

Kaulukukui, Thomas USA

[00:00:13.49] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I was born on November 11, Veterans Day, 1945 in Honolulu. That was the city. And at that time, it was a territory of Hawaii. It became a state in 1959.

[00:00:27.40] My mother is Chinese. And she descended from Chinese missionaries who came here early in the 20th century. She was a brilliant woman, graduated from high school at the age of 15, graduated from the University of Hawaii at the age of 19. And by the time she was 21, she had a masters, at a time when most poor Chinese families didn't have kids who had that education.

[00:00:54.81] My father was one of 15 children, 13 who survived. He was born and raised here in Honolulu. And when he was very young moved to the Island of Hawaii to the city of Hilo.

[00:01:09.32] My family are all athletes. My father was lucky. And someone here, a patron, paid his way-- this is before the NCAA regulations-- paid his way through the University of Hawaii.

[00:01:23.27] And by the time he graduated in 1937, this diminutive man who was 5 foot 5 and 145 pounds had become the first All-American football player in the history of the University of Hawaii. And his senior year, he was captain of the football team, captain of the baseball team, captain of the basketball team, president of the student body. And he married the Chinese beauty queen who happened to be my mother. Now unfortunately, those characteristics apparently skipped generations. So I am who I am.

[00:01:56.50] My father is my model. He was not only an athlete. He got a master's degree also in education. He was a coach, became the coach and athletic director of the University of Hawaii after the Second World War. He served in World War II as an officer in the combat engineers. He was an elder in the church, became trustee of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs here to help the Hawaiian people, was the federal Marshal for the District of Hawaii, and great model, great parents, and they raised us right.

[00:02:37.26] MARK FRANKLIN: What was like growing up in Honolulu?

[00:02:39.57] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Well growing up in Honolulu after the war, you still see the remnants of the war. There was still a great military presence. On our beaches, we had the concrete squares. They call them dragon's teeth to prevent amphibious landings.

[00:02:56.28] Remember, we were bombed in 1941. So great military presence. Also, we had our own share of war heroes, including the 442nd Infantry made up of second generation Japanese soldiers who became the most highly decorated Army unit in the history of the United States Army.

[00:03:17.61] It was a wonderful time because it was rural, but things began to change during the war with the influx of troops and a greater population. By the time 1959 came, the great planes came, tourist came, and everything changed.

[00:03:42.39] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I was drafted. I finished a degree in education at Michigan State University in 1967. I was married that same year to my wife, who's from Chicago. And I met her at the university.

[00:03:58.55] And the draft loomed over everybody then. I was a schoolteacher in Michigan. And they hadn't drafted a schoolteacher out of Michigan since the Second World War because education and school teaching was seen as an exempt vocation.

[00:04:15.83] However, to my misfortune, my draft board was in Hawaii. And that year, they drafted-- that month that they drafted me in May of 1968, I think they only drafted eight young men. But they seem to have chosen those who were no longer living in Hawaii and were not contributing to this community.

[00:04:35.49] So nine months after my wife and I were married, school was out. I was no longer teaching at least until the upcoming fall. And I came home to find my wife crying at the top of the stairs at our apartment building because there was a long envelope. And in the upper left-hand corner it said the United States Selective Service Commission. So I was drafted in 1968.

[00:05:01.71] I, like everybody else, had no sense of the Vietnam War. It was something that was happening someplace else. And for those of us who were of draft age, the Vietnam War equaled potential death if you got drafted. And that's all, no political information or understanding of it.

[00:05:21.48] The draft was kind of like a thunderstorm. If it happened and you happened to be in it, you were going to get wet, and not a damn thing you could do about it. You could do something about it.

[00:05:32.23] I was in a border state in Michigan. Michigan was a border state and people fled. Some people my age fled across the border to avoid the draft. But given the history of service in Hawaii, given my family's history of military service, I could not do that and would not do that.

[00:05:53.08] I think it was 1943 or 1944, the territorial governor chose the war mother of the year. And in one of those years, the war mother of the year was Melina Kaulukukui my grandmother. And she was war mother of the year because she had 12 children in service of the country.

[00:06:15.71] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:06:16.43] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: All nine boys and three girls were in service of the country. Pretty hard to run across the border with that kind of history.

[00:06:28.37] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky, that would have-- by that time, it would have been August, September of 1968. And after that, I went to advanced infantry training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, followed by non-commissioned officer candidate school or training in Fort Benning. That was 15 or 16 weeks. And then jump school at Fort Benning.

[00:06:59.42] And then I served as a drill sergeant, a training sergeant for a company of advanced infantry training trainees at Fort Gordon, Georgia. I had gone to a military institute here in Hawaii. So the training was not unfamiliar to me.

[00:07:18.92] What is memorable about basic training is when the crazed drill instructor climbs up the stairs and gets on the bus and starts screaming at everyone. And about that time you figure, we're not in Kansas anymore Toto. We're in the Army now. But other than that, I was actually familiar with many of those things. And I ended up as a honor graduate in my basic training class.

[00:07:46.25] Defense interval individual training was at Fort Polk, Louisiana. It was called Tiger Land at that time. And it's memorable for its emphasis on jungle training. And all of us who were there, because we were in Tiger Land, knew basically where we were going.

[00:08:05.46] I thought the training was good. The people I served with were good people. And it prepared me, I think, as best as we could have been prepared. It could not have prepared any of us for the environmental challenges of the heat, the humidity, the load you carried, the stress. I don't think you could have done that without washing out half of the company.

[00:08:32.27] MARK FRANKLIN: How about-- you went to jump school, which is airborne school.

[00:08:34.67] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I went to jump school.

[00:08:35.51] MARK FRANKLIN: Talk about that. What was that training like back then?

[00:08:39.77] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Three weeks of training. You've heard the joke about the first week to separate the men from the boys. And then they separate the men from the fools. And then the third week the fools jumped. I thought it was excellent training.

[00:08:59.28] I was a physical education major in college. My dad was an All-American. So I was in great shape. I was small 5 and 1/2 feet tall, 132 pounds. But I worked out a lot.

[00:09:11.25] So I loved the physical aspects of my military training. I loved the physical aspects of airborne training. And I liked being able to have the opportunity--

[00:09:24.87] for a week I was assigned as the first sergeant-- so I had the opportunity to lead both officers and enlisted men and NCOs in that acting capacity. And I found the Army was very good about developing leadership. Because everywhere I went I was given an opportunity to express my leadership partly because I ended up as a top graduate in every school I ever went to. But the Army knew that.

[00:09:52.77] So every other school that I went to, they gave me an opportunity to express that leadership for a period of time. And usually I'm the smallest guy in the entire company. You got 120 men. And you got a 5 foot 5 inch, 130 pounds Hawaiian Asian guy who doesn't look like

anybody else, and who isn't as big as anybody else. So it was a great opportunity to express my leadership.

[00:10:22.03] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Alright, I went to Fort Dix, from Fort Dix flew to Alaska, Alaska to Philippines, Philippines to one of the air bases in Japan. I'm not sure which one that was. And then from there to Long Binh, which was a replacement station.

[00:10:44.90] MARK FRANKLIN: When was that? When did you arrive in Vietnam?

[00:10:48.09] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: That would have been the first week in August of 1969. We landed somewhere near Long Binh during the daytime and got on a bus.

[00:11:01.49] MARK FRANKLIN: What was that like, your first impressions getting off the aircraft?

[00:11:04.85] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Hot, humid, smelly. The other first impression was we got on the bus. And we started to go. And I asked the NCO who was in charge why all the grating on the bus. And he said, so that people don't throw grenades in the window. And I thought, what's a nice boy like me doing in a place like this?

[00:11:27.94] And the other impression I had on the bus ride-- now understand I just got there. I'm not even at the replacement station yet. The fellow I was sitting next to elbowed me and he pointed out the window.

[00:11:39.78] And when we looked out a window, we were going past rice paddies. And the rice paddies were of different level. And there were two old Vietnamese ladies standing on the rice paddy dike of the upper level of a rice paddy that had some water in it.

[00:11:56.35] At the bottom below them, slightly below them was a rice paddy that had a little bit of water in it, a tiny bit of water in it. And the two women on the rice paddy dike had a wicker basket between them with two ropes going to a dowel handle each of them held on each side. And what they were doing was swinging the basket into the upper rice paddy and letting it fill with water.

[00:12:23.00] And then they'd lean back. And they'd pull on it. And the tension would toss the bucket, if you want to call it, the basket towards the lower one and about one gallon of water would come out, flip. And it would land in the lower rice paddy.

[00:12:41.29] And he and I watched him as we go by. They had this rhythm in it. And they got into this rhythm and about one gallon of water would go plop. And about five seconds later, another gallon of water would go plop. And it was pretty clear that no matter how long it took, they were going to fill up the entire rice paddy with water from the upper rice paddy to the lower one.

[00:13:02.50] All right. Is this a cultural experience? Is it why I'm mentioning it? No. I looked at that and said, we're not going to win this war. There's no way we're going to win this war.

[00:13:12.15] People have been here forever. And if two old ladies are going to stay there for as long as it takes to fill up that lower rice paddy, we are not going to be here long enough to overcome whatever's going to happen here. Now that's on a bus ride. And I thought to myself, this is going to be a hell of a long year.

[00:13:31.10] MARK FRANKLIN: When you got to-- how long were you at the replacement?

[00:13:34.76] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Maybe a week. I had hoped that the week there would have good news for me. Because my uncle who was in the Army Reserves from Hawaii was a lieutenant colonel serving in Saigon training South Vietnamese troops.

[00:13:52.41] And he told me before I went over, don't worry about it. You'll never have to go out in the field because the sergeant major who does the assignments at Long Binh is Hawaiian. And he's from Hawaii. And his name is Abraham Mailolo.

[00:14:07.46] So when you get to Long Binh, you see Sergeant Major Mailolo. And the sergeant major is going to assign you to Saigon. So that you'll spend the rest of your time training troops in Saigon. And you're trained for it.

[00:14:20.45] You're an education major. You're a teacher. You're a physical education teacher. You're a martial arts-- you have a martial arts background. This is going to be terrific.

[00:14:31.23] So I go to see First Sergeant Mailolo. And it turns out, he's the base sergeant major. I think this is terrific. This guy's got more rank than I thought.

[00:14:40.31] And so he pulls out-- he says I've been waiting for you. Your uncle says you are coming. Pulls out the 201 personnel file. Looks through it and says, oh, infantry. That's OK. It's OK.

[00:14:53.00] Looks at it some more says, airborne, why did you do that? I said, I don't know. I was just killing time until the war was over. Then he looked at it. He says, NCO school, E-6. Why did you do that?

[00:15:10.47] It seemed like a good idea at the time. He says, NCO, airborne, infantry, the only airborne unit, pure airborne unit here is the 173rd Airborne Brigade. They are dying for NCOs.

[00:15:26.52] I cannot help you. You have totally screwed yourself. Have a nice tour. I'll let your uncle know you're not coming. So that was what happened in my week I was there.

[00:15:38.13] MARK FRANKLIN: How long before you actually got to go up to the 173rd?

[00:15:41.82] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Probably a week. And then another week because the 173rd had a jungle school and an orientation. And it was probably a week before I was in the field.

[00:15:53.40] MARK FRANKLIN: What was that orientation training like?

[00:15:55.05] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: It's a jungle training school. So more intensive training for jungle operations, strategy, patrol, environment, the kind of assignments that we would have when we went out-- terrain-- for that week. And then out to the field.

[00:16:16.26] MARK FRANKLIN: And then immediately out to the field?

[00:16:17.55] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Immediately out to the field. THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I had no friendships. I cultivated no friendship. I was a platoon sergeant. We were not friends. And I made no friends among any NCOs while I was there.

[00:16:38.36] And the reason for that is I was focused on getting my people out alive and getting them home. That was my only job. I had made no friends because I didn't want to be distracted by losing any of those friends. And so the relationship I had with my men was platoon sergeant, the men.

[00:16:59.74] But as unusual as it may sound, you can have very close relationships with people in that context, even with the difference in rank, even though it's not friendship. It's not based on friendship. It's based upon competency. It's based upon a mutual understanding that I will go get you if you need it, and I'm counting on you to come get me.

[00:17:26.35] Because unless you have that understanding, you and I aren't going out to the field. We're not going out there together. So it's kind of unusual. I saw in your questions something about relationships afterwards. And I'll tell you about that then because we are friends now.

[00:17:46.30] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you think you formed friendships, relationships, with folks from other racial and social backgrounds that you might not have had if you had not been in the military?

[00:17:55.57] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Probably more with black soldiers because there is not a high incidence of blacks in the population here. But Hawaii is a melting pot. And I've got nine grandsons and one of them has got about eight nationalities in him. So it's not like I haven't been with people of different nationalities. In fact, probably I had more experience in any of the units I was in, living and working and being with those of other cultures and nationalities than anybody else there.

[00:18:34.33] The firebase was LZ Uplift. It was in the military II Corps region. The province is called Binh Dinh province.

[00:18:45.49] A firebase, basically.-- the 173rd firebases were up on the elevated ground. Bulldozer engineers have come in take off the top of the hill, put wire around everything, bring in your artillery and your mortars. And it housed two battalions of maybe 500 fighting men each with all of the support on top of LZ Uplift.

[00:19:06.97] Wooden barracks, corrugated-- just iron roofs, shower under a shower bag, no running water, outhouses. The one amenity was one of those buildings, they made a steakhouse out of it, and a bar. No theaters, none of that stuff. Bunkers and red dirt basically.

[00:19:39.05] MARK FRANKLIN: Red dirt earth?

[00:19:40.04] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Yeah, red dirt. In the field, maybe in the first few months, we were in the lowlands. So we jumped around in the rice paddies. No tents. You lived wherever you lived. Slept wherever you slept. Patrol 12 hours a day, ambush every night.

[00:20:00.41] So the reason for this is by the time I got there in 1969, the enemy had apparently decided to avoid large pitched battles, which they could be destroyed by artillery and by aircraft. So most of what were involved in were skirmishes. And because the enemy had decided not to come out in the open and fight that way, the 173rd at least, our brigade, changed its strategy to what they called the hawk team strategy.

[00:20:32.90] So rather than sending a company of 120 men out to go look for an equal or larger sized enemy force someplace in a base camp. They took a company out and sent the company out to the field. The company had an area of operations. The three platoons of the company, about 40 men each, would go to a separate area of the operations. The platoon which had three heavy squads would break up into three squads called the hawk team.

[00:20:59.01] And therefore, the three squads would be out hopefully near each other to help each other, but patrolling all day. And those squads will be in squad ambushes all night. So you'd have a company that was broken down with squad-sized hawk teams saturating the area of operation.

[00:21:21.52] And that's a great idea, as long as you don't get-- it's like sending ants out and trying to find the enemy elephant. It's a great idea because you have more chance of finding the elephant. It's a really bad idea if you're one of the ants when the elephant finds you. All right.

[00:21:38.14] So we lived out there. And for the last half of my tour or more, we went into the jungle because the 3rd NVA Division, which was a large division, had moved back into the mountainous areas of our area of operation. And so we went to the mountains.

[00:21:54.01] And the living conditions there were jungle, terrible, heavy jungle. It rained four months, monsoon season. So you were wet constantly. And your flesh rotted off and everything got infected.

[00:22:07.69] And you just slept wherever you slept. You got no tent. Because the sound really of the rain on a tent would be-- and nobody's carried a tent. So you just slept with the snakes and the scorpions and the elephants and the tigers or whatever-- just became another one of the animals basically.

[00:22:23.28] And after a while you just didn't think about it because you were just part of the jungle. And it seemed like the animals just figured you were another big thing in the jungle. And the small things avoided you. And you tried to avoid the big things.

[00:22:38.92] Yeah, so very tough. Sixty-pound rucksacks. I weighed 132 pounds, and I carried seven pounds-- seven canteens of water. And I put seven water bottles in a bag and just carried it. Feel how heavy that--

[00:22:56.14] Four days of food, which were all canned then. So they were heavy. 400 rounds of ammunition, all of that other stuff. And you lived with that on your back every day.

[00:23:07.09] MARK FRANKLIN: And the heat?

[00:23:08.38] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: In 90 degree heat and 90% humidity. So when I came back home, I weighed about 122 pounds. I was skinny when it went over, but I weighed about 122 pounds.

[00:23:20.95] And I went to Sears, I remember, in the boys section to buy a pair of trousers. My waist was 28, I found one. Inseam was 29, I found-- no, waist 29, inseam 28, I found one. But from so much hiking my thighs would not fit into the pants.

[00:23:40.11] MARK FRANKLIN: They got that big?

[00:23:40.74] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: They got that big like doing squats for a year.

[00:23:45.63] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure. Did you have any time for recreational activities? If you did, what did you do?

[00:23:52.16] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Twice I think they sent us out to secure-- that's the way the Army says it on the operations report-- Alpha Company, 1st Platoon secures the facility where it was. I don't remember where it was. And we had three opportunities to go out to the beach. It was a recreation center. Two opportunities.

[00:24:13.70] As for me, every time I went back to the firebase I never went anywhere. My assumption was some of the guys are going to go to the village and seek instant love. Some of the people are going to drink. Some are going to the steakhouse. Some of them are going to hitchhike down to the airbase at Phu Cat, which was 40 minutes away.

[00:24:36.77] And in my view was if something happened to them, I'm still on duty. So I was never off duty, never went anywhere, stayed on the base, the firebase, and wrote letters, took care of the administrative things, cleared things up with the MPs when they brought my guys to me. And that's what I did for ten months.

[00:25:00.75] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you have any specific memories of the popular culture, the music films that if you hear a song today remind you-- ?

[00:25:07.07] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Yeah. The main song we heard, which everybody agreed with, was "We Gotta Get Out of this Place." In 1969, Peter, Paul and Mary recorded "Leaving on a Jet Plane" and that became the anthem for the period, the people of my time. "I'm Leaving on a Jet Plane," because everybody wanted to go home.

[00:25:29.72] If I'm someplace-- recently, within the last year, I came home. My wife heard the car come in. The dogs barked their greeting. I didn't show up.

[00:25:41.48] She goes out to the car. And I'm sitting in the car. I roll down the window. She says, why didn't you come in? I said, listen to the song. "I'm Leaving on a Jet Plane."

[00:25:51.74] So when the song plays, I've got to listen to it. Yeah, I've got to listen to it. That's the two main parts of the culture.

[00:25:59.45] To go back very quickly, there was one incident when I was the acting platoon sergeant of my platoon in advanced infantry training. And it was a weekend. And we were-- I was sewing my PFC stripes on. I was a big deal. I had one stripe now.

[00:26:16.04] So I was in the barracks. Again, this is typical of me. I didn't go out. And so I was sewing on my stripe. And there was one black guy in the barracks with me.

[00:26:29.82] And I remember him because he was a black guy and his name was White. And White was in the barracks. And two big black guys came in at the door who were not from our platoon. Big is important because I'm small. Black is important because black was the reason they were there.

[00:26:47.34] They had come in to beat up White because White would not join in their black power type group that they had in the Army. Black was-- Mr. White was a married man. He wanted to get through-- he was a draftee. He wasn't going to get involved in the black activist movement. But these two people were.

[00:27:06.57] So they came in and announced to me that they had come to look for White and they were going to kick his ass. I was in charge of the barracks. So I told them they couldn't do that, which made them laugh basically because I was this little guy telling them.

[00:27:21.79] They said, who's going to stop us? I said, well, I'm not interested in fighting anybody. But I'm in charge of the barracks and you can't do that. So I'm not going to let you do that.

[00:27:30.72] So then the usual thing happened. They told me how they were going to beat me up. And White is in the corner waiting to get beat up.

[00:27:41.17] And finally, I told them-- I had so much to do. I was a third degree black belt in Taekwondo when I went into the Army, which doesn't mean that I could beat anybody. It just meant that I wasn't afraid to fight.

[00:27:54.17] So finally, I told them, you guys will have to leave. I'm not interested in fighting you. But if you attack me, I have no choice. I'll have to defend-- I'll have to defend myself.

[00:28:04.49] And I think they looked at this little Asian guy and thought-- I mean, is this guy an idiot? Or is he Bruce Lee? I mean, we're not sure. You could see the uncertainty come in.

[00:28:17.00] And it's kind of like being pregnant. It's all or none. You're in for everything. And you might get killed or you beat this little guy up for nothing. And then you can go beat up Mr. White.

[00:28:27.41] And they were not up to it. They had a lot of talk. And they told me how lucky I was that they weren't going to beat me up. And I agreed. I said, yeah, you probably could, but see you. And then they left.

[00:28:40.97] So that was something that was kind of interesting. It wasn't black-white racial tension. It was black-black racial tension.

[00:28:53.78] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: We had very little to do with the company commander for the reasons that I just described. He went with one platoon. Usually, the command post went with one platoon. The other two platoons went out on their own.

[00:29:07.44] And what that meant was the main ranking leader in the platoon was the platoon leader, who was a lieutenant. The next in rank was the platoon sergeant, which was me. And I had three E-5 sergeants who were squad leaders.

[00:29:24.72] The leadership-- I'll start from the top. I had five platoon leaders in the 10 months that I was there in Vietnam. The first one was at the end of his tour, and he left within a month.

[00:29:36.03] The second one that came in was trying to complete a tour, but he had lost part of his calf. And he wanted to be a career officer. And he wanted to complete a tour in Vietnam. He had some pressure on him. His father apparently was a West Point colonel.

[00:29:53.40] So he came out. And when the second platoon leader came out, I looked at his injury. Because he was limping when he came out. And he showed me his injury. And I said, well, I admire your courage, but you're going to have a very hard time.

[00:30:07.38] And he was not out there long because he just-- the physical requirements were too tough for him. So that's number two. Number two left. And for a while, we didn't have anybody.

[00:30:19.51] Number three was a Ranger who had been-- I'm not sure whether he was an ROTC officer or regular Army, but he was a Ranger. And we had high hopes for him because he was a Ranger. He turned out to be ignorant, lazy, and incompetent. And he had no sense of propriety. I mean, we were out in the field.

[00:30:49.28] So the first evening that he arrives I assigned him guard duty. We've got about 12 hours of guard duty. You only have 12 guys at the squad, one hour apiece. So in deference to rank, we always gave the first slots from six to seven at night to the lieutenant because everybody's up anyway, and he's awake anyway. He gets to sleep through the other 11 hours.

[00:31:14.37] So I went to him and I said, sir, you have first guard. His response was, Sergeant K, I'm the platoon leader. I don't stand guard.

[00:31:26.22] You can edit out what you want. You can edit out my thought. The thought, which didn't come out of my mouth, was everybody stands guard you arrogant asshole. Right?

[00:31:36.99] But I understand rank. So what I said to him instead was everybody stands guard in the field, sir. And anyone who fails to stand their guard, we're going to shoot him. So he stood guard that night and every guard thereafter.

[00:31:53.87] All right. But again, here's his attitude. In the morning, we're in the center of the perimeter. I'm awake already because I always took last guard, dawn. I took the last guard. That's in deference to me. I get to sleep the first 11 hours.

[00:32:08.73] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:32:09.23] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: All right. Because of the extra responsibility. So I wake up in the morning. And the first thing that this new lieutenant says to me is, Sergeant K, make us some coffee.

[00:32:23.21] I thought to myself, are we on a plantation? Am I the slave? Are we back in the rear someplace where my duty as a senior sergeant is to make coffee for the lieutenant-- and a new lieutenant no less?

[00:32:38.93] I'm not going to tell you what I thought. But what I said to him was, make your own damn coffee, sir. I am your platoon sergeant not your waiter. He blustered a little bit. And I left.

[00:32:53.20] But the big problem with him was he was lazy. So we would go out, and he'd set up a patrol base. And we would patrol.

[00:33:00.04] At the end of the day when it got dark, you get something to eat, and you always move. Because you don't know who's watching you. You cannot spend the night in the same place you've been after people have figured out for the last 8 or 10 hours how are they going to attack you if you stay there.

[00:33:15.20] So I told him we have to move. And he was lazy. The first night he said, well, we're not moving. So we stayed the first night. The only guy who slept was the lieutenant. Everybody else stayed up all night.

[00:33:29.45] And the next time it happened, he said again, we're not moving. We were in another location within the week probably. I said, we have to move. He said, we're not moving. I'm the platoon leader and we're staying here.

[00:33:42.93] I said, well good for you, sir. I'll tell you what. If you're still here in the morning and you're still alive, we'll come back and get you. Saddle up. So we all put on our gear. And you've never seen a guy deflate an air mattress as fast as he did. And he loaded it.

[00:34:00.14] In the morning, as was his prerogative, he gave me the lecture about who was in charge, and the rank, and all of this. And what I said to him, I said, I have responsibility also, sir. I have responsibility. I have more experience to keep our men alive, including you. And if you think that my insubordination requires some action on your part, go ahead.

[00:34:24.52] Because I was willing to take the chance of a court martial knowing that when we got back in the rear it wasn't going to happen. First sergeant wasn't going to let it happen.

[00:34:34.75] So the first time I had a chance after-- to go back-- he was probably with us a month-- to go back in the field, I went to see the first sergeant. And I said, this is not a bad guy, but he's incompetent. And what I fear for him is the first time we get into a firefight, someone is going to shoot him in the back of the head.

[00:34:54.39] One of our own guys can put a bullet in the back of his head. And he's going to be gone. And he shouldn't-- that shouldn't happen to him. We should not let that happen to him.

[00:35:06.69] So he never went back out. They sent him to a transportation company or something. Yeah.

[00:35:12.06] MARK FRANKLIN: So who's number four?

[00:35:13.56] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Yeah. So now we're at number four. Number four turned out to be a godsend. Yeah. His name was Ed McIntyre. He was a college graduate. He was a college basketball player, so he understood teamwork.

[00:35:27.21] First thing he did when he got off the chopper and we met was not to order me to make his coffee, but to tell me, I may outrank you Sergeant, but I know I don't know as much as you do. And I will be depending on you and others to help me to do my job better.

[00:35:44.62] And he and I stayed together for nearly six months. And we were a great team. Platoon members say that, not just me. And then he went back. He rotated out of the field and became the S-1 personnel guy.

[00:36:02.88] And the new platoon leader was just coming in as I was going out. So I never really met him. And in between some of those platoon leaders, I was the active platoon leader.

[00:36:13.02] MARK FRANKLIN: Were you a platoon sergeant?

[00:36:14.49] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I was a platoon sergeant, yes. For my tour, there was no big battle. Constant skirmishes, that's what they were. So it's not a matter of having a big battle and fighting a number of people, and all of that.

[00:36:31.21] Given the type of operations we were in, run into some people, run into a half dozen VC, run into one and two. People shoot at us. You're in the jungle. People shoot at you. Find base camps.

[00:36:42.54] That's basically what we did. We acted as almost like recon teams as you would take a small recon team or a Ranger team, squad size recon teams, which meant we were out in the field all the time. We were lucky. We were lucky because we did not have to be in those big battles. We were unlucky because we were never out of the field.

[00:37:04.32] And like I say, high stress if you're in an ant. If you're an elephant looking for other elephants to fight the stress comes when the elephant-- the herds of elephants fight. And that doesn't happen often. But if you're an ant looking for an elephant, high stress for the entire tour. And that's kind of what we did.

[00:37:28.71] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: My worst day in Vietnam might be a surprise to you. It was the day that I left. Most people would tell you, that's the best day. It was my worst day because I had spent 10 months of my life, 24 hours of my life, trying to keep my men alive. My whole being was aimed towards their well-being and keeping them alive.

[00:37:54.70] When the plane took off from Saigon, people were subdued. You always think your plane is going down the runway, and they're going to rocket the plane. You're just not going to quite make it.

[00:38:09.47] So actually people were subdued until we got out into international air. And then the flight attendant announced we have now left. We are now in international air. And this huge roar went up of all the people going home. And at that time, champagne came out and everybody did what they did.

[00:38:28.56] And I think the only guy in that plane who was depressed was me. Because what I realized when I left-- and that's why it's my worst day-- is I who was qualified to take care of my people had left my people in the hands of less qualified people. I had left my platoon to the vagaries of war. And I was not there to take care of them. And I was very sad.

[00:38:51.97] Everybody else was having a great time. But my worst day was when I left. I was there for 10 months. Maybe half of my men were wounded. Casualties throughout all the rest of the company platoons.

[00:39:06.84] For the time that I was there-- and I cannot say that it was only me. But it was partly me and three good platoon sergeants, I did not have one man killed. But in the two months after I left, five of them died.

[00:39:25.53] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: The best day is every day you survive. And our day was divided into two parts. It's the day when the sun is up. And if you survive that entire day and you're in a safe place where you can have an evening meal, and you can reflect on the fact I made it through another day. But now you've got to make it through the ambush night.

[00:39:46.43] So then you make it through the night, get up in the morning. Dawn comes, everybody's awake in the perimeter. You're out in the jungle someplace. Nobody's attacking you. Now you can say, well, I made it through another day, the day and night.

[00:39:59.60] So every day you made it through. That's your best day. Because your worst day might be coming.

[00:40:11.98] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: The online thing had not yet been invented. I talked to my wife once when I took a convoy down to Cam Ranh Bay. And they had this big MARS-- they called it a radio station. Other than that, only by letter.

[00:40:31.75] I wrote a lot because I was not out doing recreation. My father kept every letter that I wrote and put it in a book, gave it to me when I came home. I have a box that has every letter that I wrote to my wife. She kept every one. And my young bride wrote me every day.

[00:40:54.81] So I was there 10 months. I probably got 300 letters from her. So I'd get a letter from the mailbag and read. Sometimes you didn't get mail for two or three weeks. I got 20 letters, lined up the dates. Read them all. Burned them all.

[00:41:11.47] MARK FRANKLIN: So while you were in Vietnam, there was a lot of social, civil unrest back home.

[00:41:15.75] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: There was.

[00:41:16.35] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you get any of that news? Did you hear about it?

[00:41:18.96] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Yeah, we heard about it, but not much. Yeah, it was-- the only way I would hear about it was if somebody mentioned it in a letter. And of course, the people I'm writing to didn't want to tell me about this unrest that's going on back home. I've got my own problems.

[00:41:35.55] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:41:36.06] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Yeah. So I did not hear much about it. I was in training, I think, when Martin Luther King was assassinated. And the only racial problems I ran across-- once when I was training, and--

[00:41:52.54] I would brief everybody when they came in to make sure that they understood we are all color blind here in the platoon. In the field, just do your job. And I'm the perfect guy to do it, I'm brown. I'm not black and I'm not white.

[00:42:12.28] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I left Vietnam in the first week in June of 1970.

[00:42:19.57] MARK FRANKLIN: Describe that journey home?

[00:42:24.78] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Well, there we were in our last briefing at-- maybe it was Fort Dix. I don't know. No, Fort Lewis, Washington. Fort Lewis, Washington, they have a last briefing.

[00:42:36.42] In the last briefing, there's an NCO who must have pissed off the general because his assignment is to tell all these people who are leaving the Army-- and some of us just got out of Vietnam, why you should re-enlist, why we should re-enlist. And all of us are tapping our feet. We're looking out the door. You got about 12 taxis all lined up, ready to go to Seattle-Tacoma Airport.

[00:43:01.65] So he finishes, and boom, we run out the door. I jumped in a taxi with three other guys I've never seen before or since. We go to Seattle-Tacoma Airport, shake hands, have a good life. They're gone. I don't know where they are.

[00:43:15.21] And I try to get a plane with my orders to fly to Chicago to see my wife because she's at home. It's 10:00 at night. The last planes are leaving. They're all full. So I can't-- I say, what, I'm going to spend another night? In the airport?

[00:43:33.75] About that time, they changed the personnel at the ticket counter of United Airlines. And I looked over there. And to my absolute surprise my high school classmate is now manning the counter. His name is David Kahulakula and he's passed on now.

[00:43:48.75] And I run up to the counter with my orders. And I say, David, I just got out of Vietnam, out of the Army. You've got to get me to Chicago. So David manipulates the manifest somehow and somebody else has to spend the night in the airport because I got on a plane and I went to Chicago.

[00:44:10.99] And my wife picked me up. I was in my Army uniform, went to our home in Chicago. Christmas tree was still up because they had waited for Christmas for me. I traveled all night. So I didn't have any interaction with the public.

[00:44:26.96] So I was not one of those who can say, oh, they spat on me. That's really not the issue. The issue in reintegration is being alienated from society in a very unpopular war. And so you just close down and just not deal with it.

[00:44:45.56] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you have any trouble adjusting to life afterward?

[00:44:48.42] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Oh yeah, but mostly internal in the sense that I had a college degree. I went back to graduate school. Probably two weeks out of-- after I got out of Vietnam, I was sitting in graduate class at Michigan State University.

[00:45:04.55] And we had a small group, grad school. And the individual desks were in a circle. And I know where I was on July 1st, 1970 at 12 noon. July 1st, 1970 at 12 noon, I was sitting at a desk at Michigan State University in a graduate class.

[00:45:28.03] Now on the first of the month at 12 noon, something happens with the public system. Most states test their sirens. We do it here first of the month, 12 noon. OK.

[00:45:44.15] So East Lansing, Michigan, July 1st, 12 noon, they tested the sirens. The next thing I remember is I was under the desk and everybody-- it was really quiet in that graduate

class. I climbed back out of the desk and mumbled something about just coming back from Vietnam. And it's probably my imagination, but nobody sat next to me for the rest of the semester. They didn't want to sit next to the crazy guy.

[00:46:09.29] MARK FRANKLIN: What did you end up doing afterward?

[00:46:11.27] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I ended up teaching school for a year in Central Michigan. I came back and became a physical education teacher, football and wrestling coach, here in Honolulu for a couple of years after that.

[00:46:25.13] I got out in 1970. And by 1974 then--- or '73-- they opened a law school here at the University of Hawaii. And a friend convinced me that I should go to law school. So I talked my way into law school somehow.

[00:46:43.60] Undistinguished undergraduate career with a grade point below a three point, hovering around a two point, I really had a good time. Not the kind of grade point that would get one into law school. When at the time they had 750 applicants, they only accepted 75. But I got a four point plus in graduate school, different guy. And I somehow talked my way into law school there.

[00:47:11.86] And in 1974, I entered law school. And by 1977, I graduated. I clerked for a federal judge until 1978. I was in private practice doing business litigation for 10 years.

[00:47:27.88] And then in 1988, I was appointed to the bench of the trial judge. And I stayed about five years to leave to go into private industry and became a community affairs executive for a health care system. And eventually, 1998 to the present, I'm the chairman of the board of the Queen Lili'uokalani Children's Center, which is a trust which takes care of poor Hawaiian and destitute kids.

[00:47:57.81] MARK FRANKLIN: Earlier you said you would talk later about relationships.

[00:48:01.35] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Oh yes.

[00:48:02.01] MARK FRANKLIN: So I have question about how much contact you had with fellow veterans over the years?

[00:48:06.45] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I had no contact with my own platoon. But I started thinking about it in 1982 when the Vietnam Wall Memorial was dedicated. And I wondered what happened to my men because I had not-- we had not seen each other.

[00:48:21.16] And of course, as you know, but what the public may not know is all of the replacements that went over to Vietnam were individual replacements and nobody went as a group. So that when the Soldier's year was up, he just shipped out. He waved at them. He went on the helicopter and he was gone. Presumably never to see them again.

[00:48:40.65] In 1982, I started thinking about my men. I still had my platoon sergeant book, and it was still in the same plastic bag. It was the bag for the battery for a PRC-77 radio. Remember that?

[00:48:55.02] Alright. So I take that out. And in there are the names, the hometowns, the next of kin, the blood type, and in some cases, the Social Security number. So I took that out. I made my own list. And I started looking for them.

[00:49:12.90] At that time, no internet. You had to dial one, the area code 555-1212 and you got the area information for Tennessee. And they'd say what city and I'd give them the city. And they'd say what name. And I'd say I'm looking for Edward Knight.

[00:49:33.87] And they say we got eight Edward Knights. I said, give them all to me. And I'd get them all. And I pick up my phone and I'd call every Edward Knight in Seymour, Tennessee. And sometimes I got them, and sometimes I didn't.

[00:49:48.55] But in the end-- oh, one final thing. When I couldn't find them, I went to my friend who was running the VA here, regional office. I said, can you help me find my men? They said, no, we have privacy rules.

[00:50:01.23] I said, OK, what if I do-- here's the notice I'm sending out. What if I stuff the envelopes, put my name on them, put their name on them, and if they're on your thing, will you mail it for me? And I don't know whether any other director would have done it, but he did it.

[00:50:18.13] So in 1985, we had our first reunion, platoon reunion. I picked the middle of the-- Lafayette, Indiana was the middle of the country. And we went there to a Holiday Inn.

[00:50:29.01] To my surprise, 17 people showed up. And almost everyone that came said, I wasn't coming. My wife made me come. Or, I called up Joe, who I kept in contact with, and we said, well, if you go I'll go.

[00:50:44.08] And one guy came from California, told his wife, what are we going to do for four days? The first night he was there he called her back and he said, four days is not going to be enough.

[00:50:54.54] From that time in 1985, I now have about 25, between 25 and 30 of my platoon members. We get together now every two years. And one time with the family members, we had 75 people attend the reunion. I believe we are probably the only platoon size unit of those who served in Vietnam who have managed to stay together for 45 years, 47 years now. And the reason that's important is now we can be friends.

[00:51:29.82] We're still a band of brothers, which means-- and I'm still the platoon sergeant, which means over those four-and-a-half decades. I get the phone call from people that say, Mike's having a hard time. And he just got a divorce. He's depressed.

[00:51:46.50] Joe just lost his house in a fire. We've got to go build him another house. Bill is alcoholic and abusing drugs and nobody can get him to go in a drug program. I've had wives who are about to become ex-wives call me and tell me that their man needs help. And the only person they're ever going to listen to is me.

[00:52:09.52] So over those probably four-and-a-half decades, I probably saved a few lives or have helped them save their own lives. I've prevented at least one murder. I know that. And I have traveled all over the U.S. as part of a support group that support each of our people.

[00:52:30.34] I have come to the belief that finding a way to keep the band of brothers who have served in combat together is the single greatest factor in helping people reintegrate. Because people didn't start reintegrating-- my people-- in many cases until after we got back together. You've got to get back together and figure out, hey, wait a minute. We might be crazy, but not in our group. We're normal. Everybody else out there is crazy.

[00:53:03.37] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you ever contact your lieutenant, the one that you liked?

[00:53:06.71] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I contacted him, yes. We met again for the first time before the reunion-- because we were helping to plan it-- at the Wall. And we have been together quite a bit ever since.

[00:53:28.91] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Well, it's the most significant, probably, thing that ever happened in my life. Part of that is because I learned more about myself. When you're in a position of a combat leader of a small unit in a war like Vietnam where you don't have news coverage and embedded reporters, what happens in the jungle stays in the jungle. And you're leading a group of young wild wolves, and you have to be the alpha wolf.

[00:54:01.98] And the ethical framework, the morals of that platoon come from the leader. And it's not just affirmatively imposing them upon them. Because if you fail to act affirmatively and let things happen, then the morality of the-- or the ethics of the platoon can be eroded.

[00:54:27.07] So I wrote home during Thanksgiving. And I thanked my parents in a letter and said, thank you for raising me right because you don't know what it's like to be in a position I'm at because I'm god. What I allow will happen. What I say can't happen won't happen. And you don't know what your ethical and moral code is until you're in that situation because everybody's going to test it.

[00:54:55.26] So you can see that experience really changes-- well, it helps cement your view of who you are. And some of the greatest leadership lessons I learned, I learned in Vietnam because there's so much risk involved.

[00:55:11.99] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[00:55:15.15] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I think it's remembered by those who remember it. It depends who's remembering it. My kids only remember it because I was in it. But for others, I think it's a historical event, which for the most part was a negative event because of the

controversy in our country, because of the large numbers of men who were lost, because the perception is that we lost that war by not achieving a political objective, because we quit.

[00:55:58.35] From the point of view of my men, I can tell you. They all think the war was a mistake. And they think it's a mistake because of the lack of commitment to it and all the lives that were lost.

[00:56:13.70] There's nobody I know that says, oh, that was a great war. That was a good idea. Not with the guys I served with. And most of them, because they were airborne Soldiers, they have an attitude of we were winning when I left.

[00:56:27.18] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you think your experience in Vietnam affects in some way the way you view Soldiers coming off the battlefields today?

[00:56:35.40] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: Of course. I don't see how you can serve and not. The lessons that-- but most of us say coming out of there is that you can do things you don't think you could do. I mean, your capacity is tremendous.

[00:56:49.31] The second lesson is the lesson of brotherhood under those circumstances. With regard to Soldiers coming back, I've already said that what I think is the most important. You've got to find a way to keep them together with their group, not with the 3rd Marine Division, but with the 3rd Squad of the 3rd Platoon of Echo Company. And there's a huge difference because the healing that takes place and the counseling that takes place is important.

[00:57:20.73] So I think that's the first thing you need to do. You need to find a way to keep these Soldiers together with the people with whom they had the most intense relationship because they can care for each other like nobody else can.

[00:57:32.24] The other thing I think is important is-- and I think the services as I hear are getting better at transitioning, helping with employment. But you've really got to counsel the families. I don't know how good the counseling is for families. Because a Soldier that comes back is a different Soldier. And he's not going to change back by the way. He is who he is.

[00:57:55.96] So we have to find a way to help our families be educated about how to deal with the changed Soldier, and yet support him. Because I think the greatest thing about my transition and being able to go on was strong family upbringing, a strong family support when I came back, and some maturity with a sense-- because I had a sense of who I was before I went. I've lived away from home. I was 23 years old. My Soldiers were 19. They had no idea who they were.

[00:58:33.21] And if you don't know who you are when you go into this situation-- if you don't know what your moral code is, what you will stand for, who you really are-- war will undermine-- war undermines the big questions. Who am I really? What is life all about really? Is there a God?

[00:58:56.43] Those are the things which undermine sanity. And that's what the Soldier faces if he's young. And he needs reinforcement on the big questions because it will raise every question that you can possibly think of in terms of who you are. Is life fair?

[00:59:15.36] I mean, this jerk is living. The nicest guy in the world just got killed. Who's in charge here?

[00:59:28.77] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: My impressions of it are positive. I remember when it was dedicated in 1982. My own experience with it has changed, my Interaction with it.

[00:59:42.19] I used to go there with a great sense of sadness. My guys are on it, some of my guys are on that Wall. And it brought back to me the great loss to the nation of those young people whose lives were extinguished. The way I put it in a speech I gave once, it's a permanent drought in the river of ancestry.

[01:00:07.56] But a few years ago, I went back and I had a different feeling about it. Before I went back, I had resolved in my mind that I have to let go of some of the things that I've carried for so long. It's like carrying memories, carrying guilt, carrying responsibility.

[01:00:27.28] And so I wrote a letter to my guys who were killed. And I wrote them a letter saying, you know I'll never forget you, but I've carried the burden of not being there to keep you alive for four decades. And I have to let go of that.

[01:00:46.20] So I'm going to let go of that. I'm going to let go of the guilt. I know that you went and did-- whatever happened happened. It's not my fault. But I'm never going to let go of the memory.

[01:00:57.81] And I wrote that letter. And then I put it away someplace because there's no place to send it. And after that, the next time I went to the Wall it was kind of like visiting the boys. Rather than grieving the loss, I can go there with-- I just had a different spirit.

[01:01:14.28] I was taking somebody with me. And I realized as we were walking there. And I was telling him about it that I had a different feeling about it. Come on, let's go see my boys. And I wish for others who have experienced that, that they can get to that point.

[01:01:36.17] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I think it's good because it brings into mind-- for example, for my kids' generation-- it brings it to something the forefront of their thinking at least for a period of time something about the war and the people who served it. And unless you do it, people are just not going to think about it. And so I think it's a good idea. I think it's not too late for some people who have never resolved their experiences.

[01:02:10.37] And it's not until this morning, I decided to go walk in the parade because I'm not a joiner. It's kind of like I'm one of those-- I don't need that. I've been through all of this. I do a lot of work with veterans. I feel good about myself.

[01:02:23.89] And this morning, I decided well, the parade is not for me. Other people are watching me thinking it's for me. That I'm the veteran. But it's not for me. I will go walk for all of the others who are not here.

[01:02:38.47] MARK FRANKLIN: So you are going to walk?

[01:02:39.28] THOMAS KAULUKUKUI: I'm going to walk. Yeah. And then I wrote another friend who was in the 3rd Marine Division who's still in the tree line. He's not coming out so anybody can see him. And I said, walk with me. It's not for you. It's not for me. Walk for your boys in the 3rd Marine Division. I'm not sure he'll come, but I'll tell you what. He's going to think about it because I asked him.