

Levine, Jeffrey US Navy

[00:00:17.94] JEFFREY LEVINE: I was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut November 11, 1946. My mother is Ellie Wolf, she's an immigrant from Germany in the late 1930s. My father is Sol-- S-O-L-- Levine. His parents came from Russia.

[00:00:45.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Brothers and sisters?

[00:00:46.81] JEFFREY LEVINE: I have a brother of a brother Elliot, E-L-L-I-O-T. He's 69 years old. He was born on my mother's birthday. JEFFREY LEVINE: I entered the Navy because I was a bad teenager. I used to drink a lot.

[00:01:10.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh my.

[00:01:12.18] JEFFREY LEVINE: And I got in trouble-- I hit a parked car with my car. And my parents hired a lawyer and he said that I had two choices. I could either go to jail, or join the military. So I told him I'd join the Reserves. And he said it had to be four years. So I joined the Navy.

[00:01:33.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you have any consideration at that time of becoming a corpsman?

[00:01:37.44] JEFFREY LEVINE: No. I had no idea what a corpsman was. I didn't choose corpsman.

[00:01:44.94] JOE GALLOWAY: They chose it for you.

[00:01:46.38] JEFFREY LEVINE: We were told in boot camp where we were going after boot camp. And we went to a hospital corps school which was right next door. The only thing I was upset about was there was no travel pay. JEFFREY LEVINE: Did my basic training in Great Lakes, Illinois.

[00:02:10.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Your basic corpsman training?

[00:02:12.97] JEFFREY LEVINE: Great Lakes, Illinois.

[00:02:17.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Any further training before they shipped you off to Vietnam?

[00:02:21.61] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes. I went to Camp Pendleton in January, the end of January of 1967. And I left for Vietnam in May of '67.

[00:02:39.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Good timing.

[00:02:43.78] JEFFREY LEVINE: I volunteered for it.

[00:02:46.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Did the training that you got prepare you for what you faced when you got to Vietnam?

[00:02:55.09] JEFFREY LEVINE: Absolutely. JEFFREY LEVINE: We flew by commercial airline. Continental. And landed in Da Nang.

[00:03:11.59] JOE GALLOWAY: In Da Nang. Now where were you assigned to once you got off that plane?

[00:03:22.12] JEFFREY LEVINE: A group of three or four other corpsmen and I went to an aid station and-- for the day. That day we ended up getting our equipment. And the next day we were assigned to our companies.

[00:03:42.07] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were assigned to which company?

[00:03:43.72] JEFFREY LEVINE: I went to Echo Company.

[00:03:46.98] JOE GALLOWAY: 1/5 or-- ?

[00:03:48.76] JEFFREY LEVINE: 2/7.

[00:03:49.75] JOE GALLOWAY: 2/7. And they were located where?

[00:03:53.59] JEFFREY LEVINE: About 30 miles out of Da Nang. I have no idea what direction.

[00:04:01.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you do your entire tour with that company?

[00:04:05.98] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes. But I had a very abbreviated tour.

[00:04:08.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Very abbreviated.

[00:04:15.53] JEFFREY LEVINE: When I got there, I knew no one. And obviously no one knew me. But I was immediately embraced and I felt wanted, needed, and a friendship. And I felt the same toward them immediately without knowing anybody's name. I was a little embarrassed being called Doc, because I hadn't done anything to earn a title like that.

[00:04:45.95] JOE GALLOWAY: But you would.

[00:04:47.78] JEFFREY LEVINE: But I didn't. But at the time I was brand new. I was living off the reputation of my predecessors.

[00:05:00.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Back home there's a fair amount of social tension and antiwar protests are kind of beginning, and-- any of that come over to where you were? Among the Marines?

[00:05:16.87] JEFFREY LEVINE: No, no. Well, we were not interested in social issues. They didn't need to. The social issues in the United States had no bearing.

[00:05:27.67] JOE GALLOWAY: No bearing. JOE GALLOWAY: What did you guys do for recreation, or off duty time?

[00:05:39.18] JEFFREY LEVINE: There was only one time I recall recreation and we went to a Seabee beach.

[00:05:47.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Got to go swimming and surfing and--

[00:05:50.85] JEFFREY LEVINE: Got drunk.

[00:05:51.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Got drunk.

[00:05:52.65] BOTH: [CHUCKLES]

[00:05:58.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe the quality of the leadership in your company and battalion?

[00:06:09.01] JEFFREY LEVINE: I was impressed. I was impressed by our company commander. He was the only person's name that I remembered after I was wounded. I didn't remember anybody else's name but his. I wanted a shotgun because the .45 wasn't going to serve me.

[00:06:33.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:06:34.12] JEFFREY LEVINE: And he just-- he thought it was funny.

[00:06:37.06] JOE GALLOWAY: He thought it was funny?

[00:06:38.80] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes.

[00:06:39.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Did he get you a shotgun?

[00:06:41.65] JEFFREY LEVINE: No. But I would confiscate a Marine's M14, later M16 when he was being medevaced. Since the .45 was for the protection of the patient, I needed protection for myself.

[00:06:57.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Exactly.

[00:07:04.02] JEFFREY LEVINE: The best day, the worst day, was my last day. It was the day I was wounded.

[00:07:12.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me about that, what happened?

[00:07:18.06] JEFFREY LEVINE: We were on a patrol, it was a company-size. We were on an operation, Operation ARIZONA. And the platoon I was in went in to check out a village. And there was nothing there after it had been bombed. And about 45 minutes after patrolling we were ambushed. And the platoon lieutenant was killed. And then I started hearing, corpsman up. And I ran across a dried up rice paddy. And some of the clumps of dirt around me exploding. And I forgot to get scared. I got angry. I honestly remember thinking, who the hell do they think they are? Don't they know who I am?

[00:08:20.14] BOTH: [CHUCKLES]

[00:08:23.18] JEFFREY LEVINE: And I eventually got to the first guy and he had a fractured femur. We did this thing in field med school so I got to do that for stabilizing his femur. And I went to the second guy, and that's where I eventually got shot. I was leaning over him. I was shot right here with .50 caliber round.

[00:08:54.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh no. And you had your helmet on?

[00:08:58.85] JEFFREY LEVINE: The helmet was useless. I'd gone through a helmet before. I'd accidentally put my fist through it while I was shaving. So the helmet didn't do anything. It barely held water. And most of it came out here. I lost all of my lower jaw, my eye. My entire forehead is now a tantalum plate. I was--

[00:09:32.32] JOE GALLOWAY: That'll scramble things pretty bad.

[00:09:34.32] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yeah, I got-- but I was lucky. If it was a smaller caliber round it would have shattered, and things really would have gotten messed up.

[00:09:46.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, are you conscious at this time?

[00:09:48.95] JEFFREY LEVINE: No.

[00:09:49.73] JOE GALLOWAY: No, you're out. You don't know who came and got you or-- ?

[00:09:56.39] JEFFREY LEVINE: No. I didn't find out until almost 40 years later.

[00:10:01.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Who dragged you off that battlefield. Who patched your head?

[00:10:06.16] JEFFREY LEVINE: The other corpman.

[00:10:07.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. The other corpsman?

[00:10:08.60] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yeah.

[00:10:09.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. They got you on a chopper? Where do you wake up?

[00:10:14.60] JEFFREY LEVINE: I don't wake up until-- that was in June of 1967 --I don't wake up until September.

[00:10:21.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Whoa. And where are you by then?

[00:10:24.89] JEFFREY LEVINE: By then I'm at St Albans Naval Hospital as a patient. I'd served at St Albans Naval Station as a hospital corpsman just a few months--

[00:10:35.11] JOE GALLOWAY: And now you're back in the hospital.

[00:10:36.16] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yeah.

[00:10:37.64] JOE GALLOWAY: How long are you in that hospital? How many surgeries?

[00:10:43.32] JEFFREY LEVINE: I had about a dozen surgeries. So at St Albans, in total I ended up having about 250.

[00:10:53.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Whoa. Over what period?

[00:10:57.97] JEFFREY LEVINE: Over 30 years.

[00:11:00.60] JOE GALLOWAY: 30 years. How long before they medically discharge you?

[00:11:10.20] JEFFREY LEVINE: During the hospital-- I guess I was officially discharged in the early '70s.

[00:11:20.03] JOE GALLOWAY: That's several years, in other words, you were in the hospital care.

[00:11:26.24] JEFFREY LEVINE: The veterans hospital in Connecticut was my mailing address.

[00:11:32.45] JOE GALLOWAY: For a long time.

[00:11:33.38] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yeah. It was home.

[00:11:35.82] JOE GALLOWAY: Now you were discharged 100% disabled?

[00:11:40.85] JEFFREY LEVINE: Correct.

[00:11:42.20] JOE GALLOWAY: And yet your medical treatment continues for years more.

[00:11:50.90] JEFFREY LEVINE: And I had touch-up operations to repair original surgeries that were done more on an emergency rather than a long term basis.

[00:12:03.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:12:07.16] JEFFREY LEVINE: While I'm out of the hospital I went to college.

[00:12:12.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What did you study?

[00:12:17.18] JEFFREY LEVINE: I eventually became a registered nurse.

[00:12:19.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you?

[00:12:20.38] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes.

[00:12:21.17] JOE GALLOWAY: I trust them more than doctors.

[00:12:23.84] JEFFREY LEVINE: They probably know more. They certainly know more about the patient.

[00:12:27.71] JOE GALLOWAY: They listen more. While you were in Vietnam how much contact did you have with your family?

[00:12:37.07] JEFFREY LEVINE: An occasional letter.

[00:12:38.66] JOE GALLOWAY: That's it?

[00:12:39.37] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes.

[00:12:40.51] JOE GALLOWAY: They were supportive when you came home?

[00:12:46.29] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes. My immediate-- my parents were.

[00:12:51.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. How soon after you arrived in Vietnam were you wounded?

[00:12:59.70] JEFFREY LEVINE: 39 days.

[00:13:00.93] JOE GALLOWAY: That's it. A month, nine days.

[00:13:02.44] JEFFREY LEVINE: I was with the company 39 days.

[00:13:04.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow. JOE GALLOWAY: Now, you went you went back to college, you became an RN. You went to work as a nurse?

[00:13:18.66] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes.

[00:13:21.02] JOE GALLOWAY: In a hospital setting?

[00:13:22.41] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes. By then I was living in California.

[00:13:27.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you go to?

[00:13:30.65] JEFFREY LEVINE: Los Angeles. I'd divorced or gotten a divorce from my first wife and moved as far away as possible.

[00:13:39.22] JOE GALLOWAY: [CHUCKLES]

[00:13:41.48] JEFFREY LEVINE: Then I got a divorce from my second wife and moved back to Connecticut.

[00:13:45.02] JOE GALLOWAY: Went back to Connecticut. Did you have difficulty readjusting to life after combat? After all of these horrendous wounds?

[00:13:57.32] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes.

[00:13:57.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. PTSD?

[00:14:04.53] JEFFREY LEVINE: More people's comments. One woman in particular. It was in the early '70s, and I-- the original plate for my forehead that was put in had to be removed. So I didn't have it. And my forehead's very concave. I was sitting at the counter in a diner, and a woman made some guttural sound, and wanted to know if I was born like that. I heard her but I ignored her. And she did it again. She said, oh, we were born like that? And eventually she came over and sat next to me and tapped me on the arm to get my attention. And when she repeated it again, I told her it was none of her business, and left.

[00:15:01.53] JOE GALLOWAY: None of her damn business.

[00:15:06.28] JEFFREY LEVINE: So what I wanted was to have enough surgery to not be noticed.

[00:15:18.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you reach out to fellow veterans? You're here at a reunion.

[00:15:29.29] JEFFREY LEVINE: I didn't. When I moved back to Connecticut, I received a phone call in 2005, from the corpsman that I relieved in the company. And he said that the company had been looking for me for 37 years, and that they were having a company reunion. And I went to that. And from then I started coming to the 1st Marine Division reunions and every other years the company reunion. I had no idea where anybody was because I didn't know anybody's name.

[00:16:15.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Right. But you found them, they found you.

[00:16:20.43] JEFFREY LEVINE: They found me. That was the best day of my life.

[00:16:24.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. There's a powerful amount of healing in getting together with the only people who know what you went through.

[00:16:37.54] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes. It was really healing because I didn't have to go explain. They knew. Or you don't have to say more than a couple of words and they understand. They've all been in the same place.

[00:17:06.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Now clearly your Vietnam experience changed you and affected your life afterward. Does it affect the way you think about our troops coming back from the wars today?

[00:17:22.70] JEFFREY LEVINE: Well, I'm glad they're treated the way they are when they come-- when they return. It's the way that one should be.

[00:17:31.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, exactly. You bear any bitterness that you weren't given similar treatment when you came back or when your brothers came back?

[00:17:45.60] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yeah. Yes, I'm angry about that. My only problem was at the veterans hospital, It was predominantly World War II veterans at the time that were there.

[00:18:02.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:03.72] JEFFREY LEVINE: And they wouldn't-- they refused to recognize Vietnam as being a war. It didn't count to them.

[00:18:14.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, crazy.

[00:18:16.47] JEFFREY LEVINE: And that would get me upset.

[00:18:18.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. I would think. What do you think the Vietnam War meant to you and your generation?

[00:18:29.77] JEFFREY LEVINE: I don't know what it meant, but the result was we became forgotten. We're going to forget an entire generation of American Soldiers. Four or five years ago my nephew was in high school and he asked me if I could field some questions about Vietnam when they covered it in history. I said I'd do what I could and refer them what I didn't know. He said OK. They covered the entire Vietnam era in less than a 50 minute class.

[00:19:09.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. This much on the textbook, I think. If that.

[00:19:16.22] JEFFREY LEVINE: Well, the teacher was born after the entire era so she had no reference.

[00:19:22.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Right. How do you think that war is remembered in our society today? Or is it?

[00:19:33.68] JEFFREY LEVINE: I don't think many people remember it. Those civilians that do, see it as a mistake. That's why there is so little regard for Vietnam veterans.

[00:19:57.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Are there lessons you took from the experience that you would like to pass on to future generations?

[00:20:07.13] JEFFREY LEVINE: I learned everything from the Marines I served with. Loyalty, trust, courage, integrity, being responsible for your actions. I learned that from watching and listening to the Marines and--

[00:20:34.95] JOE GALLOWAY: And you found someone who's willing to die for you.

[00:20:38.25] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes. And--

[00:20:41.52] JOE GALLOWAY: And vice versa.

[00:20:43.44] JEFFREY LEVINE: Actually it was the other way around. It's humbling knowing somebody who's willing to do that for me.

[00:20:57.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Did you ever find the guy who patched you up, dragged you off that battlefield?

[00:21:05.82] JEFFREY LEVINE: No. But at the first Echo Company reunion, men would come over to me and-- Daphne's here, Daphne's here, Daphne's here. And I'm wondering, I never knew a girl named Daphne. Talk that much, who the hell is Daphne? You know-- Daphne-- the guy you took care of. I don't know. I never asked anybody their name. But he was the last guy. At the buffet he was standing in the room-- in the other-- the men partied and we were just standing there and--

[00:21:59.84] JOE GALLOWAY: He's the first guy or the second guy?

[00:22:01.88] JEFFREY LEVINE: No, he was the guy I was working on when I was wounded. And he thought I'd died. I tried getting in touch with a couple of the corpsmen that were in the company at the time. They don't want to have anything to do with-- they don't want to remember their experience. And then fine I respect it. Well, I thank them for what they did.

[00:22:42.11] JEFFREY LEVINE: It's a sanctuary. I think it's a sacred place for the Vietnam veterans. It's a place where we can all come together and you don't need to talk. You just hold hands and cry. JEFFREY LEVINE: I really don't give it much thought. I don't think it has a whole lot. It's nice, but it's like an afterthought. I know it's 50 years and it should be an anniversary, but it's really not a celebrating anniversary. Because we were never celebrated.

[00:23:41.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you received your Vietnam veteran lapel pin?

[00:23:45.04] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes.

[00:23:45.67] JOE GALLOWAY: You have?

[00:23:46.19] JEFFREY LEVINE: Yes. I received it when I went to a reunion in Houston. They made a big deal about it. They had Vietnamese women, dressed in their Vietnam garb, pinning on the pins in the lapel. I would have preferred somebody from the American military doing it.

[00:24:11.68] [CHUCKLES]

[00:24:15.22] Thank you. Jeff.