

Laaken, Richard US Army

[00:00:15.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Where and when were you born?

[00:00:18.07] RICHARD LAAKEN: I was born 27 May, 1936 in Marcus Hook, Pennsylvania at home. My mother and father were German immigrants. My dad was working at that time for Sun Oil Company. And for some reason, the doctor that my mother had liked at home births, and so that's how I was--

[00:00:42.12] JOE GALLOWAY: You were born at home.

[00:00:43.44] RICHARD LAAKEN: --born at home.

[00:00:44.91] JOE GALLOWAY: How many brothers and sisters?

[00:00:46.96] RICHARD LAAKEN: I have one younger brother, no sisters.

[00:00:56.82] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you grow up? What do you consider your hometown?

[00:01:00.03] RICHARD LAAKEN: Wallingford, Pennsylvania. In 1940, I think, we moved from Marcus Hook to an area, Wallingford, Pennsylvania, that is just part way between Media and Swarthmore and Chester. It's right in the center of that triangle formed by those three.

[00:01:20.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty country.

[00:01:21.87] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes. Yes.

[00:01:26.10] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you come to enter the military?

[00:01:30.03] RICHARD LAAKEN: I was waiting to get-- to see whether I was going to get into medical school and I was faced with the draft and decided to-- went down to the Navy recruiter, and he wouldn't give me any credit for my service in the Merchant Marine. I sailed for a year in the Merchant Marine. Talked to the Army recruiter and explained my situation and he said, well, if you expect that you might get into medical school, he said, to avoid the draft, you might want to enlist in the Army Reserve. So he called up the local guy, Army Reserve unit. And on the 17th of September 1959, he took me to the Pennsylvania Military Academy to get sworn in and I was enlisted as a private first class because I had had two years of ROTC at college. It was mandatory at that time at Lehigh. And spent some time on active duty, then came back and was recalled to active duty in 1961 for the Berlin Crisis. And towards the end of that period, I said, if they're going to recall me to active duty every once in a while I'd be better off as an officer than I would pulling KP and guard duty as an enlisted guy. So I went to officer candidate school at Fort Benning.

[00:03:14.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Mm-hmm.

[00:03:15.39] RICHARD LAAKEN: And then decided that I liked the Army and stayed in from then on.

[00:03:22.08] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your-- did you have one tour or two tours in Vietnam?

[00:03:26.52] RICHARD LAAKEN: I had one tour in Vietnam.

[00:03:28.21] JOE GALLOWAY: And when were you deployed?

[00:03:30.96] RICHARD LAAKEN: April '68 to April '69, with the 25th Infantry Division.

[00:03:36.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty devastating time.

[00:03:40.23] RICHARD LAAKEN: That was the year that we suffered the most casualties--

[00:03:44.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Most casualties, exactly. 30,000 I think, something like that.

[00:03:49.98] RICHARD LAAKEN: --during the war. Yeah.

[00:03:55.56] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of what the war was going to be like before you went?

[00:04:02.43] RICHARD LAAKEN: Well, I, of course, read a lot about it. And before going, I was working in the G4 office of the 2nd Armored Division and had access to a lot of the papers of lessons learned and that sort of thing. Because 2nd Armored Division had responsibility to organize a unit that later deployed as a brigade to Vietnam.

[00:04:34.71] I supported the war effort. I had served a tour in Germany. And, of course, being part of the NATO forces, I kind of put things in perspective to that, that if war had occurred in Germany, I was prepared to serve there. And I recognized that I had always been interested in politics and foreign affairs and everything. So I put it in perspective of part of a policy of containment like we had in Europe. So I was prepared to go and serve.

[00:05:32.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Beyond officer candidate school, did you do any specialist training of any sort before you--

[00:05:39.83] RICHARD LAAKEN: Well, I, of course, had some training as enlisted. And then I had my basic course and career course underway.

[00:05:59.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Now you're deploying in '68, what was your rank at the time?

[00:06:04.48] RICHARD LAAKEN: I was a captain.

[00:06:05.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Captain. How did you get to Vietnam and where did you land?

[00:06:13.30] RICHARD LAAKEN: Got my orders and flew from Philadelphia to the West Coast. And then flew from there, I believe through the Philippines, and then with Continental Airlines, I believe it was, to Vietnam.

[00:06:38.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Tan Son Nhut?

[00:06:39.48] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes.

[00:06:40.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:06:40.27] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yeah.

[00:06:41.95] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions?

[00:06:45.07] RICHARD LAAKEN: Well, we landed and the stewardesses, as we called them in those days, came around with ice cold, wet wash-- wash cloths. And the air conditioning was working well up until that time. But when the engines shut down and they shut down the air conditioning and then opened the door, it was like walking into a sauna. So I understood why they brought around the face cloths. But the smell and the humidity was just overwhelming.

[00:07:34.39] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you come to be assigned to the 25th Division? What process did you go through there at Tan Son Nhut?

[00:07:41.47] RICHARD LAAKEN: Well, I was Medical Service Corps and they interviewed me at the Vietnam Surgeon's Office. And I asked to be assigned to a division rather than back to Saigon or some rear echelon unit. I wanted to go to the front, so to speak.

[00:08:08.86] JOE GALLOWAY: You were Medical Service Corps, but not an MD?

[00:08:12.07] RICHARD LAAKEN: That's correct.

[00:08:12.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:08:13.18] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yeah. The Medical Service Corps consists of those that are involved with plans and operations and some medical supply and that sort of thing. I'm a plans and ops guy.

[00:08:25.72] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. And so they gave you what you asked for?

[00:08:28.93] RICHARD LAAKEN: Right.

[00:08:29.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Sent you to the 25th Division.

[00:08:32.65] RICHARD LAAKEN: 25th Division, and they put me in as the S3 of the 25th Division Medical Battalion. So I was the S3 plans and operations guy.

[00:08:48.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Where were they located at that time?

[00:08:50.95] RICHARD LAAKEN: They were located at Cu Chi.

[00:08:52.63] JOE GALLOWAY: Cu Chi.

[00:08:58.05] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your duties in that job?

[00:09:00.87] RICHARD LAAKEN: Well, my duties were S3, S2, S5, and commo officer.

[00:09:08.67] JOE GALLOWAY: And morale, no doubt?

[00:09:11.16] RICHARD LAAKEN: Not-- well, that wasn't part of it, but our table of organization and equipment only allowed for one officer in the S3 position. It was a major's slot, but I was a captain. And the others were additional duties. S2, S3 was a kind of a combined position.

[00:09:35.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:09:36.21] RICHARD LAAKEN: Intelligence. And the S5 was because we had responsibilities to provide MEDCAPs, the medical civic action programs, in our area.

[00:09:50.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Right.

[00:09:51.60] RICHARD LAAKEN: And commo officer was because commo was under the responsibility of the S3. And as the commo officer, we had additional radios and we provided the Dust Off support, the radio support for the Dust Off unit that was attached to the division.

[00:10:16.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Sounds like you're a busy guy.

[00:10:18.43] RICHARD LAAKEN: I was. And I enjoyed every minute of it.

[00:10:24.98] JOE GALLOWAY: What responsibilities consumed most of your time?

[00:10:32.40] RICHARD LAAKEN: They were pretty well split. As the operations-- I mean, we were pretty well established by 1968. The division med battalion operated a 50-bed facility in Cu Chi. Our Bravo Company was at Dau Tieng and they operated a 40-bed facility. And our Delta Company was at Tay Ninh and they operated a 40-bed facility.

[00:11:04.20] And we supported-- our facility took care of the minor wounds and illnesses, people that could recover and be returned to duty in about 10-day period of time. And kind of took the workload off of the 45th MASH that was at Tay Ninh and the 12th Evac Hospital that was located at Cu Chi.

[00:11:30.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you find it amusing at this late date that the Viet Cong had a hospital under your hospital?

[00:11:39.60] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes. People talked at that time about the possibility of tunnels. But we never realized that they were directly under the division headquarters and--

[00:11:55.16] JOE GALLOWAY: And ran for miles.

[00:11:56.67] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes. Yeah. And later on, we found out that the tunnel complex was all the way through Dau Tieng, where the division had a brigade and brigade operations as well.

[00:12:12.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Amazing.

[00:12:14.04] RICHARD LAAKEN: I've read the book Cu Chi Tunnels after that, but it surely-- that's right. Didn't know at that time.

[00:12:27.35] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like?

[00:12:30.04] RICHARD LAAKEN: When I got there, we had still tent roofs for our--

[00:12:35.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Hooches?

[00:12:36.40] RICHARD LAAKEN: --hooches. We had walls, wooden walls, but--

[00:12:42.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Sandbags.

[00:12:43.63] RICHARD LAAKEN: Sandbags. But the roof leaked. And later on, we were able to build our own hooches with some tin roof.

[00:13:00.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Tin roofing, yeah. Wood floors?

[00:13:06.58] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes. Wood-- yeah, wood floors.

[00:13:10.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Hot shower?

[00:13:12.79] RICHARD LAAKEN: The showers that we had, we had a shower facility for our battalion headquarters at Cu Chi. And it was an old fuel tank from an aircraft. And if it was filled up with water early in the morning--

[00:13:35.90] JOE GALLOWAY: It'd be warm.

[00:13:36.92] RICHARD LAAKEN: --it would be warm by evening during the summer months when we had a lot of sun. During the monsoon season, things got pretty chilly. It was cold by the end of the day.

[00:13:55.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe your friendships with and your impressions of your Soldiers you worked with, who worked for you, and who you worked for.

[00:14:03.78] RICHARD LAAKEN: I had a bunch of great guys working for me. The guys that ran the Dust Off control were E3s and E4s. And they were really super, super guys. Very conscientious on their jobs.

[00:14:26.91] If they would get missions in for our Dust Off, they would get the mission, they would copy down the information, and send a runner or ring the hooch of the 159th Medical Detachment helicopters, helicopter ambulance that was located in our battalion area. And those guys would beat feet out to the plane. And while they were getting the information, they'd get the engines turning and be ready to take off. They were very conscientious guys, did a super job.

[00:15:03.75] The guys that were running the MEDCAPs for me were headed up by an NCO, an E6 by the name of Weysaki. I can't remember his first name. But he was a former Special Forces medic. And they did a superb job. We had MEDCAPs that would go out to the villages. As I recall, we had about 12 villages that we supported, villages and hamlets. And sometimes we'd do two a day seeing as many as 100 to 300 Vietnamese patients.

[00:15:50.91] JOE GALLOWAY: And that would be the only medical care they had access to.

[00:15:54.54] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes. And we did-- they did a tremendous job not only providing medical care to the villagers, taking care of people with even disease like bubonic plague. Most of the time it was minor stuff, but we did see some plague patients. Later on, the division had a big immunization program for immunizing many of the people in the area against bubonic plague.

[00:16:35.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Didn't need that.

[00:16:37.08] RICHARD LAAKEN: No, that's right. But the guys that went out there did a bang up job. We also had some dental techs. And most of these people had never seen a dentist before. And so it wasn't unusual for them to extract a tooth that had become abscessed.

[00:17:03.53] RICHARD LAAKEN: Next battalion commander was just outstanding, just a super guy. Had been a distinguished military graduate in ROTC, then went on to medical school, became a physician, and was just a superb guy. I really had a lot of respect for him, and he and I maintained contact for a number of years after that.

[00:17:34.32] Some of the other officers I had a great deal of respect for, the division support command commander, full colonel. Most of the officers were really, I thought-- and NCOs-- and the junior enlisted, I thought were--

[00:17:54.63] JOE GALLOWAY: Doing good work?

[00:17:55.65] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes.

[00:17:56.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:00.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Some say when they went home, but--

[00:18:02.90] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes. That was certainly one of the best days. When I got to go on R&R to see my wife again after six months. Departed in December. I think the 2nd of December '68 to Hawaii. And she flew in from Sweden, where she had been living with her mother. So that was a good day.

[00:18:43.11] RICHARD LAAKEN: Tell me about the worst day you had during your tour.

[00:18:46.38] RICHARD LAAKEN: The worst day, I think, was that day that we received the ground attack. And quite a few Soldiers had been killed at Cu Chi base camp.

[00:18:59.40] JOE GALLOWAY: You lose any of your people?

[00:19:01.89] RICHARD LAAKEN: No.

[00:19:02.15] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:19:02.70] RICHARD LAAKEN: No, we did not.

[00:19:08.93] RICHARD LAAKEN: I met some Aussies and New Zealanders when I was on in-country R&R at Vung Tau. But just got to chat with them for a short while. But other than that, didn't have much contact.

[00:19:28.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Not much contact.

[00:19:29.75] RICHARD LAAKEN: We did have assigned to our battalion a Vietnamese doctor in the army of Vietnam. And he seemed like a super guy.

[00:19:51.88] RICHARD LAAKEN: Well, the civilians with that MEDCAP-- with the MEDCAPs. And right after I arrived there, our division was participating in something called Operation BIG BUILD, which was to help the Vietnamese rebuild their villages that had been destroyed during the Tet invasion. And we had troops that were out there rebuilding some of the houses. So I got to interface with some of them at that time. I developed a respect and a liking for the Vietnamese people.

[00:20:39.66] JOE GALLOWAY: You would sometimes go out with the MEDCAP--

[00:20:42.13] RICHARD LAAKEN: I would just-- I would sometimes visit, see what our troops were doing.

[00:20:48.49] JOE GALLOWAY: So you got to see village life as it's really lived?

[00:20:53.17] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes. Yes.

[00:20:53.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Or was at that time.

[00:20:55.63] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yeah. Yeah.

[00:20:57.07] RICHARD LAAKEN: Pretty primitive.

[00:20:58.87] RICHARD LAAKEN: It was. But, I mean, they seemed to be doing very well. I mean, they seemed healthy people, albeit that they had very rudimentary medical.

[00:21:14.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Is that right?

[00:21:17.98] RICHARD LAAKEN: But that was interesting.

[00:21:22.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Interesting times.

[00:21:28.44] RICHARD LAAKEN: The only contact I had with my wife was through the mail. And the one time that we could get together during the R&R in Hawaii for a week. And with my parents, strictly mail. I never had the opportunity to make any phone calls or anything.

[00:21:52.89] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you have available about the war you were in the middle of? About the antiwar movement back home? Any of that stuff.

[00:22:07.52] RICHARD LAAKEN: A fair amount because I would get some newspaper clippings from my parents. Had a subscription to Time magazine. I wasn't sure that I was always getting the right viewpoint from what was written in Time magazine. Because I was at the battalion headquarters at Cu Chi, my battalion commander did have a TV set in his hooch. And we would get the Vietnamese-- the news from--

[00:22:49.59] JOE GALLOWAY: AFRF or whatever it was.

[00:22:51.72] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yeah, Armed Forces Network. So we did get things. I couldn't understand why the American people were not supporting our effort. It was very disturbing to see bits about the antiwar demonstrations and so forth.

[00:23:18.42] JOE GALLOWAY: You're getting on to Kent State and all of that stuff going on at the time.

[00:23:23.62] RICHARD LAAKEN: Right, right.

[00:23:28.25] JOE GALLOWAY: When did you go home?

[00:23:32.41] RICHARD LAAKEN: April '69. And when my wife and I were together during the R&R, we talked about what I would like to have as my follow-on assignment. Pretty much, people coming out of Vietnam could pretty much get their first choice for a follow-on assignment.

[00:24:01.36] And at that time, Senator Mike Mansfield was trying to get our troops pulled back from Germany and would introduce legislation all the time to have the troops withdrawn. So I wanted to go back for one more assignment to Germany before our troops pulled out. And so I

asked for an inter-theater transfer, which for another overseas assignment directly from Vietnam to Germany.

[00:24:39.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:24:40.18] RICHARD LAAKEN: And, of course, that was approved because most of the people wanted assignment back in CONUS. And so I went home, visited my parents for a while, and then flew to Germany for my follow-on assignment in Germany.

[00:25:02.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty good move. Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after a combat assignment?

[00:25:10.21] RICHARD LAAKEN: The only difficulty was trying to understand why people were blaming the Soldiers for Vietnam, and the way that we were treated. Most of the guys were told-- word had got back that if you're flying cross country in the States, get out of your uniform. I kept mine on and flew in to San Francisco, then immediately caught a plane to Philadelphia airport.

[00:25:50.11] When I got off the Philadelphia airport, coming through there, there was some guy with his son and he spat at me when he saw me, and his son went like that to me. His son was probably about five or six years old.

[00:26:21.57] I remember when I was five or six years old during World War II, we would run out when we saw convoys driving past. Stand there and salute and we'd get the biggest thrill if some corporal or sergeant popped the high ball back at us. But didn't expect people to treat me like that when I came back from Vietnam.

[00:26:49.20] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact, if any, have you had with the veterans, fellow veterans, of your service in Vietnam?

[00:26:59.64] RICHARD LAAKEN: Maintained contact for quite a number of years with my battalion commander and the executive officer from my tour in Vietnam. And now I belong to a - we call ourselves a bagel group. We meet every Tuesday morning. There's seven of us, all Vietnam veterans, four Army and three Air Force. And of course we talk about war stories among other things, and politics.

[00:27:41.75] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

[00:27:49.07] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yes. I'm very pleased that the times have changed. I flew Space-A over to Germany several years ago. And we came back and were greeted-- when we got off-- excuse me because-- we came and it flew back into BWI and we landed about close to midnight. We had-- this was a Space-A flight that had originated in Afghanistan and had a number of Soldiers on board.

[00:28:46.87] Excuse me. And to see the people lined up, forming almost a tunnel, a line with cowbells and cheering the Soldiers when we get off the airplane was very moving. And certainly was not the reception that I got when I returned. Had to go to the men's room right afterwards. And one of the other passengers my age was weeping.

[00:29:38.58] JOE GALLOWAY: What do you think that war meant to you and your generation?

[00:29:45.52] RICHARD LAAKEN: Well, it was-- it's hard to explain. It was-- I often wondered after that if we could maintain a volunteer Army. Because if people were-- Soldiers were treated as badly as they were when we returned from Vietnam, how we could do that. I'm glad to see that times have significantly changed. So we are able to honor our veterans for the job that they've done.

[00:30:39.94] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think that war is remembered in our society today or is it?

[00:30:48.72] RICHARD LAAKEN: I don't know. I sometimes think that the same people that now were down there when that plane returned from Afghanistan and Germany and with those veterans. Looking at the age of some of those people, I wonder if they were the same people that were in the antiwar demonstrations and maybe had guilt complex and now we're down there to honor our veterans.

[00:31:22.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, I think there's a good deal of the guilt over what was done back then driving the welcome homes today. I do. I really believe that.

[00:31:38.97] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yeah.

[00:31:40.87] JOE GALLOWAY: It's hard to understand.

[00:31:42.42] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yeah.

[00:31:45.32] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you would like to pass on?

[00:31:54.64] RICHARD LAAKEN: If there's any lessons, it's that our military is civilian-controlled and they're doing the job that our government sends them to do. And whether you support the foreign policy or not, they are not the makers of the foreign policy. They're the ones that have to implement what decisions our government makes. And I'm glad to see that they are now honored.

[00:32:43.12] JOE GALLOWAY: You visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial?

[00:32:46.00] RICHARD LAAKEN: I have.

[00:32:47.62] JOE GALLOWAY: What are your impressions when you go there?

[00:32:50.35] RICHARD LAAKEN: I tear up.

[00:32:54.45] JOE GALLOWAY: A lot of lives.

[00:32:55.80] RICHARD LAAKEN: Yeah.

[00:33:04.45] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard about the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War.

[00:33:08.14] RICHARD LAAKEN: I have. And I think it's a great thing that you guys are doing to commemorate that and to capture the experiences of our veterans that participated in that war.

[00:33:24.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Colonel Laaken.

[00:33:26.56] RICHARD LAAKEN: Oh, you bet.