

LeMoyne, John US Army

[00:00:16.72] JOE GALLOWAY: When and where you were born, your family, and your age when you went to Vietnam.

[00:00:23.65] JOHN LEMOYNE: 15 December '43, Columbus, Ohio. My dad was overseas and my mother was an Ohio girl, so she went back to her family home area. And I went to Vietnam in 1969. I think I was 24 or 25 at that time.

[00:00:46.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were your family members?

[00:00:49.53] JOHN LEMOYNE: Mother and father, older brother and a younger brother. Older brother was a Sailor in the Navy. He started out as a surface warfare gunnery officer on a destroyer right here at Mayport and then transferred to be a frogman, and he went to Seals. Stayed in Seals for 35 years and retired as a rear admiral upper half.

[00:01:08.64] Younger brother, smart, very focused, and works very hard. So he got a full ride scholarship to Harvard and then got a full ride scholarship as a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford, then got hired into Newsweek. And from there, transferred to New York Times and was a bureau chief down in Central America during the guerrilla wars down there, which, by coincidence, was where he had done his master's dissertation on the social influences on the military in Nicaragua. So he knew all the players.

[00:01:57.41] And when they started to talk about peace negotiations, the guerrillas in El Salvador asked him to sit with them as an honest broker. And he did that for about two or three years, and then the United Nations hired him as a peace negotiator. And he retired from the United Nations a few years back as assistant secretary general. It's fascinating to talk with him.

[00:02:31.09] JOE GALLOWAY: What would you consider your hometown?

[00:02:34.44] JOHN LEMOYNE: Where I currently live, Gainesville, Florida. It's where I went to high school, met my wife, and our son and his family graduated from university there also, and they stayed in town. And the grandkids are there. They're five minutes away from us.

[00:02:49.26] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of the war before you decided to enter the military?

[00:02:57.33] JOHN LEMOYNE: Well when I first enlisted, I dropped out of college and enlisted just to get a break from school and kind of figure out what I wanted to do and where I wanted to go. And the war was still below the headlines. But I enlisted Special Forces Reserve. And so during my SF training, I learned a lot about it. And all my instructors had been veterans of Korea and Southeast Asia by that time.

[00:03:22.41] So I knew it was a long war. I also felt that there was some social issues that drove it. And I read all I could about it. When I went back to school, I decided then that I wanted to see

it. And so I went to ROTC and got commissioned. And I thought I'd do a two-year tour in the Army and get out and go to grad school.

[00:03:59.12] But I went into it with my eyes open. I think I had a pretty good appreciation for the historical context of the war that was going on and why, and some of the rights and wrongs on both sides of the issue.

[00:04:18.20] JOE GALLOWAY: What was the source of your commissioning?

[00:04:20.81] JOHN LEMOYNE: ROTC, University of Florida.

[00:04:27.29] JOHN LEMOYNE: Fort Benning, Georgia, infantry. At that time, the infantry officer's basic course was about the least preparation you could possibly have to go to combat. It was terrible. And the five-week course that I was in, I remember we spent one night in the field. We had one live fire exercise. We did some weapons familiarization, but not real training, and very little leadership experience.

[00:04:57.39] The saving grace was, at that time, going to Ranger School. And the great value of Ranger School is not so much the small unit tactics you learn, but really, what you learn about yourself, down deep inside. And it forces you to face yourself in a way that you never had before. And that's where the real strength and value of Ranger School comes out.

[00:05:20.11] I was fortunate that I was on a good Reserve team. I had some good leaders, and we had some good training. We went to jungle operations training. We did two-week FTXs out in National Forest on the summer training. Went to jumpmaster school as a PFC, Bragg. So I did-- I had some good role models, some good mentors, and some good training.

[00:05:42.70] And I was very fortunate when I went to the 82nd. I had, on balance, really good, professional NCOs. I also had the worst NCO I ever served with. So I had both ends of the spectrum. And that gives you a pretty good balance to know what to look for.

[00:06:02.50] JOE GALLOWAY: General Schwarzkopf said you learn more from the bad examples that you do from the good ones.

[00:06:09.26] JOHN LEMOYNE: The bad ones stay with you forever.

[00:06:15.99] JOHN LEMOYNE: We landed at Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. It was a busy, metropolitan, traffic-heavy, tropical environment. And the bus they picked us up on, of course, had anti-hand grenade screen mesh on all the windows and so on. And of course, we had been traveling and flying for about a day and a half. And so we were all kind of in awe and also stunned. But it was-- I'd been in the jungles before. I'd been in Colombia. I'd worked there for a year. I knew about tropics. And it was like, yeah, this is the tropics. But I was surprised by the traffic and the casualness of, normal life was going on.

[00:07:05.48] JOE GALLOWAY: This was 1969?

[00:07:08.00] JOHN LEMOYNE: '69. April '69. I was assigned to the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) as an adviser, as a replacement. And we spent about three days at the replacement depot there at Tan Son Nhut, Saigon air base. And I knew the Vietnamese Airborne had an advisory team, and I knew they were headquartered at Tan Son Nhut. And so my buddy and I, we flew over together. I said, instead of just sitting around here bored, waiting for our names to be called, let's go find out.

[00:07:48.87] So being paratroopers, I figured that the officer's club at Tan Son Nhut Air Base would know-- somebody would be in there from the airborne team. Sure enough, two o'clock in the afternoon, there was a table full of them. And they'd just come out of the jungle. And the fluke was, is my TAC officer from Ranger School was one of them. And he said, what in the hell are you doing here?

[00:08:12.33] And I said, I'm looking for the Vietnamese Airborne. And he said, well, you found us. What do you want to do? I said, I want a job. And they threw us in a Jeep and took us down to the detachment headquarters, and we interviewed, and I got hired. And so my orders were changed, and I went from a replacement somewhere out in the bush to the Vietnamese Airborne Division as this assistant battalion adviser. Changed my life.

[00:08:37.84] JOE GALLOWAY: You were at that time a first lieutenant?

[00:08:40.24] JOHN LEMOYNE: First lieutenant. Yeah, I was about four months in grade when I got there. I spent six months in the Vietnamese Airborne as a lieutenant, and then transferred to an American unit and was a reconnaissance platoon leader for four days, and then was a company commander for about five-and-a-half months. Made captain about halfway through all that.

[00:09:10.85] JOHN LEMOYNE: I showed you on the map where we pretty much operated there south of Tay Ninh. Fortunately, no mountains. I mean, routine was, up at first light. And as an adviser, I would spend the night down with one of the rifle companies on the battalion perimeter, because we were doing battalion operations then. And we were fighting North Vietnamese regiments about every 10, 14 days.

[00:09:37.78] So myself and the two NCOs, we would laager in with one of the rifle companies around the perimeter. And the major and his RTOs would be in the center with the battalion CP. But first light, awake. We had little cooking fires; put the canteen of water in there, get it warm. Wait till about 30 minutes after first light, see what was going on.

[00:10:03.10] Get a shot of coffee, pack your gear up, check your weapons, and then get ready to move out. And we'd spend the day doing a search and destroy, really, just searching for North Vietnamese and trying to keep them out of the area. We were right close to Cambodia. And so what they would do is they'd follow us and recon us for a number of days. And then once they got a feel for where we were going to laager in, they'd come out of Cambodia at first dark.

[00:10:31.48] They'd get all set up. And about midnight they'd start dropping the mortars. And it's a very distinctive sound, as you know. Goes, tchun, tchun, tchun-- real quick. And when the

first one would bottom out, everybody would start yelling, súng cối, súng cối, mortars. And we'd all-- we dug in every night. And we had overhead cover, three foot of dirt and so on. So you'd roll out and roll into your fighting position.

[00:10:57.77] And after the mortar barrages would go by, they'd start the ground assaults. And if those didn't work, they'd back off and they'd start the mortars and the rockets again. And they'd do that for about three to four hours, trying to get into us. And if they weren't successful, a couple of hours before first light, they'd start running towards Cambodia again, because they knew they couldn't be shot at in Cambodia.

[00:11:23.18] JOE GALLOWAY: They were moving primarily to escape air power?

[00:11:27.77] JOHN LEMOYNE: Air and artillery, which were the biggest killers in Vietnam.

[00:11:33.20] JOE GALLOWAY: What was the food like?

[00:11:35.93] JOHN LEMOYNE: We ate Vietnamese food. We had no GI rations as advisers. Interesting-- they had dehydrated rice that was grown and processed in Louisiana. And the bags were all shipped to Vietnam as part of our support for the war effort. And then they had little tins of fish, pork, and beef, sometimes. They'd get resupplied every four days.

[00:12:07.37] And the system that worked out that I just joined was, the company commander you spent the night with would feed you dinner. And that was the main meal of the day. Morning was generally coffee, and you had to have your own. And lunch was, whoever I was moving with, you'd get a ball of precooked, cold rice, and that was lunch. And it was an interesting transition for a gringo boy from the United States.

[00:12:44.36] But what I learned was two things. My RTO was a wonderful young man, five years combat veteran, and because he had been wounded, they were going to give him a break and let him be an RTO for the adviser-- and also, I think, to make sure the adviser stayed out of trouble, particularly a new guy like me. But Burt and I worked out where I'd buy the coffee beans and the sugar and the little limes, and he'd carry them. And half were his and half were mine.

[00:13:19.10] And we'd grind up the coffee beans in a canteen cup, and that's where we made our coffee in the morning. But we also had a routine where we got up at midnight every night and we'd get around the coals of the little cooking fire and heat up a canteen cup of coffee, share cigarettes, and he'd teach me Vietnamese. And we'd wait until we knew the mortars weren't going to come, and then at about one o'clock go back to bed. And we did it every night.

[00:13:48.85] JOE GALLOWAY: I have a distinct memory-- you're pretty good about finding coffee.

[00:13:55.40] JOHN LEMOYNE: I'm a wimp at heart.

[00:13:57.61] JOE GALLOWAY: No, no, no. But I do have that memory of you sharing half a cup of the only hot coffee in about 100 miles of the Iraq desert.

[00:14:09.64] JOHN LEMOYNE: It's like a good Navy chief, if you're a real professional Soldier, you always know where coffee is.

[00:14:16.36] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions, your quarters, like?

[00:14:21.43] JOHN LEMOYNE: I had a room in a converted hotel in Saigon, where the airborne advisory team had one floor of a six-story hotel, I think, almost entirely filled by MACV headquarters staff officers. And it had a restaurant, three, four meals a day, and so on. And I think, in six months, after I finished in-processing, in six months, I was there twice. Had a wonderful house lady who gave me the entire history of Tet '68 and Saigon on the balcony one day. But so I had that as a permanent quarters.

[00:15:04.37] But in the jungle, we slept in hammocks. We dug foxholes every day, and cut timbers and put three feet of dirt on top. And I'm living proof that a 82-millimeter mortar will not penetrate it, because I got the tail fin to show it. But that was our routine. You start at first light and you spend most of the day moving, and then about 4:00 in the afternoon, you stop. The battalion would organize what company goes where, and while we're digging foxholes and cutting timbers, the battalion S3 and FO are calling on artillery and getting all the targets in and getting ready for a night attack and getting set up.

[00:15:52.89] JOHN LEMOYNE: Initially, the civilians and so on in Saigon, it was confusing, because it was just normal life, I mean, except for all the visual impacts of barbed wire, checkpoints, sandbags, and dirt, and so on. It was a normal metropolitan life. And even though there were incidents in and around Saigon, normal life continued.

[00:16:19.29] With the Vietnamese paratroopers, I'd read Bernard Fall's books. These guys were the most professional soldiers I saw in Vietnam, and by far the best combat soldiers. They were focused. They knew why they were there. They were the fire brigade for the South Vietnamese Army, military. They never went to quiet areas. They were always put in areas that needed to be reinforced. Long line of combat experience.

[00:16:54.83] Battalion commander I worked for had joined the French paras. The battalion executive officer was a North Vietnamese who was a veteran of the 5th Parachute, colonial parachute battalion, at Dien Bien Phu. One of our first sergeants was a Laotian from the French colonial airborne. I mean, just-- so that cadre, that core, was still there lingering from the French Indochina War. And these guys had been fighting for over 20 years, and about 15 of it in South Vietnam. They were just very, very good.

[00:17:32.31] When the first round would go off in a contact, none of the company commanders carried an M16. And they all had .45s. When that first round would go off, that company commander would run to the contact and get right with that platoon leader or the NCO running that platoon. And their initial response was to immediately assault and try to overwhelm it. And

the first casualty the company commander saw, he picked up the M16. And I watched him do it many times. They were just seasoned, professional, cool, calm combat leaders.

[00:18:22.68] JOHN LEMOYNE: One of the reasons I volunteered-- requested to go to an American unit was to see how bad it really was. And most of the American units that I saw in the first six months I was there were nowhere close to a professional army. Sloppy, dirty, casual, lazy. Bad habits. A lot of bad habits. And I kind of said, this isn't the Army I enlisted in. And I want to see if it's really as bad as it seems. And so I asked if I could switch over.

[00:19:04.95] Fortunately for me, with the Vietnamization process, my slot on the battalion team was eliminated. And so they were going to-- because the airborne team-- the airborne was such a good unit, they were going to eliminate that assistant officer first, as their first step for this reduction of the advisory effort. And I was able to go to an American unit and see.

[00:19:30.47] JOE GALLOWAY: And what were your first impressions when you got to the 25th Division?

[00:19:38.98] JOHN LEMOYNE: I mean, it was a well-organized, well-established-- I went through the base camp at Cu Chi, and then, from there, I went to Tay Ninh and joined the battalion there. And I had interviewed about a month earlier at that battalion. The battalion commander had changed since then, but he knew about it. And again, the fluke was-- and never argue with fate, Joe-- the battalion S3 had been one of my instructors in the Florida Ranger camp. He remembered me. In fact, he graded me on a patrol.

[00:20:10.07] And so I went to the recon platoon. Lieutenant Colonel Forrest Rittgers, very professional, very, very good battalion commander. Knew his business, knew Soldiers, had been a previous battalion commander, was wounded, medevacked to Japan, refused evac to the States. Came back from Vietnam and got a second battalion. Just a good man and a good Soldier, and a very patient leader, because he was extraordinarily patient with me, because I was dumber than dirt. And then Dan Butoff was the battalion S3, and he was probably-- I'd say he's one of the most professional, top-notch Soldiers I ever served with.

[00:20:57.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, how long did you have the recon platoon?

[00:21:00.02] JOHN LEMOYNE: Four days.

[00:21:00.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Four days?

[00:21:01.71] JOHN LEMOYNE: Yeah.

[00:21:02.09] JOE GALLOWAY: And then they gave you a company.

[00:21:03.95] JOHN LEMOYNE: And they gave me a company.

[00:21:05.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, this unit-- you said the American units you had seen prior to this were pretty sloppy. This unit, I take it, was not.

[00:21:18.77] JOHN LEMOYNE: Depending upon where you went. The battalion worked as-- in company operations, not battalion operations. So they were all-- essentially, it was separate, independent company operations, the four companies. And three of them were in the bush at any one time, and one would come back in and go on brigade reserve or quick reaction force.

[00:21:46.41] The recon platoon was very good, but they were located in a separate compound entirely. We were not in the base camp at all. We were down the road by ourselves with a Vietnamese provincial reconnaissance unit. They were good troops. And of course, they were handpicked. And they knew they had a special deal, and they had to maintain the standards, and so on.

[00:22:11.04] But my second night with them, we went on an ambush on the edge of a village. And we were looking to see if villagers were contacting VC or VC were infiltrating the village to get supplies. And we had Starlights and so on. And we saw little lights, two little lights in front of us. And we could just barely make out two people. And my guys told me, they're signaling back and forth. And I think because I had six months' experience already with the Vietnamese, it just didn't seem right. So I wouldn't let them shoot.

[00:22:54.78] And we watched them until dawn broke. It was grandmother and grandfather with little perfume bottle oil lamps looking for crickets and worms to go fishing the next day. And I wrote it on my report just like I saw it. Sent it in. And got a call on the third day to come to town headquarters. And I thought, well, I'm going to get my ass chewed on this one. And went in and reported to the colonel, and he had the report, and we talked about it. And I told him what happened. And he said, OK.

[00:23:32.08] He said, I want you to come in tomorrow morning and turn the platoon over, and you're going to take command of A company tomorrow afternoon. And I looked at him and said, sir, you're making a mistake. Colonel Rittgers looked at me and said, I'll be the judge of that, Lieutenant. But I could always go to him with questions.

[00:23:53.98] I could always ask Major Butoff, what does this mean? How does this work? Because they were doing things I had not seen with the Vietnamese Airborne. So for me, it was all new. It was a learning experience. But I was comfortable in the jungle, I was comfortable with Soldiers, and I was comfortable with fighting. And so they put me in command. And I found out later, there were three captains waiting for that company.

[00:24:20.93] JOE GALLOWAY: And you got jumped over them.

[00:24:28.59] JOHN LEMOYNE: The Vietnamese I worked with were very good. And they taught me a lot-- I mean, a whole lot, particularly about combat and operations in the jungle. When I went to an American unit, I was able to take a lot of that and apply it, because most Americans going over there had never been in the jungle, you know, that type of environment.

[00:24:55.89] And the unit that I joined had spent a lot of time in kind of static areas, village defense-type business, and so on. And I noticed that they didn't wear helmets, they didn't carry their field gear in a harness, everything was on a rucksack. And there didn't seem to be any

system. And then I also noticed that when we got back in the base camp for that one night in the rear, they didn't sleep by platoons or squads. I mean, it was kind of casual.

[00:25:38.33] And I had a very good first sergeant. He got there a couple of weeks before I did. And one of the most experienced platoon leaders had just been made the company XO just before I got there. And he was very, very good. First Lieutenant Sean Davis and First Sergeant Pappy Erwin.

[00:25:57.80] And so we talked about some of those things and we just started making some changes, and implementing some things that-- I mean, I just knew they were the right things to do, like wearing helmets. And guys have combat gear, so when they drop their rucksack, they still got two canteens of water, they got all their magazines, they got their frag grenades, et cetera, et cetera. We started doing that. And then I made the squads sleep with squads and platoons sleep with platoons, and I made team leaders and squad leaders sleep in areas instead of separate hooches.

[00:26:35.58] JOE GALLOWAY: This was with the Vietnamese or the Americans?

[00:26:37.71] JOHN LEMOYNE: No, this is the American unit. And basic young men, no matter who they are or where they are in the world, any army you want to pick, the basic human value is still there. All they need is, particularly in the military, somebody they trust and somebody who respects them. They were good young men, mostly didn't want to be there. In almost six months of company command, I had five professional Soldiers in six months, including myself.

[00:27:24.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Rest of them mostly draftees?

[00:27:27.18] JOHN LEMOYNE: All draftees.

[00:27:27.87] JOE GALLOWAY: All draftees. What did you do for recreation, off-duty activities, if you had any?

[00:27:37.99] JOHN LEMOYNE: I had very little. When I was with the Vietnamese Airborne, twice in six months, we got a four-day stand down. And our battalion was base camped at Vung Tau. And so I used to go to Vung Tau with the battalion.

[00:28:03.71] The other guys would stay in Saigon with their buddies. But I'd go to Vung Tau. And there was an Australian base camp there. And I was able to link up with the NCO mess at the Australian base camp, and they made me an honorary member. And I'd go to the beach during the day, and go to the base camp at night, and have a good meal with them, and--

[00:28:27.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Drink a lot of Foster's.

[00:28:29.30] JOHN LEMOYNE: Well, I didn't drink, so they thought I was kind of weird. But we'd spend the evening together and I'd spend the night there, have breakfast the next morning, drive down to the beach again. And there was a little USO there that was very nice. And I could

generally get lunch there and enjoy it very much. When I was around the Saigon area, I'd go down to the Vietnamese jump school and hang a strap with the jump school and go jump with them, just to still be a paratrooper and do that. So I got a number of jumps in there when I was in the Saigon area. It was worthwhile.

[00:29:09.73] There was no major operation that I was part of. The Cambodian invasion happened just after I left. Invasion of Laos was two years later. Tet '68 was a year before I got there. Just normal operations. The only two that would stand out, Joe, was with the Vietnamese Airborne, in June of '69, the North Vietnamese invaded Tay Ninh City.

[00:29:35.46] And we were on stand down at that time. So we got alerted, and we loaded Chinooks, and we flew into Tay Ninh City that night, and while taking fire, landed and offloaded, and then cleared the southern approaches into Tay Ninh City. But that was a big fight, that summer, around Tay Ninh.

[00:29:57.00] Then when I went to American unit, I was in the same AO, operational area, same terrain, which for me was fortunate. And my company was attached to a sister battalion that was doing an operation and clearing the northern slopes of Nui Ba Den Mountain, which we had a communication site up on top. And so we spent about a week working that with them. And for that battalion, that was a major operation. And my guys, it was interesting. Good education. I mean, we learned a lot. We saw a lot of things. Didn't get a lot of contact. But people have been fighting on Nui Ba Den since the mid-'50s.

[00:30:46.19] JOHN LEMOYNE: The people in the countryside, I mean, the turmoil and the hustle and bustle of Saigon was kind of a surprise. But when you get out in the country, the Vietnamese country peasant is salt of the earth, has very few wants or desires except peace and farm and be left alone. And they had been through a lot. And they deserve peace.

[00:31:24.50] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your opinion of the enemy, the North Vietnamese that you were fighting?

[00:31:31.40] JOHN LEMOYNE: Almost every guy that-- almost every fight we had with North Vietnamese, they were professional. I had very few VC contacts-- scattered, small ones, but not that many. Mostly VC. Most of the VC fighters were dead from Tet '68. The North Vietnamese were good, but not nearly as good as they claimed to be. And it was interesting--

[00:32:04.67] I spoke Vietnamese with a North accent, and so when we'd get POWs, we'd start talking, I remember one of them turned to my counterpart and said, this gringo speaks North Vietnamese. But the first few days I was with the Vietnamese Airborne, we captured a young soldier. He'd been watching us for two days, wanting to surrender. It was right out of a Jane Fonda movie.

[00:32:38.40] This kid was a college student who got drafted out of college to the Vietnamese Army. They made him an infantryman, sent him south on a trail, three months. Got down to a unit in Cambodia and had just arrived and were told they were going to go across the border and overrun a Vietnamese Airborne unit that was commanded by American advisers.

[00:33:09.54] And it didn't work out so well for him, and he got separated. And he decided instead of going back there to that kind of lifestyle, he was going to see what it was really like, so he watched us for two days. And finally, the third morning, he stood up and walked in. And it was something right out of Hollywood. This kid was a college student, drafted, sent to war, didn't want to be there, thought it was all crazy. And so we gave him cigarettes and coffee, and he just chatted away. It was just-- if he had pale skin and blue eyes, he could have been in Los Angeles.

[00:33:55.31] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't have a rotation. It was victory or death.

[00:34:00.95] JOHN LEMOYNE: Exactly right.

[00:34:02.90] JOE GALLOWAY: And there were battalions that I knew about of North Vietnamese who came down with 500 men, and at the end of the war, had five left.

[00:34:13.12] JOHN LEMOYNE: Yeah. I mean, we probably killed over a million total. But you're right. And they knew it. And the VC units that we bumped into, almost all of them were North Vietnamese. But I know that when the North Vietnamese won the war, they took all the South Vietnamese communists and put them in prison for three years, because North Vietnamese don't trust the South. And South Vietnamese are disdainful of the North Vietnamese. They call them Tonkinese. And they do like this when they say it. They're Tonkinese. And they still do. When I visited there in 2003--

[00:34:56.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Same thing.

[00:34:57.50] JOHN LEMOYNE: They were still saying it, yeah.

[00:35:05.17] JOHN LEMOYNE: When I knew my flight for R&R to see my wife was confirmed. And then there was a time, both as an adviser to the Vietnamese paratroopers after a few months, but also, later on, as a company commander of the American unit, where I knew if we got in a fight, I had the tools and experience to make it work, to bring it together and make things function and click.

[00:35:43.21] And that was reassuring, as opposed to that feeling of being a babe in the woods, like, what am I doing here, and what should I do, and how do I do it, which is how I was when I first got there. That was reassuring. JOHN LEMOYNE: Day after Christmas, I had three guys killed. And their platoon left them. And I found them. And it just infuriated me.

[00:36:20.50] JOE GALLOWAY: This was with the Americans?

[00:36:22.36] JOHN LEMOYNE: Yep.

[00:36:22.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:36:24.19] JOHN LEMOYNE: The day after Christmas. I made the platoon go pick them up and spend the night with them. Had another occasion, Joe, where a unit got a chance encounter,

immediate engagement. They were running to get back to the laager site to get a hot meal. And they ran into an NVA base camp. Got into a really intense firefight. And they left one of their guys there, dead.

[00:37:11.66] And we got alerted that night, went in at first light, and then we went into the base camp area to clear it and so on. The North Vietnamese were all gone. But we found this American Soldier. First dead American I ever saw. Big boy, no shirt, bright red hair, laying on his back. And we rolled him over to get him in a poncho, and he'd been shot in the back with a 40-millimeter M79 round, which tells me that one of his buddies shot him, because the wartime load for 40-millimeter, the spin rotation, the warhead arms in about three to four feet. After that, it explodes. And so it was still in it.

[00:38:02.86] JOE GALLOWAY: So it was a very close-range shot.

[00:38:04.87] JOHN LEMOYNE: Very close-range shot. And in the confusion and panic and so on of a firefight, that I'm sure one of his buddies shot him. And I pulled my guys together, and we talked about that fight. And of course, the company that that Soldier belonged to-- of course, they were all in shock. I mean, of the 30-some guys that were in that group trying to get out back to the laager site for hot chow, the mech unit, over half of them were wounded. And they were in shock and dismayed.

[00:38:36.78] And I said, look in their eyes. Look at the leaders. Look what they're doing. Look at what you see wrong, because we're going to get in a fight someday, and we need to make sure that we don't do these kinds of things, that we stay focused. And I used it as a teaching point, as a leadership technique.

[00:39:05.02] JOHN LEMOYNE: At Tay Ninh base camp, there was a Philippine civil affairs unit that was there. I never worked with them in the field per se, but I saw them there and so on. And I think they were doing some good work. I worked with the Australians over in the eastern part of the country, north of Vung Tau, for a while. Did two or three things with them in a six-week period. They were very good.

[00:39:28.00] I thought they were very, very professional, very focused. They knew their business and they maintained good standards. There was good leadership there. I'm a little biased, but that's all right. I didn't work with any other allies other than those. The Vietnamese, I worked with. I mean, the Vietnamese Airborne were superb soldiers. And they, and the Marine Brigade, and the 1st ARVN Division up north-- reputation of being all very, very good. They had good leaders.

[00:40:03.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:40:09.89] JOHN LEMOYNE: Of course in those days, letters. My wife would send me a tape occasionally. And then I was medevacked one time to the field hospital in Saigon. And they had a phone there. You could patch up on a MARS shortwave radio. I was able to call my wife.

[00:40:31.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. One time?

[00:40:33.80] JOHN LEMOYNE: Yeah.

[00:40:35.18] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war from home?

[00:40:40.25] JOHN LEMOYNE: Not much from home. We got *Stars and Stripes*. I don't think I ever saw the American military TV show, AFN, but--

[00:40:57.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Radio?

[00:40:58.04] JOHN LEMOYNE: But we had the radio. And of course my troops always carried a little portable-- my RTOs would crank it up and so on. Didn't hear much about it. We knew about the protests and the antiwar fad that had hit America, but it was really kind of irrelevant.

[00:41:19.22] JOE GALLOWAY: It didn't affect you.

[00:41:20.63] JOHN LEMOYNE: We were focusing on what we were doing. And my goal was to get every one of my Soldiers home alive. JOHN LEMOYNE: April 1970.

[00:41:33.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe what that was like.

[00:41:36.68] JOHN LEMOYNE: It was-- because of my wife, I was happy to go home. And if I hadn't been happily married, I probably would have extended and stayed in Vietnam. But I got to San Francisco and stripped out of jungle fatigues, took a shower, shaved, put on my short-sleeved khakis, and went to San Francisco International Airport.

[00:42:10.07] And when I checked in at the airline counter, one of the flight attendants was there for our flight. And she said, you may want to change out of that uniform. I looked at her and said, I don't have anything. I spent a year in the jungle. I don't have anything else. And she said, OK. They were very nice to me. And went to Atlanta, caught a flight for my hometown, Gainesville, Florida.

[00:42:49.87] And the guy sitting next to me was-- as we were coming into Gainesville, Florida, he said, Soldier just coming home? I said, yep, just coming home. He said, how are you getting home to where you're going? My wife had an apartment there and so on. I said, well, I thought I'd get a taxi. And he said, might not want to wear that uniform as you're doing this. And so the university professor gave me a ride to my wife's apartment.

[00:43:19.21] JOE GALLOWAY: How did that feel?

[00:43:22.48] JOHN LEMOYNE: Unfair. We were not baby killers. We weren't murderers. Most of the guys there were honorable and sincere, trying to do the right thing. They weren't liars or cheats like Jane Fonda and the rest of them. So it was unfair, but I had 30 days' leave, and then reported to my next duty station.

[00:43:56.75] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your reception like from family and friends at home?

[00:44:00.65] JOHN LEMOYNE: Glad to see you. Not much discussion. When you ask somebody about their military service or wartime experience, I mean, how do you relate that? You're either bragging or you're telling lies. I mean, just-- because they can't relate to that. So you're pretty noncommittal and pretty brief.

[00:44:27.77] I was fortunate. I went to another military unit, was a Ranger instructor in the Florida Ranger camp. And all of us had been through that. And that was our release. We'd chit-chat and talk and shoot the breeze.

[00:44:46.75] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow Vietnam veterans over the years?

[00:44:52.36] JOHN LEMOYNE: Well, I stayed in the Army, so obviously a lot.

[00:44:56.20] JOE GALLOWAY: A lot.

[00:44:57.26] JOHN LEMOYNE: And then the last 10, 15 years, I've had guys that I served with in my rifle company reaching out, contacting me, and saying hello, touching base. I had one sergeant at Fort Bragg who had a break in service for a number of years, but he wanted me to come to his retirement ceremony. And I was happy to do it.

[00:45:21.14] JOE GALLOWAY: What about contacts with the Vietnamese you served with, Airborne?

[00:45:26.38] JOHN LEMOYNE: Most of them are dead. My favorite counterpart was Captain Ngoc. He was probably the finest combat leader I've ever served with anywhere. Seven Purple Hearts, three American Silver Stars, 13 years as a POW. And because of the priority for ARVN POWs, he and his wife and two kids were able to get a priority to Thailand and then back to the States. Settled in Los Angeles. And I visited him in 1999 and caught up with him. He had liver failure from hepatitis as a POW, and he died in 2001.

[00:46:25.27] Battalion commander I had, Colonel Phuc, also settled in Los Angeles. And his son was a staff sergeant in the California National Guard in their long-range reconnaissance company. And when I was at Fort Benning, Georgia as a CG, he came there for the jumpmaster school. And his father was asking him, you know, what names are there at Fort Benning?

[00:46:51.58] And he mentioned that the commanding general was a guy named LeMoyne. And Colonel Phuc went, I know John LeMoyne. He was a lieutenant with me. And so he contacted me, and I went to his graduation. And I spoke to him. It was a nice touch. We still do reunions with the Vietnamese Airborne every year. I go to those. And the advisers have a reunion every other year. And very proud, very sincere.

[00:47:32.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your time in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life or changed you in any way?

[00:47:46.65] JOHN LEMOYNE: I was the only officer hired in the Vietnamese Airborne Detachment-- Advisory Detachment-- that was not a combat veteran. I didn't know that when they hired me. And I flew out to the jungle, and dropped off by helicopter, late afternoon, and the guy I was replacing with was still there. So we had the night together to talk. And the next morning we got to a major contact.

[00:48:23.77] And I didn't understand most of it, because it was all confusing to me and so on. But we came out, and the whole battalion got on line. And I'm with the major by the battalion command post, and the Vietnamese battalion commander, Colonel Phuc, was saying something. And one of his soldiers took off his rucksack and pulled out a bugle.

[00:48:45.52] And I'll be damned if he didn't blow charge. And four rifle companies of paratroopers charged the wood line 300 yards away. It was astounding. And I'm running with the company that I'm attached to and thinking, what in the world have I gotten into? And we got into the wood line, and then I linked up with the battalion XO, and we and we did a kind of a right turn with one company and went in to a different area where some of the bunkers were.

[00:49:22.52] And all of a sudden, there was noise and I was flat on the ground, looking up. And the battalion XO's RTO was in front of me, laying on his back, shot through the head. And he was looking at me and blinking, and every time he'd breathe, the brain material and stuff would ooze out of his head.

[00:49:46.04] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your Vietnam experience affect your life afterward?

[00:49:51.38] JOHN LEMOYNE: A bit to my surprise, I decided to stay in the Army. And it kind of reconfirmed for me that And I've pretty much maintained that throughout.