our guys called it gangland fighting. It was walk down the center of the street and pull a weapon out and see what happens. But so that's the kind of training that we had. I think that was Colonel Hannifin, our battalion commander, pushed that forward into his platoons, that everything will be small unit tactics, whether we were in the Caribbean or whether we were in the Pacific. And you're going to have to learn to understand the people. You have to understand their backgrounds, their heritage, and what's causing them to be angry at you.

[00:17:28.94] THOMAS ISENBURG: I think it was for all Marines. We tended to get it just because we were scheduled to be in a lot of villages. So we weren't supposed to be in very large

operations, where we just sweep across large countryside. We were always very small units. I mean, our platoon basically spent six weeks in a little village that was at the corner of Laos and the DMZ. Rarely saw the company.

[00:17:53.31] And then when we did get into some of the big fights with our company and our battalion, a lot of our guys got hurt, too. So no, I think it was Marine Corps wide. It just, I think the term hit because we were doing the rubber boat trick. You know, sneak in the middle of night, grab some unsuspecting Vietnamese or Dominican Republic guy, and put him back in the boat, and go out to the submarines or out to the ships. So that's why it's stuck. And it still has. It's still known as the Raider Battalion.

[00:18:25.44] THOMAS ISENBURG: When we were over there in December, the lieutenant sent me to the battalion radio guy to learn how to talk to air cover ships, artillery, and how to call them in. He knew I could read a map, so we would work the coordinates out. Really hated that job, being a platoon radio, because he would go off and do his stuff, and then we had to put up with a corpsman because the corpsman would look at the patrol trails we were taking. And every time, he would sit there and say, OK, you can go through the left trail, but not the right trail. The right trail's dangerous. I don't do house calls there.

[00:19:05.58] And the lieutenant would listen to him, you know? And he'd make things change around just so the corpsman wouldn't-- because he would get kind of whiny when one of us would get hurt. He'd say, I told you guys you weren't supposed to go there. But no, so I had to learn how to talk to air cover, artillery, the Navy ships. They still had cruisers that you could depend on if you were close to the coast.

[00:19:26.19] And then the Vietnamese stuff. So learning the radio, learning the codes, carrying a little book around with all the codes and stuff. Oh man, it's really boring stuff. There were a few times where if the lieutenant couldn't get back to me, I could call in an airstrike or an artillery strike, in which case I felt good because I think I helped our guys when they got in trouble. But then I thought, I should have been out there with them too. So it was only in times when we were in larger operations, where we were catching fire as well, that I actually felt like I was contributing because I could shoot, and then, occasionally, carry the radio.

[00:20:08.31] And the other thing was you couldn't get supplied during the rainy season, so the batteries would tend to discharge enough. So then you just carried the stupid 25-pound radio around that you can't talk on. And then I had to be a runner, right? I had to communicate from the platoon to the company, if we were with those guys. And then that bothered me because I was away from my guys, you know? Especially the lieutenant, who it was my job to protect, right?

[00:20:34.82] So no, it was-- I guess I served a purpose, but it was not what I joined the Marine Corps for. But yeah, so that was it. Otherwise, I was a rifleman, automatic rifleman, first and foremost. And always carried my rifle. I didn't turn it in when they gave me a pistol to carry. So I always had the two, and occasionally, you know, I'd be out at point just because I thought they needed a radio out at point, just so I felt like I was contributing, instead of sitting in the rear with the gear.

[00:21:13.10] THOMAS ISENBURG: We were issued the M14 rifle. The squads were broken up into fire teams of four each-- a corporal, who was running the fire team, and then one of the fire team members had a normal rifle. One trigger, one shot. Another had an automatic rifle that was set on automatic all the time. So if you hit an ambush, those guys would just stand up and spray the countryside. And then the other guys would take aim and try and actually hit something. So that's why it was called automatic.

[00:21:45.74] The trick was, though, is that you had to have at least a sharpshooter or expert rating, even on automatic. So if you sprayed across a target, you had to hit that target almost in half, where the other guys were supposed to hit at certain points in the target. And I lucked out. I was pretty good, and loved that rifle, so that's what it did. And the sergeant would always say it was my job to make sure the lieutenant didn't get shot.

[00:22:12.65] So with the automatic, you know, I could knock down trees and everything, right?

[00:22:21.88] THOMAS ISENBURG: It starts with friends and family coming to Camp San Mateo at Camp Pendleton, 3 o'clock in the morning, to say goodbye to their husbands, sweethearts, friends. We were all kind of lined up. The battalion was all packed to get on trucks to take us to San Diego to get on our troopship, which was the USS Bexar, but it was spelled B-E-X-A-R, which was supposed to be our transport ship all the way to the South Pacific. Boarded the ship, you know, like 5 o'clock in the morning, and we left San Diego on the 11th of August of '65. Headed initially to Okinawa.

[00:23:02.60] And there we did some training on beach landings and jungle warfare. And then we got this word about maybe going to Indonesia because of a communist takeover. So we were headed that direction, but they turned us around. And they sent us to the Philippines, where we got some real jungle training, including how to make rice cakes inside bamboo. That was almost a recipe art, and our platoon sergeant figured that one out. We didn't know what was going on, and we made sure we didn't cut our hands off trying to cut the bamboo so we could stick the stupid rice in there.

[00:23:35.39] And his deal was if you can't get food, you know, this country's got a lot of rice. So go for it. Then we went by ship off the coast. It was supposed to be our first Dagger Thrust, which got turned around a little bit. And we joined this Operation HIGHLAND, which was to be a blocking force for when 1st Air Cav came into the country.

[00:23:57.71] And then everything from that until December of '65 was making these Dagger Thrust landings. We'd spend time in some of these villages. Some of these villages were bombed by Navy artillery. In one particular village, we found a huge VC encampment, you know, where we saw uniforms and food and storage. And one of their classic weapons was a C-ration can with a bamboo stick on it, and a pin that they would stick in a .22, pull the pin out, and it would fire the .22. And we thought, OK. If this is the best weapons they got, we got no problem.

[00:24:41.20] And then we started finding AK-47 Russian rifles and we said, oh yeah, the Russians are definitely involved in this country. But no, we were doing the John Wayne thing we did off the California coast. This time, though, we were using live ammunition. And only on two

occasions did we have a combat situation outside of a village that we had to deal with. But our training, you know, we knew how to disperse. We knew where to move to. And we only spent like five or six days in those particular areas, then we'd get back on the ship again and we'd go on to the next spot.

[00:25:17.17] It wasn't after until HARVEST MOON, in January of '66, where they moved us to a place called Phu Bai that we actually became in-country.

[00:25:31.87] THOMAS ISENBURG: Well, there was a couple of them. One was the Montrose, which was apparently an old converted cruise ship. And then the Talledega that would have the Higgins boats on it. And then some of our guys would be on the USS Iwo Jima. It was a flattop helicopter aircraft carrier. We were always making the beach landings, so we always stayed on these cargo ships, if you will.

[00:25:54.78] We'd be in the cargo hold, and the Navy had hooked up these chains to hang these canvas beds. And there were six high, roughly two feet distance from one rack to the other. Being the tallest, I always got the top one. But when we'd hit heavy seas and stuff like that, you'd always hear some foul language as somebody bounced off one of those racks and hit the deck. But that was it for us. Chow was Navy chow. It was good.

[00:26:24.99] But you're kind of restricted. I mean you've either got the cargo, or you got sitting on the deck. There's not enough room to do any training. We weren't allowed to do any riflanship programs. So it was kind of boring, really. We'd do calisthenics to kind of keep things going. And if you kind of went against the rule that the staff sergeant wanted you to follow, the platoon sergeant, you'd find yourself down in the bilges, polishing brass or something like that, and being told what to do by some Navy guy. It was punishment.

[00:27:02.34] But yeah, so we were just aching to get off the ship and go do something. You know, dry land and whatever. Marine Corps must have thought that was a problem, too, or at least Colonel Hannifin did, because the Marine Corps birthday, November 10, 1965, the 7th Fleet pulled up off the beach, we all got on board thinking we were going to do something. And here was a big cake in the middle of the beach, and we were having a celebration of the Marine Corps birthday.

[00:27:28.78] We thought, OK, nobody's shooting at us, but we're in a combat zone. We're sitting around playing poker or talking or whatever, listening to music, and eating this cake. I said, OK, we got John Wayne beat.

[00:27:47.06] I mean, we were cleaning weapons, or we were getting ready to go, or cleaning uniforms and stuff like that. And certainly when we got in-country, occasionally we would take naps and stuff like that. In the spring of '66, we were given an opportunity to pull liberty in Hue, in civilian clothes and unarmed. And we sixty-fivers, every time we talk to the guys who followed us, we have to apologize for getting those people angry, look at us and say, you were where in 1966? Alright, yeah. And I had to get pictures of it. So Woody, one of my guys and I, sitting in a rickshaw. It's the only civilian clothes we got. It was the last one we could pack in our

sea bags to take with us. And no weapons. And we're riding around Hue, which is a beautiful city.

[00:28:35.53] I mean, it was the old imperial capital, and so you had this beautiful Spanish and French architecture that was all through the city. But it just blew everybody away that we'd take a truck, travel 25 miles up Highway 1 in Vietnam, and go to Hue and check things out. Very friendly city. Very friendly people.

[00:29:00.01] The other one was a little later off. Apparently, we got finally designated that it was safe enough in Phu Bai to send the USO people up. So they sent this guy, Big, Tiny, Little. None of us had ever heard of it. That was kind of jazz and blues kind of band stuff. But a month later, Ann-Margret came. We were on ready deployment, so there was only 30 of us sitting in the audience. She wore this kind of tight, white outfit, and walked among us, singing these songs.

[00:29:30.36] Oh my gosh, it was like-- this is the reason we fight. And she would talk to guys. I mean, she was there for half a day, you know, just visiting and stuff like that. And then we had to get on the trucks and deploy out to one of our hillsides. So she came out to the truck and shook hands with us. One guy got-- oh, the corpsman-- got a hug. And off we went. But she was just spectacular. And we're thinking we still get sniper fire and rocket fire at night, and she came all the way up here to do that. It's extraordinary.

[00:30:04.43] MARC HENDERSON: Where was that at?

[00:30:05.75] THOMAS ISENBURG: It's in Phu Bai. It's a village about 30 miles south of Hue up along the coast. It was originally one of the Army missile control sites, so they had a big compound. And then the Marines were taking the other side. So we were in the process of building up tents and things like that, that we could actually sleep in, in a rack. And then we would do patrols outside.

[00:30:31.45] As a matter of fact, we would help the villagers rebuild bridges or help them in the fields and stuff like that, that kind of thing. So that was our base of operations.

[00:30:45.43] THOMAS ISENBURG: Well, we went from bunkers in the ground, to tents, and then finally these-- what they call soft side. It was a wooden platform, wooden walls, and then a tent over the top of it. It was luxury living. It was also where we had our first beer, too. So it was cool. And a chow hall, so no more eating out of a cardboard box. No more drinking the water with those sanitation pills in it, stuff like that. It was in the rear with the gear, right? You could actually kind of dress up, and we didn't necessarily have to walk around with our weapons. But we did.

[00:31:22.24] So we'd go to the chow hall with our weapons and what have you. We were just so used to carrying it with us anyway. So that was kind of high class living. And they had their own helicopter landing field, so when we did make assaults, the squadron of helos would come in and pick us up. Otherwise, we'd take a truck or something like that. The helos were H-34s, old school, strong helicopters. Came out of the Korea era. And I think the Marine Corps was kind of

caught flat footed, so they were using any kind of device they could to fly us around when the trucks wouldn't get us to where we needed to go.

[00:32:00.74] And so they would come in. For the life of me, I can't think of the name of the squadron now that we used most of the time. They had eyeballs on the front and the cell of the helicopter. It was always their thing, that we can always search out trouble for you guys to go land in. Which they did.

[00:32:22.92] THOMAS ISENBURG: I think, certainly, the platoon commander, Doug Pickersgill, joined the Navy in 1955, left the Navy in 1959, and joined the Marine Corps and went to Marine Corps training. He was a student of the Revolutionary War, and so he wanted the sergeant to teach us tactics on small units who could move and what he called "split the door." So if you imagine a set of playing cards, where you would fold them together. His idea was the enemy was in the middle and then you fold the cards. So the strength got larger and larger and larger.

[00:33:04.23] But at the same time, as the cards folded, you started to disappear. Jim Hannifin, our battalion commander, was a fan of the Civil War. And he was from North Carolina. So he remembered the small unit tactics of some of the Carolinans and how they would fight their wars, especially when certain Northerners would show up in a state that they didn't like.

[00:33:31.41] And his was what he called "ghost door." And it was a situation where, if you imagine a fan with flat pieces to it, as the fan moves through the enemy, another piece of the fan comes up behind it. So the enemy slides in, thinks he's going to get the guys from behind, then the other part of the fan comes down on top of them. But as it keeps doing that, it moves.

[00:33:57.12] Just after we left in '66, we got a compliment from an NVA colonel who called us the Ghost Battalion. And Hannifin was just tickled with that. And he did such a good job, they moved him back to the States so he could train other officers in small unit tactics, and then even large unit tactics without standing up and firing at each other kind of thing, where you actually sneak through the jungles and do some work. So you had those two. All three platoon sergeants were Korean veterans.

[00:34:35.58] They knew how to do hill fighting, and where cliffs come in handy, where caves come in handy, and stuff like that. And then since we were always training to learn to do each other's jobs, then we knew what they were thinking and what they weren't thinking. And initially, we had French maps of some of those inland areas that the lieutenant would redraw where we were going to be tactically to do our thing. They reported up through the chain of command, and as far as I could tell, it was outstanding.

[00:35:05.70] And General Krulak, before-- you know, the elder, was managing that whole buildup of Marines in the Pacific and bringing them into Vietnam. Matter of fact, his son, who became commandant, was one of our intelligence S2 officers during HARVEST MOON. So he got to see a lot of stuff going on. And matter of fact, he watched our platoon sergeant break up this horrendous ambush all by himself and made sure he was awarded the Silver Star for his actions. And Sergeant Little was really embarrassed by that because he just said I was doing

Goofy's work because occasionally, some of us would run out and do things. Figured we were much bigger. We would scare the little guys. And that's what he was attempting to do, too.

[00:35:50.04] So you had this experience, this real world experience, to rely on. And we've been trained together. I mean, we knew each other. That's where, I think, when we'd lose one of our guys, it was painful because we knew who their family was, or their wife, or kids, or whatever. And so it made us more angry to do things. But not angry enough to hurt people who are scared of us to start with.

[00:36:18.81] Matter of fact, we were told by the Montagnard chiefs early on that one of the problems that we would see in Vietnam was when Japan invaded the country, they taught the citizens of Vietnam that Americans will eat babies and rape women before they kill them. So we walk into a village and get introduced as Americans it'd terrorize those poor villagers, that here are these monsters that the Japanese occupation troops told us about. And the Japanese, even though they're Oriental, look Asian. So there was an association.

[00:36:57.54] But some kid from Detroit or Chicago coming in there just scared the heck out them. So a lot of that winning hearts and minds over was being in the villages and showing some kindness. Yes, being firm at night. We would go out on ambush patrols. As far as we knew, some of the kids were out building traps. But during the day, we would take orders from the village chief and we would protect the village if there were NVA, especially the villages along the Laos border. We were always doing that kind of work.

[00:37:26.64] Lieutenant Pickersgill would spend a week or maybe 10 days in a spot. Hannifin would select the villages in the area based on intelligence information. You know, was this an entry point for the NVA to come into South Vietnam, and was there a village there, and were they pro-NVA or were they against the North Vietnamese?

[00:37:50.73] And occasionally, the whole platoon would get together if the village was large enough. But usually it wasn't. I mean, we're talking less than 20 families in most of these villages. And they'd been there for generations.

[00:38:07.17] THOMAS ISENBURG: The rule was adopt them as if they were your son or brother. Tell them where you've been, what you're doing. Stay close to them. They will not be on point for the first month. They will always be further back. So if we run into an ambush, they're somewhat protected. After the first month, they're on their own.

[00:38:38.30] We would find out about them. What town are you from? Where does your family live? Do you have any brothers or sisters? Are you married? And that kind of thing, because all the other guys were that. But the one rule that was clear from the lieutenant was you will not tell them they're replacing somebody that's gone. You will not judge them based on what your friend is who died or was wounded.

[00:39:06.25] So we kind of accepted them as they've been with us all along, but maybe not with this unit, so we've got to help them get engaged with this unit. And the darndest thing was-- I mean, I think we had like 20-some replacements over the year. Those guys, their expectancy, for

some reason, was short. One of our guys who was with us, just a month and he got hit and wounded. And it was severe enough that he had to go home. Another guy, six weeks later, he got killed.

[00:39:51.87] And we started feeling guilty about that. Like, we weren't protecting them enough. We didn't teach them enough kind of thing. And usually, where that happened was when we were in the large operations, where we were fully engaged with a battalion. So we had a lot of bad people that we were dealing with, and I guess stopped taking care of these new guys. So yes, they were accepted. Yes, they were trained. But it was a year or more after we had all been together. So it was odd. It was-- I don't know. They were decent souls.

[00:40:36.94] THOMAS ISENBURG: Years and years and years later, there was a story about military Vietnam veterans finding brothers and sisters at veterans hospitals and stuff like that. And so I wrote an article in a newspaper about hooking up with my old unit. The sister of the guy who was wounded 30 days after he joined us saw it. She was doing some work in the Bay Area, and lives in New Mexico, where her brother is, and wrote me a letter through the newspaper; said, my brother's at the Palo Alto Veterans Administration hospital. Could you go visit him? Juan Herta.

[00:41:23.74] So I went, and I went through this whole grilling, active deal with the doctors because they said, you cannot talk about Vietnam. And I said, whoa, wait a minute. I'm talking to a guy that served with me in Vietnam. How can we not talk? No, you can't talk about Vietnam. You can't talk about patrols. Anyhow, I saw Juan. It was hugs. It was tears. It was talking.

[00:41:46.78] He went back to college. He had a trucking outfit out of New Mexico, went up to Arizona, and stuff like that. Was enjoying it pretty well. And then his old wounds, he was getting some kind of a blood poisoning. And so they shipped him off to Palo Alto to have them take a look at it because the VA's got a huge hospital situation up there. And so we're talking about that, and they had a nurse and a doctor watching us. And other veterans started to join us, all Vietnam veterans, including this gal who was a Navy chief working for the Coast Guard in the Mekong Delta.

[00:42:19.42] I didn't even know the Coast Guard was in the Mekong Delta in the '60s and '70s, but I guess they were. So the talk started to drift over, well, remember that hill by so-and-so, or that river, or whatever. And the doctor was having a fit. And finally, this captain, retired captain, said, just leave us alone. We're OK. We promise to tell you if we attack the hospital, so you have enough time to get out. And we had a great time. Great time.

[00:42:47.65] And Juan comes to these reunions every so often, even though he's got a little more trouble with his legs. He's got a false leg and stuff like that. But yeah, because he doesn't have to finish sentences. We look at each other and know exactly where we were, what we were doing.

[00:43:01.00] The fun part is what we did afterwards, which was our lieutenant's speech. He said, we're brothers. And the fun of being brothers is not what we did, but what we're going to do. So when you get back to the States, or your life moves on, and you stay in touch with people,

go into wonderment as to what they've done. And it was. These guys-- college, and work, and owning businesses, doing designs, and all that. I mean, we were at war with our own country for 20 years, yet we were able to survive. And we did well.

[00:43:39.97] And the other thing we had is the staff sergeant said, you realize, of course, that if one of your brothers dies in your arms, you have the honor of living your life better because you're now living it for him too. Unfortunately, we were living a lot of lives. There were 17 of us that came home out of 43. And since we knew every one of those guys, we know where they came from, what they did. So it's like a full schedule.

[00:44:18.55] THOMAS ISENBURG: We were in our last operation as the unit that deployed to Vietnam called HASTINGS. Started in mid-July, ended in mid-August. It was the largest operation to date, and it was against North Vietnamese regulars coming across the DMZ and in from Laos. And we were the blocking force. I was still carrying around the stupid radio. The company radio operator got hurt, but I mean, the whole company started with 155. We were walking around with 50. So each of the platoons was basically down to squad size.

[00:44:53.18] So occasionally, I would go out on the patrols, observation patrols, or do Air Cav-- or air calls and stuff like that. Sergeant Little got hit. Lost part of his legs. He was brought back. The captain who had replaced my captain said, you have experience with this platoon? I said, yeah, I was fire team and squad leader in that platoon. He says, OK, you're now platoon sergeant. So go take care of them.

[00:45:20.78] Which was the way we were operating. I mean, corporals were running platoons. Lance corporals were running squads. You know, it was whatever was left that we could afford to do that. So my job basically was to bring those 20 souls together, pack them up, and get them ready to ship down to Da Nang because the Marine Corps determined that our unit was no longer fit to be in combat, that we'd lost too many souls. So they got some helicopters come in, took us to some trucks, and we took a drive down the coast to Da Nang.

[00:45:54.61] And my job was to get the guys together and make sure they had all their gear, and we stopped off in Phu Bai to pick up our sea bags and all that kind of jazz. And so I was kind of like administrative control. And then they stuck us out in some new camp area where they were going to rebuild the battalion. It was west of Da Nang. We never knew what the name of the place was. But yeah, it was to make our guys kind of clean up, get weapons clean and stuff like that, and then start bringing in all the new people.

[00:46:26.16] So I designated one lance corporal and two other corporals as squad leaders, and then just as guys would come in, they'd start to organize them and find what they could do and so forth. And then we started getting our orders to go home. And the doc and I were the last ones to go in October of '66. So my job, basically, was to bring the unit home because my platoon commander was gone, my platoon sergeant was gone, and we didn't like the idea of putting somebody in charge that didn't know the guys.

[00:47:00.16] THOMAS ISENBURG: My best friend got wounded. My platoon sergeant got wounded. And they were close enough that I could have helped them, and I couldn't do it. I've

never gotten over that guilt. I pulled two other guys out of a problem, but I couldn't get to them until the next day. And then some of the other guys went in to help me get them out.

[00:47:29.44] Jim was completely lucid. So was Gary. You know, don't worry about it, we're cool, what have you. Always stayed in touch with Gary. He's out in Kansas. He lost the motor nerves that control his legs. He designed a metal rack system that would allow him to, as he said, do the twist, and allow him to move his legs so he could walk. His career was an aide in physical therapy for quadriplegics and paraplegics. And here he is, clanking along in this metal contraption he designed, helping people learn how to walk again. That was his career.

[00:48:17.87] Jim Little got his legs fit. Talked the Marine Corps into putting him into active duty. He was with a Marine unit in Greece. Blew his legs out again. Marine Corps said, we'll have to retire you, and he says, no, make me a recruiter. And I saw him in the mid '80s. And I said, OK, so you're sitting in a wheelchair with your legs in casts, telling young high school kids they should join the Marine Corps. How's that going?

[00:48:46.95] Oh, I get a lot of guys. Get a lot of guys. He retired from the Marine Corps after 50 years. He had this connection to the young Krulak about I'm giving my time to the service, and so let me continue to be an active Marine. But I will work with the Veterans Administration, going around helping people with whatever they need. As a matter of fact, in 1971, he talked the Marine Corps and the Veterans Administration into shipping him to Da Nang, where he set up a veterans headquarters where he could, he said, go to foxholes and tell the guys about their VA benefits when they get out of the Corps.

[00:49:28.78] Charlie blew up his hooch, and the Veterans Administration thought, OK, this is not a good idea, to have a civilian working in Vietnam. And then he retired from that. 50 years in the Marine Corps. It was outstanding. It was a great celebration we had when he retired. But that was Jim Little.

[00:49:45.46] So the guilt I had in losing these guys, and then to see how they overcame that, their wounds and stuff. So many years later, I think, kind of evened stuff out. But every time I them, I'd apologize for-- because I could see them. I was on a little rock cliff. I could see them. If I didn't have my own guys to care for, I would have been down there to take care of him, and I didn't do that. And I'd known these guys, at that point, for over a year and a half. I couldn't help them.

[00:50:13.73] It was the last major operation we had. I mean, we always seemed to do better when we're a small unit. With big operations, with everything involved, air cover, and B-52 strikes, and artillery and all that kind of jazz, it just got noisy and messy and confused.

[00:50:34.11] THOMAS ISENBURG: Phuoc Li. Small village, 15 families, end of a valley that goes right into a major trail that the NVA used to bring supplies into South Vietnam. It's parked up there, basically, at the 17th parallel and the Laotian border. And it's really a nice little valley. During Operation HARVEST MOON, in December of '65, B-52s were called in for a strike. And we had to move two miles away. And even at two miles away, guys were getting bloody noses and ear problems because of the concussion of these 500 and 1000 pound bombs. And huge

holes. I mean, the thing that I think got to us more than anything else when we walked through this valley were these huge, 40-foot holes, 30-feet deep is, how did people survive during World War II, when we carpet bombed all of Europe and all of Asia and Japan?

[00:51:26.78] I mean, how did they do that? I mean, we're talking maybe a small village, but mostly it's just ground, dirt, and rice paddies. So that went through our lieutenant's mind that we need to move this village. Because it really was. It was a very fast pass. It was an artillery zero zone. Occasionally, the Air Force would come by and bomb the edge with Laos and stuff like that.

[00:51:53.24] And command, I guess, thought that these villagers were helping in that traffic coming in and out. We'd been there for two weeks. We didn't know it for sure. I mean, they had some children that were in their teenage years. Definitely could have been doing stuff at night. But as far as we knew, everything was OK. But it really bothered Lieutenant Pickersgill when he was told that, OK, you're going to have to get out of the valley because we're going to bomb it. And that way, eliminate the ease with which the North Vietnamese could get in.

[00:52:22.01] So he worked this deal to get all 15 families moved, including their dead. They had them in little clay pots, and gathered that stuff up and we moved them 20 clicks away for the B-52 raid. And we presume it's a big hole in the ground where the village was, but they were allowed to go back after we moved them away. And being with those people and sharing with their families, we learned how to properly harvest rice. We would listen to some of their songs and stories, and by then, our Vietnamese was still getting kind of lousy. But they would do it. And at least two of them spoke French, so a couple of our guys could speak French and carried on.

[00:53:02.99] And so we would hear stories about where their generation came from, and you know, they'd been in this particular village for five generations. So it just-- the lieutenant was right. You know, what if this is your hometown? What if this is San Clemente, California and somebody decides they're going to bomb it off the map? But you like people there. You do your shopping there. You do your eating there. Now you're going to kill them all? No.

[00:53:32.91] So our best day was packing up that family. Doc, of course, was delighted because that was the birth mother, little girl thing he did. And he says, OK, I'm now an uncle. You have to get all these people out of here. And he would whine about it so much that we would do it just because he was whining all the time. But yeah. Clearly that was the best day.

[00:53:57.03] And if it happened after I lost Jim and Gary, yeah, probably would have eased my pain a little bit better. But the fact that we did that as a unit, and to explain to these poor people that, yes, you can come back. You know, we're not stealing your home. We're not stealing your fields. But it is very dangerous. And trying to get that point across? I mean, other than some rifle fire and maybe a rocket, certainly not something that makes 40-foot bomb holes.

[00:54:29.72] And see it in their faces, like we were stealing their home from them, was terrible. But we felt better to see them on the trucks headed away to safety. That was the best day.

[00:54:47.02] THOMAS ISENBURG: Filipinos, just for a little bit, when we were doing the Phu Bai base because they were apparently in there providing security with the Army. No, it was mostly ARVN. Some Australian recon people. But we're talking days, maybe, so no long term association with those folks. They were reconning an area that was what ultimately became Khe Sanh.

[00:55:13.28] And they were hanging out in an old French church headquarters kind of thing that overlooked the valley. We thought it was a stupid area to be. We were just supposed to be backup for them, security, if you will. And then we were headed north from there. It wasn't until 1968 that-- we all knew about it, but of course we had nobody to talk to about it anymore, until 30 years later when we all hooked up. What stupid idiot would have set a base up in a valley that's surrounded by high hills, right?

[00:55:48.47] And that was one of the problems with Vietnam. We would attack the North Vietnamese and South Vietnamese, Viet Cong. We'd take their position away from them, and then we'd give it back. It just annoyed the heck out of us, to go through all that effort and all that pain, and then give the enemy back the land that he just lost to us. But yeah, that was it. Their job was they were looking for a base of operations for their unit that, I guess, was down in the Mekong Delta or something. We were just the cops of the neighborhood for them.

[00:56:24.83] THOMAS ISENBURG: Initially, it was building up the unit. So we got back into Da Nang at the end of August. The month of September of '66, all these fresh troops were coming in. So it was rebuilding the battalion, and the platoons, and the squads, and so forth. We went out on a couple of patrols with them basically as advisers. We weren't actually running the platoon or the squad. And some tactics, and we'd go to some places where we might get a little sniper fire and stuff like that. So they'd practice how they would take cover. But they all seemed to be pretty well trained. Most of them were coming in from training grounds in Okinawa and in the Philippines.

[00:57:07.45] So we were just trying to acclimate them to what was going on. The rest of the time, it was listening and watching, and what have you. The new company commander, Captain Platt, was really outstanding because he would-- I think there was, like, nine of us in the whole battalion that were still left around the end of September. He would include us in any briefings that he gave to the company and ask us for any inputs and stuff like that, but advised us that we would be getting our orders at the end of September and be going home in October.

[00:57:44.66] As far as packing up, I mean, everything was always on the go. So whatever uniforms we had, or our one set of civilian clothes, was kept in our sea bag. We didn't have any other items other than the fact that our rifle, and in my case, the .45 pistol. I mean, we became attached to those. But we had to turn that stuff in when we were leaving. And we didn't quite understand where we were. I mean, we knew about Da Nang, but we weren't sure where the heck we were. So when they said, you're going to hop on a bus and go to Da Nang so you can get set to leave country, we said OK. I mean, all of our replacements came in by airplane. Nobody came in by ship.

[00:58:31.82] So we sat around. We lounged. We went to this local Vietnamese guy. He was trying to make clothes for people. So a couple of us got camouflage Bermuda shorts and Ho Chi Minh sandals, sat around on bunker bags having a coffee or something. I mean, it was a holiday routine, right?

[00:58:56.42] They had a little ceremony for the last of us to leave. The colonel, as a matter of fact, he didn't know what to do with us, so he shipped us out to villages every so often with the medics. We would play security for medics who were helping out in the villages with medication, injuries, and stuff like that, in some of these villages. And of course, we were used to villages, so we just kind of fitted in where we went. And the Army guys were doing a really great job with them. So I think it was just to give us something to do.

[00:59:25.09] MARC HENDERSON: What was that going away ceremony like?

[00:59:27.96] THOMAS ISENBURG: Basically, it was sitting in our old unit, now our new unit. So the 2nd Platoon, Echo Company would sit around, and Captain Pratt would come forward and he'd say, all right, in 2nd Platoon, are any of you people veterans? And we'd look around and we said, what's a veteran, sir? Somebody we don't need any more and we're shipping home. We call those veterans. Oh, that's me, sir. That's me, sir.

[00:59:55.98] We would stand up and we'd get pelted with raw eggs. And we hadn't seen raw eggs in I don't know how long, so this was quite a thing that we get pelted with raw eggs. And we would say, sir, what was the purpose of the raw egg? Just to let you know what you're going home to. Have them sunny side when you get home, and thank you for your service. That was it.

[01:00:18.72] Two days later, we were on trucks going to Da Nang. And that was-- none of our Class A uniforms fit. Apparently, we lost a little weight while we were in 'Nam. So apparently, we embarrassed whatever this-- it was an Army captain and a Navy commander who were responsible for picking up people and getting them ready to get on the airplane, because we had to wear our Class A uniforms to get on this airplane. So they were bringing in Vietnamese tailors to kind of sew things up so they would kind of look OK.

[01:00:55.28] But there was nothing new that you could get. So that was most of it. And you know, welcome, thank you, and get ready to get on your airplane. They marched us out this one morning, and there's sitting a Braniff commercial airliner, with stewardesses. It blew us away.

[01:01:17.09] We didn't understand what was going on. How could you bring a commercial airliner into Da Nang? But apparently, that's what was going on. These airlines had contracts with the military to do that. And they were going to fly us to Okinawa. And we were going to spend a week in Okinawa because that's where they were really going to get serious about, OK, let's replace these uniforms because there's no way you're wearing this embarrassing stuff. You know, the fact that the shirt is twice as big as your chest size is and it just hangs down. This is embarrassing to the Corps, so you will dress up.

[01:01:49.19] How to do our ribbons, and all that kind of jazz. They get us all pretty. We did a couple of inspections when we were in Okinawa. And then they say, oh, by the way, it's

recommended that you not wear your uniforms once you disembark in California. We said, what's going on? Haven't you heard about what's going on in California? There's antiwar demonstrations, and they're targeting military personnel.

[01:02:16.81] Can I go back and get my rifle and my pistol and take it with me, you know? So we got all these pretty uniforms on, we were told how to wear ribbons and stuff, because none of us ever had that kind of thing before. And then got into our fancy uniforms, and here comes this Braniff jet. We fly to Okinawa-- or, I'm sorry, did Okinawa. We fly to the States, and we stop off in Honolulu. So we get off the airplane to stretch our legs, and that's when it first hit us, because people would avoid us. We'd walk along the terminal-- there was even this lady that had two kids that put her hands over their eyes.

[01:02:52.42] And so we kept thinking, oh, is my fly undone? Is my shirt screwed up? What's going on here?

[01:02:57.97] MARC HENDERSON: What month and year was this?

[01:02:59.29] THOMAS ISENBURG: October of '66. One of the guys had gotten a book from his family with something about it's against the war, but it's for the troops. But it had a critique in it from some guy named Dr. Spock, and I forget, some other person, that basically said, no, it's the American citizens that are causing this problem, in uniform. Not the Vietnamese and stuff. I think we lamented-- when we were traveling back to Okinawa. If we had caught one Russian, the whole thing would have been considered a success.

[01:03:35.24] So we got into El Toro, here in California. Again, the sergeant said, you know, here's your orders. You get to go home for 30 days' survivor's leave, and then you're going to be transferred to wherever these units are. Me, it was to Lejeune. And by the way, we have a PX here where you can get civilian clothes. Suggest you wear those once you leave the base.

[01:04:01.23] We didn't. When we were training here in '65, we would go to Disneyland because we found out that the workers at Disneyland would have parties after the park closed at midnight. Really great people, you know, from all the states-- Iowa, Idaho, and all that kind of thing. So that's where we would go instead of Oceanside or San Clemente or Long Beach or something. We would go to Disneyland.

[01:04:27.31] So there was three of us, even though we didn't know each other, had experience with Disneyland. We said, heck with it, and we grabbed a bus and off we went to Anaheim. And I stayed there for a week and found a couple of the friends who were still there two years later that are going to college now in California, when before they worked at Disneyland. And then hopped on an airplane and went home, in uniform.

[01:04:53.51] And occasionally, I would get these kind of weird looks. I didn't know what was going on.

[01:05:02.87] MARC HENDERSON: What was your rank when you came back from Vietnam?

[01:05:08.35] THOMAS ISENBURG: Corporal.

[01:05:08.77] MARC HENDERSON: Corporal.

[01:05:09.22] THOMAS ISENBURG: Yeah. E-4, corporal. It wasn't until I got with the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines at Camp Lejeune they made me a sergeant, which surprised the heck out of me. Three years in the Marine Corps and I'm a sergeant? That's unheard of. But I got a squad, you know, I was in charge of stuff. I mean, I was king of the hill. But yeah, corporal.

[01:05:29.30] MARC HENDERSON: So before I go on to some of your reflections on Vietnam, is there anything else you want to talk about your time there?

[01:05:40.61] THOMAS ISENBURG: I'm not conflicted anymore. You know, my old roommate at college said, go to the Corps. They'll solve that problem. Not conflicted. I think the countryside, you know, it could have been in northwestern United States. I mean, with the green hills and rivers and lakes. Even the rice paddies were striking in their stuff. I thought the people were kind of decent. But I also liked what I did for a living, too. And if people were going to give me a problem, I knew how to deal with them.

[01:06:18.84] And that took some getting over, that a fight or an argument had to be handled by some other means than blowing somebody away. So I had to work on that. Had to work on that. And getting back home, people telling me that I did the wrong thing, and so forth, and so on. Of course, I'm going to argue with them all the time. And fortunately, my next door neighbor, my old friend, would correct me on my behavior.

[01:06:54.56] But no, it satisfied a need. I could play John Wayne. I could shoot and kill. I could care. I could help. I could protect. I mean, it's all the stuff that I grew up with, reading books about World War II and Korea and stuff that said, gee, I'm just lucky I did this, and being scared half the time. But somehow getting past being scared, and turn it into anger and stuff, or purpose.

[01:07:31.81] And then when my dad told me, he says, you know, we always got your paychecks because you had them delivered to us. Do you know that you were paid an extra \$65 a month? And I said, no, what was that for, Dad? Combat pay. Bought my first car with that money. It was cool.

[01:07:52.34] THOMAS ISENBURG: Gave me purpose, how to deal with disappointments. But also, didn't necessarily care for others, but I knew I had this obligation. I had names of six Marines and one corpsman. I was going to do better for them. And so I had a purpose to life. And that purpose, especially when the Marine Corps said they didn't want me anymore-- which I have to tell you that story too.

[01:08:29.59] They sent me on this cruise to the Caribbean. It was a blast. It was the Christmas of '66 through the spring of 1967. Come back, all set, to figure, OK, I'm going to go back to 'Nam now. And the Marine Corps wants to send me to the active Reserves. I said, what did I do wrong? I'm an E-5 sergeant, I should be going back. I know what it's like over there.

[01:08:52.64] And they said, oh no, we got it covered. There's enough troops there. Everything's going to work itself out soon. This is 1967. And I'm thinking, I was there. It's not working itself out because we keep giving territory back to the enemy that we shot at. But they said, no, thank you very much for your service. We're going to send you to the Reserves. So I think the biggest feeling I had was I have no purpose.

[01:09:17.34] What am I supposed to do now, if I'm not leading Marines into combat? If I'm not caring for villagers? If I'm not protecting my family? I've got no purpose. And so that was a problem. I told my best friend about that, my neighbor. And she was kind of antiwar anyway, being a nurse. She's there to save lives, not to take lives. But we could always talk straight.

[01:09:45.32] And she said, well, maybe this is your opportunity to go finish college. Go do what college course you want, not what your dad wants, and maybe get on with your life, especially if you're telling me you've got to take care of six other people that no longer exist. So I took her advice, and talked to the Reserves. Really nice guys. Didn't think they needed any operations to work with them on. Why don't I go back to college? I mean, it was like it was all set up for me.

[01:10:15.76] So I did. But I picked a university which was predominantly made up of veterans. So it was kind of a quiet college in Daytona Beach. I got to build airplanes. Was a great school for me. And then got a job out here in California and married my next door neighbor, and off we went.

[01:10:37.04] MARC HENDERSON: Which school?

[01:10:38.12] THOMAS ISENBURG: Embry-Riddle Aeronautical in Daytona. And they had a connection with Hughes Aircraft, so I got a job with Hughes out here in LA, building helicopters, which unfortunately, they lost the contract. But we were also doing missile defense systems on board F-18s. And the F-18 hadn't gone into service yet, but was due to go into service. That led me to some people who were doing electronics on it, who kept messing up with my stuff. So they invited me up to San Jose or Palo Alto, California to explain what they were doing, and the boss up there offered me a job.

[01:11:11.78] And then sent me back to college to get an electrical engineering degree because he didn't want me bending metal. He wanted me sticking wires in stuff. And I spent 30 years with that company. Had two kids. It was moving forward. And so I think I had a purpose, but there was this nagging feeling behind me about-- I missed the guys. I was never more alive than being scared half to death, in a combat zone, but also just sitting around and talking about them and joking with them about this girlfriend, or that mom, or that dad, or that cousin, or whatever.

[01:11:54.44] THOMAS ISENBURG: High regard and respect for them. And I'm delighted that this country appears to have them in high respect and regard. When we had a reunion at Camp Pendleton, our current 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines had just returned from its fourth tour to Fallujah. And we would sit-in these conversations, and they would say, how did you guys fight a war in jungles? And we said, how did you guys fight a war on the beach all the time? You got no trees to hide behind.

[01:12:25.39] You know, and so we'd get into these comparisons, but it was like, OK, we're all the same age all of a sudden. We're just talking about one's on the beach and one's in the jungle kind of deal. But it amazed me that they would keep going over and over and over, and then be out in the open like that, plus carrying almost 100 pounds of gear. I mean, come on. In the hot sun? It was remarkable, this generation that has done this thing for America since 2011. It's just, they're so strong. And they're so open about their generation.

[01:13:01.84] So yeah, very high regard and respect for them. But I don't envy them. There's no way I'd go to the beach to sit around in a hot uniform all day.

[01:13:14.31] THOMAS ISENBURG: Yeah. I have friends who were alive or not alive that have done remarkable things with their lives since then. I was given a purpose, even though I didn't understand it at the time. And as I said before, if we'd captured a Russian, everything would have been OK. Because it was Russia we were trying to stop, not giving Vietnam to China. I was invited 10 years ago-- or 15 years ago-- to my daughter's high school civics class to question about what it was like to be in Vietnam.

[01:13:51.54] And one of the continuing questions I'd get was, so how many drugs did you take when you were over there, and did you smoke marijuana? This was from some 17-year-old that I felt like throwing out the window, right? So in the media, film, newspapers, and stuff, whatever these kids look at for history, we're nothing but druggies that kill babies and women. That's us. I mean, it was worse fighting the war here in the United States, when we got home, than it was fighting the actual war in Vietnam.

[01:14:24.62] The other thing was-- my son couldn't resist this-- but he thought you and your guys need to wear this t-shirt. So here is this baby blue t-shirt. It's got a map of Vietnam on it, and it says "Southeast Asia War Games, 2nd Place." And my ex-lieutenant said, this is perfect. Quit fighting them, we'll just make it funny. Yeah, we'll laugh. It's second place. That's what we got. We didn't win this one.

[01:14:54.59] You know, and especially World War II veterans who still think we were not actually combat veterans. My dad wanted me to get into a VFW in 1974. They wouldn't take me because I was not in an actual war. It was a "police action." I said, OK, fine. That's why I'm still not a member of the VFW.

[01:15:18.94] THOMAS ISENBURG: Family is important, be with people that give you a purpose, protect what rights you have, are the three that I can think of.

[01:15:36.67] THOMAS ISENBURG: It was sad looking at those two panels with all my guys' names on it. But then standing back and seeing that they share that with thousands of others, I felt, OK, they're not alone. They're not stuck on a white slab of cement in an open field-- although they are. They've got their names up here. And I think the most telling thing from that, and one of my daughter's friends, who was National Guard, gave me a GI Joe model of a veteran leaning up against the Wall. And when you press a button, you see his face in the Wall. And sure enough, when you stand next to that Wall, you see a reflection of yourself.

[01:16:26.02] Like, OK, I'm there with them. It was very-- not soothing, but kind of comforting. But oddly enough, out of all that, what got to me more-- and it still makes me cry-- is the nurses statue that's around the corner, where they've got this wounded Soldier that they're caring for. Because I had the opportunity to have a nurse take care of me. Fantastic people. To put up with all that smell, and stuff, and just be smiley, you know, and what have you.

[01:16:59.08] So even though seeing my guys on the Wall, walking around and seeing that nurse statue, that really gets to me.

[01:17:10.51] THOMAS ISENBURG: While I appreciate it and welcome it, I think it is still our generation commending our generation. It's not a country thing. I mean, when our guys come back from Afghanistan or Iraq, and there's a party going on, welcoming the unit back into town, it's all generations giving those Soldiers and Airmen a hug and a welcome home and so forth and so on.

[01:17:43.56] This thing I think tries to recognize the fact that, yeah, we were there. Yes, we've spent the last 50 years living a different life. And now we can go up to each other, give a hug, or shake hands. But it's still us celebrating us. As far as the rest of the United States is concerned, it's old news.

[01:18:07.15] And you know, thanks very much. But the generation that's going to appreciate you guys is the generation that is serving in the military now. And just because they're curious, you know. They talk about the differences. Like, my old unit, when it talks about being in the sand or being in the jungle. So I think it's wonderful that people have gone through this work to do this. It is fun to get all these services together because we can joke a lot about, oh gee, so when you were in the Army, did you actually have silverware and plates that you ate out of when you were in combat?

[01:18:44.98] Or Air Force-- so that air conditioned hooch you stayed in-- that kind of stuff, right? And so we could talk and laugh at each other as if we're there. And we don't have to finish full sentences. But it's each other. It's our generation. So thank you for doing that, and thank all the people associated with doing it. That it just brings this family together, like my 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Association comes together every year just so we don't have to finish sentences, but just be proud as heck of the stuff we've accomplished in our fight against our own country. And now we're all getting close to retirement, right?

[01:19:23.22] As a matter of fact, last year, my-- I've got three surviving brothers and the wife of my platoon commander live here in Southern California. And they had heard about something last year, where it was going to be a celebration of Vietnam veterans. And they had talked about doing something for a 50th anniversary stuff. And I joked with them. I said, well, no, 50 years is '65, not '68 or '69 or whatever kind of thing. So yes, and the guys talked me into going.

[01:19:55.45] And I said, well, you realize it's all services. And he says, well, that's why you wear your colors-- so they know who the Marines are. Oh, yeah, that's right. So it's got to be bright red and-- yeah, got you. Yeah, and two of the guys are Montford Point Marines, so they always joke about their best friend is this honky white kid because the Montford Point Marines

was the Marine Corps segregated blacks and whites when they were doing boot camp back in the late '50s and early '60s.

[01:20:24.98] So every so often, if I came down here, they'd invite me over to one of their meetings in Compton, and we'd joke about that because we're brothers.

[01:20:37.52] MARC HENDERSON: Have you heard of the ruptured duck?

[01:20:40.07] THOMAS ISENBURG: Yes.

[01:20:40.65] MARC HENDERSON: After World War II?

[01:20:42.44] THOMAS ISENBURG: Yeah.

[01:20:43.10] MARC HENDERSON: So after World War II, returning combat veterans were given a diamond shaped patch to sew on their uniforms to indicate they were coming back, returning veterans after the war. And it looked nothing like the eagle that it was supposed to look like. So they called it, affectionately, the ruptured duck.

[01:21:04.25] In that same spirit, we have a Vietnam War veteran lapel pin that has an eagle on it, and it has the six stars representing each of the allies. And on the back, because we're here, we work for the Department of Defense, and on the back, it says, "On behalf of a grateful nation, we thank and honor your service."

[01:21:32.27] THOMAS ISENBURG: Wow.

[01:21:32.96] MARC HENDERSON: And so I just want to say, sir. It's a true honor that I can give you this. And would you like it in your pocket or your collar?

[01:21:44.21] THOMAS ISENBURG: Wow. That is one important medal.

[01:21:49.68] MARC HENDERSON: Thank you for being candid with us and sharing your stories.

[01:21:53.76] THOMAS ISENBURG: Geez. Thank you.