

Mathieson, Gordon USAF

[00:00:14.45] GORDON MATHIESON: I was born in North Quincy, Massachusetts, which is about six or seven miles just south of Boston.

[00:00:23.12] JOE GALLOWAY: And when?

[00:00:27.98] GORDON MATHIESON: Oh, 1944. December of 1944.

[00:00:30.95] JOE GALLOWAY: All right. And did you grow up in that town, go to school there?

[00:00:35.42] GORDON MATHIESON: I did. I went right up through high school there and-- in the North Quincy, Quincy area.

[00:00:42.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, I know Quincy well.

[00:00:44.33] GORDON MATHIESON: Oh, good.

[00:00:45.53] JOE GALLOWAY: They've got a great Vietnam memorial there.

[00:00:47.75] GORDON MATHIESON: They do.

[00:00:48.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were your family members?

[00:00:50.33] GORDON MATHIESON: Well, of course, my mom and dad, and then I had two older sisters. Joan was six years older than me, and Arlene was about ten years older than me. Both have passed since then, but that's who I grew up with.

[00:01:04.92] JOE GALLOWAY: What did your dad do?

[00:01:06.29] GORDON MATHIESON: He worked at the Quincy Shipyard most of his career. He was a steelworker there and building those boats, all different types of boats. And then another career he had was he was also a salesman.

[00:01:25.22] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you come to enter the Air Force?

[00:01:28.70] GORDON MATHIESON: Well, it's a funny story. I knew I wasn't going to be able to afford going to college, so I decided to go and get my military obligation out of the way and then go to college later on after I had some savings. So I actually enlisted at the age of 17. In those days, you had to get your parent's signature and all that.

[00:01:53.90] JOE GALLOWAY: This was what year?

[00:01:55.04] GORDON MATHIESON: This was 1962.

[00:01:56.99] JOE GALLOWAY: '62.

[00:01:58.40] GORDON MATHIESON: Yeah, yeah. And so I enlisted in the Air Force.

[00:02:02.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Signed up for three or four?

[00:02:04.64] GORDON MATHIESON: I signed up for four years, and I did the four years and was discharged when I was 21. So I had all my military obligation done. GORDON MATHIESON: The irony of that whole story is when I get into boot camp and I took a barrage of tests like most recruits do, they found out I had an affinity for foreign languages. And I said, yeah, I love Latin. I love Spanish.

[00:02:31.85] And lo and behold, they had me scheduled to go to a Russian school for the Air Force in Syracuse University, way up in upstate New York. And what happened was I got very ill from an infection from drinking out of a canteen during the maneuvers and all that that we had. And it was infected. And I was in the hospital for two months. This is at San Antonio, Texas at Lackland where most all Air Force recruits go.

[00:03:01.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, the basic training. Yeah.

[00:03:02.27] GORDON MATHIESON: Yeah, exactly. And so I lost out on the opportunity to go to Syracuse University and-- very disappointed. But as I was waiting around to get some other orders of becoming whatever-- I had no idea what they had plans for me-- they said, hey, we have another language school coming down and it's Yale University, and we'd like to know if you want to try out for the Chinese language program. And I said, sure.

[00:03:31.58] Well, to make a long, long story short through many recruits that were trying out for that, they whittled us down to 30. And I think it was 25 went to Chinese language and five went to Korean. And it was a close to a year long program. I think it was ten months. It was ten months. And so my first assignment was going to college, which is the reason why I joined the Air Force, to put it on the back burner.

[00:04:02.81] JOE GALLOWAY: They sent you to Yale?

[00:04:04.43] GORDON MATHIESON: I went to Yale, New Haven, Connecticut, of course. And it was a very high stress academic environment. We had to go to classes 30 hours a week, just pure Chinese and ten hours of lab each week. So that was the downside. The plus side was, I met my girlfriend there who became my wife, and now of 52 years. So a lot of good things happened in New Haven, Connecticut. But it was quite an experience. I met a lot of nice fellows.

[00:04:41.24] JOE GALLOWAY: So you got almost a year at Yale at the beginning of your career?

[00:04:47.24] GORDON MATHIESON: That's right. That's right.

[00:04:48.53] JOE GALLOWAY: What did the Air Force do with you when you finished your Chinese course?

[00:04:53.90] GORDON MATHIESON: Well, from there I went to what is sometimes called intelligence school, because obviously they were spending all this money on us. They spent a lot of money on us getting a top secret clearance. And we were apprised of what was happening. And so we went to another Air Force base in San Angelo, Texas, Goodfellow Air Force Base in the southwestern part of the state.

[00:05:18.33] And that was about a three to four-month tour there, again very intensive training on intelligence. And that's where I took the Chinese language and applied it to aviation terminology. And so you can kind of guess what we're going to be heading towards. We sort of knew it, but then we got all the details of it. We were trained as intelligence workers and knew all the ins and outs of the intelligence world.

[00:05:48.92] So that was exciting and yet very intensive. And then we got our orders. And some of the fellows went to Okinawa, Japan. And the place where I wanted to go was Taiwan because they speak Mandarin there. And so I was all excited. I love the language. And now I was going to actually speak it with the people.

[00:06:21.33] GORDON MATHIESON: We left in the spring of '64. We went via Hawaii and so on and so forth, Guam. And then we made it to Taipei, Taiwan, which is the capital of Taiwan. What a revelation that was. My first real foreign country at a very young age. I now was 18 years old heading towards 19. And it was exciting for me to be a young man in a foreign country and able to speak the language, which was key. And so we were up in a very, very high elevation in the mountains, beautiful, beautiful area surrounded by terraced farming of rice paddies. It was just gorgeous.

[00:07:09.87] JOE GALLOWAY: What was the name of the town?

[00:07:11.64] GORDON MATHIESON: It was Shu Lin Kou.

[00:07:16.59] JOE GALLOWAY: For a minute there, I thought they were going to send you to Beitou.

[00:07:21.09] GORDON MATHIESON: No, no, Beitou. I've heard of that. Beitou, yeah. I know about Beitou. No, we went to Shu Lin Kou. And I stayed there for I guess from April until I shipped out to Vietnam in November. What happened there was my NCO came over to me one night during a work shift and he said, hey, we got some-- a hot request and we need a couple of translators down in Vietnam right away.

[00:07:54.24] And they said, would you like to go? They said, you know, you're a talented translator and so on and so forth. And I said, sure. I'd love to go. I'll do my duty wherever you want to send me. And he says, well, it's going to be Da Nang. And I didn't know anything about Da Nang.

[00:08:11.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Before you go off to Vietnam, tell us what you were doing in this assignment in Taiwan.

[00:08:20.70] GORDON MATHIESON: I can tell you now. I couldn't tell you at the time. I couldn't tell you for seven years after I got out of the Air Force. And my wife never knew what I did even though she was with me a lot of the time in New Haven. Yes, we listened in to Chinese pilots.

[00:08:42.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Radio intercept?

[00:08:43.59] GORDON MATHIESON: Radio intercept, exactly. And we would transcribe what the pilots and the ground controller were saying. And we would do it word for word. And if we missed a word, we were taping at the same time. We had a foot pedal, and we taped, mag tape. And so that's what we did, exciting job because we listened in to transport planes, Chinese bombers, and Chinese fighting planes.

[00:09:12.25] So we had all different frequencies and we were trained on all of them, and it was exciting. And then our tapes went to what they call the T-House, the Transcribing House and they got cleaned up before they went to the Pentagon, NSA, and other places.

[00:09:34.04] GORDON MATHIESON: Took off from Taiwan, took a commercial flight, they had a commercial flight. I believe it was Continental Airways. I'm not sure on that. But we were in our fatigues. We were the only two men in fatigues, my buddy and myself. And we went to Tan Son Nhut in Saigon. And there they said, it's up to you.

[00:09:57.29] You're going to hear a theme here, think of the time now, it's 1964, and it's the real beginning of what's happening in Southeast Asia and, of course, Vietnam. So there weren't any rules books or anything to go by. You were basically on your own. And we knew that. We knew that going in. They assigned us an M1 rifle, even though neither one of us were combat trained, but we had an M1 rifle that we brought on a commercial airline with us, and much to the chagrin of the stewardesses.

[00:10:35.90] JOE GALLOWAY: They put them up in the--

[00:10:36.80] GORDON MATHIESON: They put it up in the overhead cabin. And as soon as we--

[00:10:41.81] JOE GALLOWAY: And ammo?

[00:10:43.58] GORDON MATHIESON: No, no ammo. No, no ammo. We had clips, but we put those in a separate area. So the clips were separate. So what happened there is we landed in Saigon and the commercial pilot for Continental Airways, I believe, said to me, can you come here for a minute? I said, sure. He saw my fatigues and Air Force and all that. He goes, did you hear any gunfire when we were coming in?

[00:11:07.46] And I says, no, but I suspected you were afraid of that because he announced-- upon landing into Tan Son Nhut he said, just hold on. He said, this is how we land, straight down. And he said, don't be afraid. And he says, everything's going to be all right. And it was. But when we landed and we had to walk over to the "terminal" there, he said, do you see any bullet holes in the fuselage? So he said, will you walk with me? And so we're both walking and he said, what's that up there? And it was like behind the cockpit, and it was two holes.

[00:11:46.84] And he said, I didn't have those when I left Taiwan. And I said, well, you've got them now. He said, I thought I heard something. And he says, I thought I actually felt something. So that was my first 30 minutes in Vietnam. And the rest was-- oh, by the way this was a TDY or Temporary Duty Assignment as was most of the assignments for Air Force people at that time. And I can get into that a little bit later. So everybody should know, I think the original assignment was for 60 days, but it went a lot longer than 60 days.

[00:12:23.98] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do when you got to Saigon?

[00:12:27.10] GORDON MATHIESON: In Saigon, all I did was wait, wait for a hop to go to Da Nang. So I was only there about five or seven days. And an NCO came by and said, hey, Airman, we've got a flight to Da Nang. And I said, great, because you want to get settled. Plus I was supposed to be relieving some other fellows, and I didn't want to delay their exiting Vietnam. Turns out they left anyways because-- they just left.

[00:12:57.76] There's another story there, but the fellow that I was relieving went back to Taiwan where he originally came from. We were shuttling men back and forth in the early '60s. And I think the other branches did that as well. But in any case, so I landed there and we got a hop-- it wasn't an American plane. It was an Australian plane. And the Australians were flying a group of paratroopers from Saigon up to Da Nang. And so we were the only two Americans on the airplane.

[00:13:33.71] JOE GALLOWAY: What kind of airplane? Do you remember?

[00:13:34.36] GORDON MATHIESON: Yeah, I do. It was a Canberra, which is their airline manufacturer. They were just getting into that. It was called the Caribou. And it had the big back that flopped down and so on and so forth. I'm going to get to that too.

[00:13:48.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Twin engine.

[00:13:48.73] GORDON MATHIESON: Twin engine. Yeah, and very, very expansive wings. The wingspan on that went on forever. But in any case, they were really good. There was a pilot and a co-pilot. And probably midway to Da Nang, and that's a long flight by the way, a co-pilot came back and he said to me, can you follow me? And I said, sure. He says, bring your rifle. I carried my rifle then. And he said, I'm going to put the back down. So he puts the back down, the loading ramp. And I said, what are we doing?

[00:14:27.85] JOE GALLOWAY: You're in the air?

[00:14:28.81] GORDON MATHIESON: Oh yeah, oh yeah, we're in the air. And I'm in Vietnam, maybe-- well, up in the air an hour or so, maybe two hours. In any case, he said, I'm looking for an unidentified aircraft. We think it could be the enemy. And I said, oh OK. So he had a machine gun, and I had an M1, which is not a machine gun. And so he said, just keep your rifle out there and get ready in case we have to do something.

[00:14:59.45] And I says, I don't see anything. All I see is clouds. And he said, well, look in the middle of that cloud over there and do you see, it looks like a dot? And I said, yeah, it looks like a dot. And he said, well, we have to wait and see if it gets any closer and if it does, we'll get an identity. So he says, but just keep your weapon at the ready. A very nice Australian fellow, very nice.

[00:15:23.23] He had the better gun. I was jealous. But, in any case, the plane did get closer and closer. The dot got larger and larger as it came closer to us. And then all of a sudden the pilot spoke to him on his helmet. I didn't have a helmet. And he said, it's OK. It's a US aircraft. I think it was a C-123. You might know a C-123. They called them the farmer's plane or something like that. The ranch plane, I think. So we were relieved of that, I was, so were the 22 or so paratroopers.

[00:16:01.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Maybe the Ranch Hand?

[00:16:03.16] GORDON MATHIESON: Ranch Hand, that's what it was.

[00:16:04.68] JOE GALLOWAY: That was the-- spraying Agent Orange.

[00:16:06.94] GORDON MATHIESON: That's right. And we'll get into Agent Orange because I was involved with that too. So, in any case, that was good. That was a relief. All the paratroopers were like this, the Vietnamese, South Vietnamese. And we relieved them and said, OK, everything's going to be fine, but they didn't understand English and I couldn't speak Vietnamese. It was a handicap, in any case.

[00:16:29.32] But to make a long story short, we landed at Da Nang. And they let us off at one area of the airport. And we had a long way to where we had to go to check in. And as we were walking along, and I was just renewing this story with my wife last night, is I hear this pop, pop, pop. Now I don't know warfare at all. We were not combat trained.

[00:16:53.45] And so I said to my buddy, I said, it sounds like somebody is building a house. You can hear the carpenters just hitting those nails. He looks at me and he goes, no, there's nobody building houses here. And I says, yeah, you're probably right. And then the next thing we hear is zing, zing and rounds are going off the ground, dirt. It was dirt, but it would hit rocks and stuff like that-- very scared, and ran.

[00:17:18.71] We didn't even know where to run, so we ran towards the terminal that we knew was in that direction, jumped into a bungee ditch. And then finally we just scooted along the bungee ditch until we could get to safety. And then we finally meandered into the terminal. So that was my first day in Vietnam.

[00:17:43.54] GORDON MATHIESON: The work was the same. However, obviously, there's no buildings, there's no compounds or anything like that. And what they had-- well, first of all, there's a place called Monkey Mountain, which you've probably heard of, and they thought I was going to be assigned there. So I went up to Monkey Mountain and that was an interesting day as well. That was the very next day.

[00:18:03.31] Let me go back. The first night in Vietnam, I was dog tired. I fell asleep, put the mosquito net down and the next thing I woke up and it was daylight. And I said, oh boy. Everybody was running around like crazy. And I said, what's the problem? They said, Mathieson, you slept all last night. And I said, yeah, I was tired. They said, they strafed our barracks.

[00:18:27.76] I said, I didn't even know. And he says, you didn't even hear it. So then they showed me the rounds that were in the-- it was wooden columns. It was an old barracks. There was holes in the sides. I don't even know what kind of construction it was. You could see outside of it. That's how poorly, maybe it was too old, I don't know, but it was not good.

[00:18:48.97] But they did show me the rounds and I said, oh boy. So then they gave me a side weapon, a .45. And that I carried with me all the time. And they said, keep this under your pillow every night. And I did. I did. So it makes for a hard pillow, by the way, because those pillows are about that thick.

[00:19:08.77] But in any case, I was mustering in and where they showed me where I was going to be permanently wasn't going to be Monkey Mountain, but they wanted me to know where it was and what they did up there. They had translators up there. I didn't know any of them. I think one was Chinese and one was Vietnamese language translators. And so they took me down to-- and my buddy as well, don't forget there was another person with me-- they took us to a clearing not far from the Air Force base. In fact, not far I found out much, much later to where they stored the Agent Orange.

[00:19:52.84] And so we went out there and there was a series of military vans that they had somehow fused together in different ways. And I thought there was only four or five. I found out later there was, maybe they added some, but I was talking to a fellow that was there after me and he said, we had eight, so they might have added on. But they were all connected. So you could go from one van to the other. And they had our gear set up on the side. And the very next day, we were assigned to start working there, doing the same thing we did in Taiwan, listening for Chinese pilots.

[00:20:34.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Where do they have living?

[00:20:36.40] GORDON MATHIESON: It was in that barracks. I never moved from that barracks. In Saigon, we lived in a big tent. There must have been 40 or 50 of us in there because it was like a transient tent. We stayed there for almost a week. But up there, we had this barracks that I stayed there for the duration.

[00:20:55.75] JOE GALLOWAY: Sounds like an old French army barracks?

[00:20:58.51] GORDON MATHIESON: You're probably right. I never asked. It was funny, and I'll tell you why. It was set down so when you walked into the barracks, you actually step down into it. And it had a cement floor to it. The showers were cement, all crumbling and all that, but they were using them.

[00:21:17.86] JOE GALLOWAY: But it was below ground a certain level to protect you from the mortars.

[00:21:23.74] GORDON MATHIESON: And I thought about that later and I said, that's probably why all the bullet rounds were high because we were down lower. And I'm talking a good foot and a half or so. And they thought they were shooting right at our beds, but our beds were lower than that. But in any case--

[00:21:43.67] So I went to work. And what we did, what we had to do was split the 24 hours because you always have to have 24-hour coverage in case aircraft come in at 3 o'clock in the morning--

[00:21:55.69] JOE GALLOWAY: So you we were doing 12 on, 12 off.

[00:21:57.36] GORDON MATHIESON: 12 on, 12 off for every single day I was there. I never had a day off. So my buddy said, do you mind if I take the day shift? And I said, we're not going to be here that long. So I said, go ahead. You take the day shift and I'll take the night shift. So my hours were, let's see, 1900, 7 o'clock at night till 7:00 in the morning.

[00:22:27.82] And we got shuttled by a little short Air Force bus. You've seen them. They're still around. And they would pick guys up at different points on the base. And I'd go to work. And I'd be in the van for the 12 hours at nighttime, which as anybody would know, there's not a lot of activity at nighttime, especially in the '60s, especially from a third-world country. But in any case, that was my assignment. And that's what I did there.

[00:23:04.16] GORDON MATHIESON: Mostly we were just military men. On most days, we weren't allowed to go off the base. Then some days they'd say, OK, you can go off base and off base meant be going downtown to Da Nang. I was in a barracks with only a small percentage of Americans. There was a mix of-- well, there were Australians in there. There was a lot of Australians. It was a transient barracks that became a permanent barracks for some of us. Now, because we were a TDY, that's why I think they considered us transients.

[00:23:38.80] So I would say-- with a lot of Australians and a lot of Americans I got to know more at work. But I got to tell you, and this is important, I think, for people to know-- since we were all transients, TDY, I'd be at the bench if, you will, listening in and there'd be someone to my right and someone to my left. And one would be a Morse code intercept operator. We called them ditty boppers, affectionately. They were 292s, that was their MOS. And we had cryptographers.

[00:24:13.45] We worked as a team, a language translator, a Morse code operator, and a cryptographer. The cryptographer was-- his or her job, well, his job at the time-- was to decrypt

whatever the codes were for the frequencies of the day. So they would tell us what they thought the frequencies were going to be, and they were spot on most of the time. If there was any communication, it would be on those channels that we talked. We would spin the wheel constantly. But if we got a hit on one of those, we would listen in intently. And we were trained on how to listen in on that stuff.

[00:24:51.89] So my point in this question is, we didn't get to know each other that well. Even though we were shoulder to shoulder, we could get up and walk around and go to another workstation somewhere else, we weren't locked into those ones, it wasn't permanent, people were coming and going all the time. I'll give you a good example.

[00:25:13.74] There was one fellow I met who was a Vietnamese translator and I said, where did you do your training? And he says, I got it at Fort Meade, at NSA headquarters. And he said, it was a year. And we started talking, and we became good friends. And-- maybe for about a week or so-- and then the next day I go to work and he doesn't show up. And he's been reassigned somewhere else.

[00:25:40.71] This is a commentary on my part. It was not a well organized entrance into that war. When you hear the thing today about, what's the exit strategy? I used to laugh because I'm saying everybody says what's the exit strategy in any war, in particular Vietnam. There wasn't even an entrance strategy.

[00:26:03.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Not a very good one anyway.

[00:26:05.90] GORDON MATHIESON: Not at all. It was seat of the pants every single day.

[00:26:08.85] JOE GALLOWAY: Now we're talking now still '64, early '65.

[00:26:13.88] GORDON MATHIESON: Yeah. I landed right after Thanksgiving in '64, and I was there through the early part of '65.

[00:26:28.34] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were working seven days a week, so you had no recreation time except your sleep time?

[00:26:35.12] GORDON MATHIESON: And that went like this. I'd get off the bus. I'd get to the barracks about 7:30. Sometimes you could get a little coffee at a small chow hall that we had. That wasn't very predictable and even the opening times was kind of crazy back then because they weren't fully staffed. They weren't fully stocked.

[00:26:55.79] The joke was that Christmas time Anheuser-Busch had donated planeloads of Budweiser beer for all the fellows in Vietnam. And even the trash cans were brand new galvanized trash cans. And on Christmas Day, I says, I'm going to have a beer. And they said, oh the turkey dinner and the whole nine yards.

[00:27:18.36] And I got all excited and went into the chow hall before I had to go to work that night. And I saw all the trash cans, but there was no turkey. And the only thing in the chow hall

was make-believe mashed potatoes, the instant ones, or whatever they called it, and some peas. And so we had peas and mashed potato and all the beer you could drink.

[00:27:43.76] JOE GALLOWAY: All the beer you could drink.

[00:27:45.02] GORDON MATHIESON: On New Year's day, a plane load comes in loaded with turkeys. But it was all good.

[00:27:54.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Welcome to the war.

[00:27:55.52] GORDON MATHIESON: Yeah, exactly, exactly. And we always had C-rations, which I didn't like. And they gave us the little opener to open those things, but I had difficulty with that.

[00:28:06.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, I think you just covered the describe any memorable holidays during your tour.

[00:28:13.35] GORDON MATHIESON: Yeah, there was that. Well, Thanksgiving I had in Taiwan. Then there was my birthday on the 18th, Christmas on the 25th, New Year's, and I was there through, I believe, Valentine's Day, which wouldn't mean a thing to anybody at that time.

[00:28:31.50] JOE GALLOWAY: All right. So how long was this temporary tour?

[00:28:36.06] GORDON MATHIESON: It went on for-- it wasn't too bad beyond the 60 days, closer to 90 days. I don't know the exact dates right off the--

[00:28:44.43] JOE GALLOWAY: And then back to Taiwan?

[00:28:45.78] GORDON MATHIESON: And then back to Taiwan, yeah. And I felt like-- I just got to tell you, I was so thankful to be out of Vietnam. We got attacked one night. I don't really talk too much about it, but for years I never told my wife, and all of a sudden the 202, the cryptographer says, hey, we've got to get out of here right away and we're going to put lights out right away. And I said, what's going on?

[00:29:13.61] He says, there's small arms fire right outside our compound. And all we had was sandbags that ringed the whole area. They were about five feet tall, and they were pretty thick too. But I didn't even know what small arms fire was. So he says, everybody out Now at the time, there was only about six or eight people on my shift. It was a very small shift, people coming and going all the time.

[00:29:42.68] And he handed us, they didn't call it an AR-15 back then, it was an M16. They handed us an M16, and with clips taped together, and a helmet that literally came down and covered my eyes. And they said, get out, but don't shoot until you get the thing. I said, where's the safety on this gun? Where is it? He goes, you'll find it, you'll find it, and that's how the six of us went out there, scared, nervous, confused. The lights went out. We had stadium lights

beaming down on our vans. They should have been beaming out. But nonetheless, that was another tactical error.

[00:30:26.49] In any case, we could hear the gunfire. We could see the gunfire, and it wasn't that far away, but we weren't told to fire arms. I figured out where the safety was finally. It was an awful, awful time. None of us had been combat trained, none of us, and yet here we were in combat.

[00:30:49.38] And then we got the OK signal about maybe a half hour later or 45 minutes later that we could come back in. What had happened was, and I didn't even know this at the time, there was a contingency of Marines that actually protected that area. And when the word came-- in fact they were the ones that dialed in and said, we got some problems. So they went out and they flushed them out, was the term. They said they flushed them out. They're gone.

[00:31:16.07] They were always Viet Cong. They were always the black pajama-- because we had our own prison camp there, and we could see them the next day. And there was a lot of them there. And I thank God for that night because if it wasn't for the Marines, I wouldn't be here talking to you today. I'm sure of it.

[00:31:35.20] Oh, there's a footnote to that. I was an angry young man that time, and so I yelled at-- there was an NCO that came by every now and then from headquarters, wherever that was I never know, and I gave him my heretofore because I said, we were attacked last night and none of us are combat trained. We need training on shooting, firing the M16. And he says, I got the message. And that was it. The very next day, we were all invited out there during the daylight hours to learn how to fire the M16. And that's what we did.

[00:32:12.49] The second thing I asked for, and this is a personal thing with me, I asked for some defoliant to be sprayed around the compound. I didn't know what it was. I had no idea. I said, we can't see out there. They're going to come back at us. I said, you've got to do something. I said, we couldn't see anything. It was dark at night, and we couldn't see through the trees. And they said, you'll have it. Two days later, the Agent Orange sprayed all around there. But we didn't know. We didn't know.

[00:32:56.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Could you describe for us the quality of the leadership in your outfit as high as you could see it.

[00:33:05.44] GORDON MATHIESON: In Vietnam, there was none.

[00:33:08.20] JOE GALLOWAY: None? Taiwan?

[00:33:10.58] GORDON MATHIESON: Taiwan there was. We had an NCO. There was our shift supervisor, and then we had a CO, Commanding Officer. Even though it was a small air station, it was pretty well organized, pretty well organized. Vietnam was just-- you were on your own every single day. When I heard the Russians--

[00:33:28.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Your captain and your NCO were competent mostly?

[00:33:34.06] GORDON MATHIESON: Well, the NCO was. I think he knew Chinese, if not he knew Russian, but he knew how the radios worked and the procedures, the policies and all that. The captain, no, not at all, not at all. There was a lieutenant there also, a nice guy, very smart guy but he just didn't really get it. And we didn't talk much to him. But he knew what we did. The concept was pretty simple.

[00:34:01.06] When I heard the Russians in Vietnam, I said, who do I tell? And they said, well, we'll get the message. We've heard this before from other guys that they're hearing Russian aircraft. I said, I'm getting them. I'm not getting any Chinese. I did not ever, ever hear a Chinese pilot while I was in Vietnam, Russian lots. I said, well, I hope--

[00:34:23.08] GALLOWAY: They should have fed you some of the ground stuff because we were getting Chinese guys.

[00:34:29.44] GORDON MATHIESON: Was it Chinese or Vietnamese?

[00:34:31.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Chinese.

[00:34:31.99] GORDON MATHIESON: Really? Interesting.

[00:34:33.44] JOE GALLOWAY: They had advisers with the North Vietnamese Army units.

[00:34:37.80] GORDON MATHIESON: OK, yeah, yeah.

[00:34:39.52] JOE GALLOWAY: And when we reported it back to Washington, Lyndon Johnson went berserk and said he would court martial anyone who said anything about Russians or Chinese.

[00:34:54.28] GORDON MATHIESON: And that's exactly the story I heard too. And I said, are those tapes actually-- that I taped-- Russian pilots coming in? They were bringing in all kinds of anti-aircraft artillery. They were bringing in--

[00:35:07.39] JOE GALLOWAY: SAM missiles.

[00:35:08.53] GORDON MATHIESON: Everything, SAM missiles, and the rifles were better than ours. And that's what they were carrying in. Now we all know the story now that they spent almost every dollar they had on that war, but at the time, I didn't know it. And then I started getting stories about some of the fatalities of the Viet Cong were left on the ground and they found these-- I think they were AK-47's or some facsimile to that, Russian-made weapons. So they were supplying even the VC with Russian armament.

[00:35:52.04] GORDON MATHIESON: I think advanced communication was coming along, a little bit trailing the need for it. The need was there because there was literally no communication of anything. We didn't know what was going on. It was kind of bizarre. With our radios, we could pick up some public airwaves. And one night a fellow said, hey, the president is speaking.

And we could pick it up out of-- I think it was Hawaii. Or it might have been the Philippines. I'm not sure.

[00:36:27.32] And it was Lyndon Johnson giving a speech. And his speech was we're doing well in Vietnam. It's going to be not that big of a deal. But he said, we are not bombing Laos. And yet every night at 20:00 hours, we had Operation BARREL ROLL-- and that's been disclosed, it's not classified anymore-- where the F-105 fighter bombers, the Thunder Chiefs, they called it, would take off. And they would leave Da Nang. And they would go right over our heads and shake the vans we were in and they were bombing Laos, obviously, the supply routes. Now they were killing a lot of innocent Laotians, and that was the political sadness to that whole story.

[00:37:20.49] But so I'm listening to the president of the United States tell us one thing and here I am live on the ground and it's just the opposite of what he was saying. And there's a whole commentary to that I don't want to go into right now. But that's something that I always brought back with me.

[00:37:43.32] JOE GALLOWAY: You rotate back into Vietnam again?

[00:37:47.31] GORDON MATHIESON: I did not. I went back--

[00:37:48.61] JOE GALLOWAY: You did not? You went back to Taiwan?

[00:37:50.76] GORDON MATHIESON: I went back to Taiwan and I literally, and I'm not a very demonstrable person, but I kissed the tarmac when I get into that air place, that airport. I was so happy to be away from that country for a lot of different reasons. Even the smells of Vietnam are so unique. They're different than Taiwan.

[00:38:12.43] And so I was so thankful, and I even wrote a letter to my girlfriend at the time saying I'm starting to feel like I'm a human being again because of all the things that went on there. I don't want to go into them.

[00:38:24.15] JOE GALLOWAY: How long more did you stay in Taiwan on that tour?

[00:38:28.86] GORDON MATHIESON: Let's see? That's a good question. I think it was in the fall. I can't tell you exactly when, but it was in the fall. And because I had a top secret clearance, I got assigned to spy-in-the-sky satellites and the base that I chose. I didn't even know such a place was there, nor did the other people stationed there. It was in a hidden compound. And what we did was, satellites would orbit-- they were doing Southeast Asia, of course, and they needed somebody--

[00:39:04.77] JOE GALLOWAY: This is all in Taiwan?

[00:39:06.21] GORDON MATHIESON: No, we were back at Westover Air Force Base, after I left--

[00:39:09.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh yeah, after you left.

[00:39:09.87] GORDON MATHIESON: This is after I left Taiwan. And it was an exciting job because we would launch the satellites at Vandenberg Air Force Base out in California, and I'd be part of that dialogue. And then we'd get a date as to when the capsule would come down off the coast of Virginia. And then we had Operation SNATCH, and that's where the helicopter goes out and snatches the capsule with the film in it, brings it over to Langley Air Force Base, and then a C-124 or whatever would pick it up and fly the whole thing up to Westover.

[00:39:46.08] And I would go out and meet them-- And we had passwords and all that-- and get the film into the compound. And that's when we had about 30 men that did film developing. And they would work around the clock developing this spy-in-the-sky satellite film, very wide-- I don't know what the size was-- very wide millimeter. I don't know what size it was. And then they would dupe it for the Pentagon, for NSA, and so on and so forth. And then we would ship it out as fast as we got it. It was a very intense period to get that film developed, analyzed, and sent down to NSA and all that.

[00:40:25.45] JOE GALLOWAY: But if you look at that, that's awfully low tech.

[00:40:28.53] GORDON MATHIESON: Very low tech. At the time though, the quality of the film, even though it was black and white only, it was superior because I would look at some film, we'd test it, we pull it out look at it, make sure it looked OK, we could see the veins of the leaves, on the jungle leaves. But the one that I liked was we had a big poster on--

[00:40:53.94] we were in a double chamber place. I won't go into all that. But it was a very secure place. And we had a picture of a football game. And when I first got there I said to the boss I said, what is that? And he goes, he said, that's the picture that convinced the secretary of the Air Force that spy-in-the-sky satellite is better than aircraft. And I said, how? And he said, look at the football. And you could look at the football and you could see the thumbnails of the center of the Minnesota Vikings.

[00:41:24.81] And he said, well, we showed him that from hundreds of miles, or whatever it was, miles up in the air, we convinced him that that's the quality that he's going to always get from a satellite. And it was an interesting time. It really was.

[00:41:46.78] GORDON MATHIESON: Well, it had to be that night that we were under attack. That tries men's souls. Even though we're all young men, I can remember the fellow next to me, he was a 292, a little short guy. And he was crying. And he wet his pants. We all sensed we might die there. We all did. And it was sad. It was sad for me to experience that as an American, a young American man. But it did happen, and it probably happened in 1,000 other areas too.

[00:42:26.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Probably going to get on a plane to leave.

[00:42:28.52] GORDON MATHIESON: That's it. That's really it. It's a sad commentary. Like I said, they never had an entrance strategy.

[00:42:42.44] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact did you have with your family back home?

[00:42:47.42] GORDON MATHIESON: The only person I did was my girlfriend. I made the decision not to tell my family until I was back in Taiwan because of the unpredictability of what was going on. But my wife, my wife now, Anne, she knew. As a matter of fact, I was there for Christmas and she sent me a Christmas gift and it got there.

[00:43:11.34] JOE GALLOWAY: It got there?

[00:43:11.69] GORDON MATHIESON: It got there. It was already open. They opened everything to make sure there wasn't any contraband or anything in there. But in any case, I got that sweater. I loved it for years, a nice sweater.

[00:43:28.55] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news, if any, were you getting?

[00:43:33.62] GORDON MATHIESON: We got Voice of America, and we got the armed forces had--

[00:43:38.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Armed Forces Radio.

[00:43:39.44] GORDON MATHIESON: --radio, yeah, I got that. But it was clear to me even back then that that was filtered information.

[00:43:45.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Stars and Stripes newspaper?

[00:43:47.33] GORDON MATHIESON: Stars and Stripes. We didn't get newspapers there. I had those in Taiwan. We never got anything. We had no idea. We had no idea what was going on. And no one ever spoke to us. I'll tell you a funny story. I was getting up one morning-- and new people were coming and going all the time in this transient barracks that we had.

[00:44:12.90] And one day I met this young fellow, an Army guy, because we had Army and Navy in there and Air Force, and of course a few Marines, but they were mostly out in the field. And he just was going off to work, and I was just coming home from work. So I'm ready to go to bed. And I look over to him, a young fellow. He's probably 18 years old, if he was that. I don't even know if he shaved yet, and a nice kid.

[00:44:39.32] And he opens up his locker. We had those tall lockers back then, metal. He opened it up and he reaches up, and I'm watching him. I think he's going to get a shaving kit or something like that. He gets a bottle of liquor. This is first thing in the morning before he goes to work. And he takes the bottle. And he takes a couple of swigs, puts the cap on and puts it back up there. And I felt sad. I felt really sad that this is what it does to a lot of people, a lot of young men, and women I suppose. But it just felt bad to me.

[00:45:15.15] So again, I told you I had a little bit of a temper in those days and I wasn't shy. So I spoke to, again, an administrative NCO or whatever, it might have been an officer. I said, we got to do something. I told them the story. He said, what are we going to do? And I says, well, why don't we have a library? And these guys can go to a library and read a book, get out of the

doldrums of the war, have a diversion. And so he said, that's not a bad idea. So he says, I'll let you know.

[00:45:45.66] So he called up, and I think it was Hickam Air Force Base, and about three or four days later an aircraft comes in and a lot of other stock and stuff was coming in with boxes and boxes of books. So I'm coming home from work 7:30, 8 o'clock in the morning. He goes, hey, Mathieson, your books are here. I said, what books? He said, you're going to put a library in that van over there. It was just a temporary library.

[00:46:15.42] But it's a funny story to that. I got to tell you this. So I said, I'm not going to tell these guys to do it. I'll get guys and I'll work with them. So we started putting books up. They said, what order? I says, I don't know. Let's go alphabetical by author. So we each had boxes and we put them up there and all this sort of stuff.

[00:46:34.06] And one little book I had put up earlier as I'm bending down, it falls on me. Now this is going to sound like a TV show or something, but it actually happened. It was a very thin book. And at this time I, like a lot of men, were sort of on the edge of depression because you don't know what's going to happen minute to minute and you don't know how long you're going to be there, and what kind of shape you're going to be in when you leave.

[00:47:01.81] There were a lot of caskets that were piled up every morning. And we had red ones, and green ones, and aluminum ones. The red ones were for the communists, the VC, for them to come get it. The green were for the ARVN troops, the South Vietnamese troops. And the aluminum ones were for the Americans to go back home. And every day I stayed there, they would get taller and taller, especially that aluminum one. And very scary because that's the first thing that you'd see in the morning when I was coming home from work.

[00:47:35.80] But in any case-- oh, that book. The book hit me on the head. So I go to pick it up. I look it up. I open it up, and I didn't know the title, but I noticed the author. And his name was Monsignor Gifford, Sacred Heart Church, North Quincy, Massachusetts. I used to be his altar boy. I tell that story because it is so unique. And I went to tell a fella next to me and I said, he's not going to know-- he doesn't even know who I am. So I just took the book, I looked at it, and I just put it back up.

[00:48:12.61] I used to serve this priest for maybe three or four years and now that book finds its way to this little library, makeshift library in Da Nang.

[00:48:22.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Falls on your head.

[00:48:23.82] GORDON MATHIESON: It fell on my head literally. It hit the tip of my cap. That's what happened.

[00:48:33.69] JOE GALLOWAY: When you finish up in Taiwan, you go back to--

[00:48:38.82] GORDON MATHIESON: Westover.

[00:48:39.45] JOE GALLOWAY: --U.S. assignment?

[00:48:40.44] GORDON MATHIESON: Yeah. And I was there for just about a year doing the spy-in-the-sky satellite production with my top secret clearance.

[00:48:51.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any problems readjusting to life in the U.S. after that foreign tour?

[00:48:57.67] GORDON MATHIESON: I'll tell you I did. Massachusetts was good. They gave us a \$300 bonus for serving there. And I was like, I think the guy at the post office said, I think you're the first or second guy that's ever asked for it. You really want it. I said, I need it. And so I got that check and cashed it right away. And then I moved to a boarding house in Connecticut because I knew I was going to get married a few months later down there. And I wanted to go back to school, college. And I wanted it to be inexpensive. So I went to Southern Connecticut State College.

[00:49:33.16] What happened there was I saw the attitude of the student body. I used to wear my fatigue jacket and my jeans and a button down shirt to school. And one day I went to the cafeteria, the Commons they called it. And I sat down with a cup of coffee and doing my homework because I was working full time and going to college full time. And I had to get all my homework done during the day or on weekends.

[00:50:03.34] So I'd be there and all the kids that were along the long table got up and left and I was left all alone. And I said, son of a gun, son of a gun. So it happened a second time, and I just stopped going to the Commons. Now the good news is, I had to take a required speech class. So I had a chance to get up at the podium and tell everybody in the class about Gordon Mathieson, Vietnam veteran, Air Force guy going to get married in a few months, and so on and so forth.

[00:50:42.65] And then the question and answer period. It was only like a five or six minute speech, but I hit a lot of points evidently because the questions were fantastic. They were asking a lot of questions like you're asking me right now. This was 1967 now. And once they heard me talk and the authenticity of it, they got to realize-- and I told them the good, the bad, and the ugly, most of it was ugly, but in any case--

[00:51:09.17] then all of a sudden when I went to the Commons about two weeks later, they actually came over to where I was. It was a phenomenon. It really was. And they wanted to have coffee with me and chat. But it did happen. I saw it firsthand.

[00:51:30.03] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today?

[00:51:35.76] GORDON MATHIESON: It's not. It's not, and I'll tell you why I know. A couple of years ago, I took on a high school substitute teacher job. And we were doing history and one of the days was the Vietnam War, excellent video. They even had photos or reels of Vietnam. This is probably symptomatic of every high school. And this was in Massachusetts. I'm back on Cape Cod at this time, my wife and I.

[00:52:05.28] And they had no interest in it at all. I said after we saw the video, I went there. I was there. Any questions you have, here's an opportunity. You've got a veteran right in front of you. And the bell rang and they all left. And they liked me as a teacher, but they just didn't have any interest in the war. I don't know if it was Vietnam or if it's any war though.

[00:52:34.73] GORDON MATHIESON: It's breathtaking. It's emotional. I stared at it. At first, I wanted to walk away from it. But then I was drawn to it, looking at the names of-- my wife and I. And in the back of my mind, I'm thinking these people think this was all Vietnamese people, but it was Russian money that killed these guys. If that wasn't in the formula, we would have been over-- I think that war could have been over within six months to a year. We had B-52's there, but they were getting shot down by Russian AAA.

[00:53:18.84] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard about the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War commemoration. You're part of it today?

[00:53:25.21] GORDON MATHIESON: Yeah. I feel good about that. I'm really honored that you included me in that.

[00:53:31.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Have you received your Vietnam Veteran lapel pin?

[00:53:36.72] GORDON MATHIESON: I got one from the town up in Cape Cod and then I had it always on my other hat that looked like this. And just about a year ago, I brought my grandson and my wife. We went to the-- where did we go? the New England Aquarium. And when I put my hat down in a very darkened area to look at some fish, the next thing it was gone.

[00:54:01.80] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, they got it.

[00:54:02.67] GORDON MATHIESON: Somebody got it. So somebody is wearing my honored lapel pin.

[00:54:07.56] JOE GALLOWAY: How about we give you a new one?

[00:54:09.48] GORDON MATHIESON: That'd be great. That'd be great.