

Munson, Don US Army

[00:00:13.43] DON MUNSON: Born Indianapolis, Indiana, 1938. My mother died at a very early age. My dad was in the-- he was a little bit too old to join during World War II, and served in the Red Cross. He was in the American Red Cross on the military side and deployed over to Europe, went throughout the African campaign with Patton and his Army. Came home, I think, in late '44-- so just before the war was over.

[00:00:48.17] MARK FRANKLIN: And what did he go on to do after the war?

[00:00:50.26] DON MUNSON: He was-- as soon as he graduated from college, he was a baseball player. He was actually recruited by the Saint Louis Cardinals. And before they had a chance to start the season, he'd already been traded to the Cincinnati Reds. And as I mentioned, he was a roommate of Dizzy Dean, back in the days of the old Gashouse Gang.

[00:01:10.09] MARK FRANKLIN: What was his full name?

[00:01:11.30] DON MUNSON: He was George William, also always known as Red Munson, because of flaming red hair, which I didn't inherit. But not only the gene for the red hair skipped a generation, but his baseball talent skipped a generation. I was a catcher in junior high and high school and college, but didn't have quite that same success.

[00:01:35.55] MARK FRANKLIN: Any brothers or sisters?

[00:01:36.73] DON MUNSON: I have an older brother and a younger sister. The older brother was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, where we were living at the time that I was born in Indianapolis. And I have a younger sister, who came two years after the war, and was born in Atlanta, Georgia.

[00:01:56.01] MARK FRANKLIN: Talk about your hometown. What was Cincinnati your hometown? Is that what you considered your hometown?

[00:01:59.28] DON MUNSON: Well, we grew up there for-- I hate to say, grew up. I was there for about three years, while he was overseas. And it was kind of a wonderful story that-- there were four ladies whose husbands were serving overseas. They were all the same age, all very close. Each had a child or two.

[00:02:16.80] And one of them had a mother who was a widow living down in-- what was it, Panama Beach, Florida? And she said, I've got this big five-bedroom house, why don't you girls come on down? So I spent most of the war on the beaches of Florida, loving every minute of it. And you know, I'm one of those people that was upset when the war was over, because we had to go back to Cincinnati. [LAUGHS]

[00:02:46.94] DON MUNSON: Graduated from high school in Biloxi, Mississippi. His military in the American Red Cross was just like active duty military. Every other year, we moved to a different base. So we were in Atlanta, Georgia for my early years, and then we moved to Mobile,

Alabama, then we moved to New Orleans, Louisiana-- finally, back to Biloxi, Mississippi, where I finished high school.

[00:03:09.41] After high school, I got a offer you couldn't refuse, to go to Tulane University. And that was my undergraduate college.

[00:03:20.86] MARK FRANKLIN: So were you able to finish college?

[00:03:22.40] DON MUNSON: I did. Finished the four years. Then it was-- again, I love to tell this story, that when I registered my freshman year, they looked at the card and said, we've got all your courses down here, but you forgot to put in ROTC. And I said, oh, no thank you. I'm not a career veteran. And they said, no, no, you don't understand, this time and age, it's mandatory.

[00:03:45.39] So I said, oh, OK. Well, you know, what are my options? And they said, well, we have all four programs-- Army, Navy, Air Force. If you go Navy, you could be a Marine.

[00:03:53.31] Oh good, I'll go Navy. And I did all their testing. And they said, I'm sorry to tell you this, but you're colorblind. And I said, oh, OK. Well, I'll just go join the Air Force, to heck with you guys. Went over and they said, well, if you're colorblind and didn't get in the Navy, you sure can't get in the Air Force. So I ended up in the Army and had no aspirations for a full career. But after about a couple of months, I realized this was what I was cut out to do.

[00:04:23.40] I loved the challenges. And yeah, went on, became a Distinguished Military Graduate, which gives you the regular Army commission-- allows you to choose your branch. I chose infantry, and the rest is history.

[00:04:38.05] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, why did you choose infantry?

[00:04:40.44] DON MUNSON: Square, if you're going to be in the Army, that's where you belong. I mean, everybody has a contribution to the service, and all of the other branches are certainly supportive and necessary. But infantry is where you do the fighting.

[00:04:54.48] MARK FRANKLIN: When did you graduate from Tulane?

[00:04:56.49] DON MUNSON: 1960. And that helped me a great deal. Because having graduated in '60, I had the pleasure and the luxury of two full years at the 82nd Airborne Division, where I learned my trade. Had the opportunity to go down to jump school, then later had the opportunity to go to Ranger school, then I went to jungle warfare school. And I went to half a dozen other schools. Still have the scars from chemical-biological school. [LAUGHS]

[00:05:26.13] And after that, it was time for an overseas assignment. They sent me to Germany. I had a very pleasant year serving as an aide-de-camp to a two-star general, who was in command of the largest command on the American side. But he wore two hats. In addition to being a US Army commander, he was also a NATO commander of a force that they called the Mobile Land Force. And the theory in NATO is if you attack one nation, you attack them all.

[00:05:56.55] To make sure a potential aggressor understands that, they have this organization called the MLF. And the Mobile Land Force is about a battalion from each of the then 15 members of NATO. So that was the command that he had. And it was all on paper at the time. But once a year, they would get together and do a tactical exercise and a field training exercise. And it gave him the opportunity to belong on the NATO level.

[00:06:25.84] So when they held NATO conferences, he would hop on a plane, drag me along with him. And we'd go to places like Paris, and get to meet Charles de Gaulle, who at that time was not happy to be a member of NATO. I was there when they in fact said, could you move all your forces out of France? And it was a great relocation that took place.

[00:06:45.69] MARK FRANKLIN: You were a lieutenant-- first lieutenant?

[00:06:48.38] DON MUNSON: At that time promotions were fairly fast. And so I was a first lieutenant when I left the 82nd. And within a year, I was a captain.

[00:06:58.16] MARK FRANKLIN: But what a great assignment.

[00:06:59.48] DON MUNSON: And-- right. After I left him-- and by the way, because his command went all the way from the East European border all the way back to 200 miles into France, we traveled about 8 to 10 hours every day of the week, including Saturdays and Sundays. And it was just a priceless experience. So I got to travel a great deal-- see everything through the eyes of this two-star general. And I loved every minute of it.

[00:07:28.63] And when we were finished, he invited me to come back home with him. And I said, I'm honored that you asked, but I need to finish my overseas tour. And he said, well, where do you want to go, and what do you want to do? And I went down to 10th Special Forces in Bad Tolz, Germany, which was the best assignment in the military. There was no way I was getting out after that. That assignment, they required us to do skydiving, scuba diving, mountain climbing. And I thought, oh, throw me in that briar patch.

[00:08:03.80] DON MUNSON: I loved it. And part of the reason I loved it was because I graduated from Tulane on the first day of June. West Point didn't graduate until the 7th of June that year, which meant I had a week of date of rank. And date of rank from lieutenants is [LAUGHS] like virtue among fallen women.

[00:08:23.78] And so you know, I got a leadership assignment based on date of rank. Whenever we were-- and we had fun. I mean, West Pointers-- the entire West Point class usually takes 30 days off. And by the time I got down there, they were finished with their leave. So my whole basic infantry course was all the West Point grads.

[00:08:46.88] MARK FRANKLIN: Talk about infantry training at Benning, back in 1960. At that time it was Fort Benning.

[00:08:52.40] DON MUNSON: It was Fort Benning, yes. It's now Hal Moore-- of course, an old folk cavalryman.

[00:08:57.38] MARK FRANKLIN: Yep.

[00:08:57.80] DON MUNSON: And yeah, I admire him and have met him on several occasions. In fact, his son and his grandson and granddaughter are members of our chapter down in Dallas, Texas. Yeah, we made him an honorary member because of his dad. Half the people in our chapter knew his dad. Right.

[00:09:16.86] MARK FRANKLIN: So what was that training?

[00:09:17.82] DON MUNSON: The training was all hands on. Obviously, there was some classroom sessions, but mostly those were preparatory-- and now get in the buses, and we're going to take you outside. And it was-- everything was brand new to me. The beauty of it was the West Pointers that I with had been doing this for four years.

[00:09:39.81] And it was old hat to them. So I would sit there and pick their brain. And I'd-- again, duck to water. I loved everything that they were requiring us to do. The dirtier you got, the more I said, this is what I signed up for.

[00:09:54.75] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, you mentioned you also went to airborne school and Ranger school.

[00:09:57.83] DON MUNSON: Yes, I did.

[00:09:58.35] MARK FRANKLIN: Anything stand out from that training that's memorable for you?

[00:10:02.43] DON MUNSON: They're all physical challenges. And the one thing that I loved about being in college and being in athletics is I came to the military in I think fairly good shape. And I came out number one on the Ranger course as a Ranger company commander, which was fun because there were five captains in that course with me. And they had one of those captains in charge of the company for the first week.

[00:10:29.91] And they said, well, he's a nice guy, but we'll try another one. And each of the five captains who were from one of the service corps of the-- service branches of the Army were not quite the infantry material they were looking for. And I happened to be the senior ranking of the lieutenants. So yeah, so the last two months of the course, I was the Ranger company commander.

[00:10:53.01] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, when you went down to 10th Special Forces, that's more training.

[00:10:56.91] DON MUNSON: Right.

[00:10:57.21] MARK FRANKLIN: And they have their own qualification course?

[00:10:59.31] DON MUNSON: They do.

[00:10:59.70] MARK FRANKLIN: Now you get to do the specialty-- talk a little bit about that.

[00:11:01.83] DON MUNSON: Well, I loved it. And I loved it for no other reason-- as I say, the mission at that time was unconventional warfare. When we ended up in Vietnam, Special Forces did a lot of counterinsurgency and training of the indigenous forces.

[00:11:19.14] But in Europe it was a very realistic approach to what can happen if the balloon goes up and the third world war starts. And we're not talking about a low-intensity conflict. We're talking about third world war. I mean, the Warsaw Pact at that time included all of the nations of Eastern Europe plus the Soviet Union, which was at that time the largest land army on the planet. And it was very realistic training.

[00:11:50.70] The unconventional side of it, which is what 10th Special Forces in, required us to train amphibious warfare. We did a lot with the Navy, where we were in submarines and launched ashore in the Greek Isles. I personally was on a two-month exercise with the Italian Alpini, climbing in the Italian Alps, loving that.

[00:12:13.95] I remember when I was told, get your team ready, you're going to go to this mission down in the Italian Alps. And I told my commander, sir, you do know that I grew up in New Orleans, Louisiana, which is underwater. But I loved every minute. We climbed on Dente Diablo and Mont Blanc.

[00:12:37.41] MARK FRANKLIN: You're now a commissioned officer. You've spent a little bit of time in Europe. And our involvement in Vietnam is slowly, incrementally getting more and more progressive.

[00:12:45.60] DON MUNSON: Correct. And you're exactly right, and you've got your finger right on it. Because by this time we're into 1965, and that's when we launched full-size division forces into Vietnam. I immediately applied and said, I need to be part of that. That's where the fighting is. I'm an infantryman. This has been fun, but it's time to get serious about my military career. And they wrote back and said, we've got you scheduled. We'll tell you where we need you.

[00:13:13.23] And they sent me to the career course first. So instead of being there during that first year, during which the 1st Cavalry Division was involved in what is now known as the Battle of the Ia Drang, the beauty of it was that was the very unit that I joined as a brand new--

[00:13:32.34] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, when you say they sent you to the career course, that was the infantry advanced course?

[00:13:35.85] DON MUNSON: The infantry advanced course, right.

[00:13:37.62] MARK FRANKLIN: And talk a little bit about that training. And do you think that prepared you for what you saw?

[00:13:40.89] DON MUNSON: It did, but not so much because the program of instruction from the platform was so phenomenally good. And it was. The instructors at that time were superbly professional.

[00:13:54.39] But what I loved about it most was '65 now was over. And I was doing this course in '66. And who were all my classmates? Guys that just got back from Vietnam. And half of the people that were in the Ia Drang Valley were in my class. So I got to get personal experience from all of this.

[00:14:14.93] Because I knew when I went overseas-- I was bound and determined-- there was no other unit that I would serve in. I was going to the Cav. And when the infantry branch officer came down and said, give us your choices, and I put the same choice three times-- and they said, well, no. And I said, you don't understand. I spent a year in Germany as an aide-de-camp to the man who was the commander of the 7th Cav in Korea. I need to be in the 7th Cav. And he kind of snickered at that, and that's what was my assignment.

[00:14:53.55] DON MUNSON: I can't say that I'm one of those strategic-level thinkers. I'm much more on the tactical level. And it was a disappointment because I was ready for the third world war. You know, I was going to see tank warfare and divisions against divisions. And it was patently obvious after you get down there-- by the time I arrived, which was early or mid '65-- excuse me, '67.

[00:15:19.29] In that time frame, the impact of the Battle of the Ia Drang had already worked its way through the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. And they realized, we can't mess with this cavalry unit. They have absolutely total air power, and they can reinforce a unit faster than we can on the ground. And from that point on, the area of operations that the 1st Cav Division was assigned to broke down into not divisional size operations, which I had trained for in the Fort Benning School For Boys.

[00:15:58.24] The majority of the operations came down to battalion size op-- area of operation, where the battalion commander would send out companies on patrol. And even companies would break that down into, we'll send out a platoon on a search operation. So it was really down at the grassroots level for that war. And it was mostly search and find. It wasn't a pitched battle. It wasn't the front line is right there and we always know where the enemy is. It was, we can't find the enemy.

[00:16:34.14] DON MUNSON: I got there in mid '67.

[00:16:36.60] MARK FRANKLIN: What were your first impressions? Did you go by ship, or by aircraft?

[00:16:39.39] DON MUNSON: No, I flew. Yes.

[00:16:40.35] MARK FRANKLIN: What was your first impression getting off the aircraft?

[00:16:44.07] DON MUNSON: I had grown up in the heat, so the heat was not the problem. The problem I had, I guess, was that I had anticipated a more intense environment. And you were putting your finger on it earlier, that I had the beauty of going from 1960 until my arrival in '67 to prepare for my time in command. At that time there were lots of units over in Vietnam that were being commanded by captains, or at best by-- I said captain-- by senior lieutenants, or by captains, who had been promoted within two years of their commissioning.

[00:17:26.79] Whereas when I got over there, I was one of the most senior captains in the Army-- and very, very prepared, from having both of the infantry courses-- all the other preparation I'd had, plus all the training I'd gotten in Europe. So I felt supremely confident as a company commander.

[00:17:44.02] We all arrive at An Khe. At An Khe, they were trying to juggle who goes to what empty slot. And I said, got to be the 7th Cav. And just so happened they did have an opening.

[00:17:58.72] And I got there. The company commander that he said I would replace still had 30 more days. And so he said, what I want you to do is get your feet wet. Acclimate to the climate. You can help me on the staff-- some operational things I've got going. And so it was about 30 days before I took over my company.

[00:18:20.63] But once I had the company, I just loved every minute of it. And very shortly thereafter, we moved up to the Bong Son area-- conducted operations in the Bong Son. We were there for three months. Moved back to An Khe while they were rotating troops in and out of An Khe for base defense of that massive An Khe installation. Because I think I read somewhere there was like a 10-mile perimeter for the airfield.

[00:18:49.81] And finally, we moved north, and that was where I was wounded in an operation. We were just chasing individuals. It wasn't a fixed battle. But somebody would shoot at us, and we'd go try and catch him.

[00:19:10.78] DON MUNSON: If I had to have a single primary responsibility, it was to take care of your men. And that's what I felt. As a matter of fact, 50 years after the war, I still wear that as my finest moment, that we were in many conflicts together, little pitched battles, and most of them didn't last more than an hour. But in all that time, I never lost a man

[00:19:37.93] MARK FRANKLIN: Really?

[00:19:38.59] DON MUNSON: Yeah.

[00:19:39.82] MARK FRANKLIN: That's saying a lot.

[00:19:41.12] DON MUNSON: That's the one I love.

[00:19:42.07] MARK FRANKLIN: That's saying a lot. What responsibilities took up most of your time?

[00:19:47.19] DON MUNSON: Patrolling. I mean, we would get up at crack of dawn.

[00:19:51.30] MARK FRANKLIN: Company size patrols?

[00:19:51.90] DON MUNSON: How's that?

[00:19:52.41] MARK FRANKLIN: Were they company size patrols?

[00:19:53.19] DON MUNSON: Yes, most of the time I was out on company patrols. We would gather supplies. I would identify from the battalion commander his projected estimated location of enemy forces, or the last time they'd had conflict according to the historical records. And we'd go back to see if we could find either a supply route down there, a path that led us back to an enemy force. In almost every instance, it was a matter of just slogging through the jungle waiting to get shot at, and that would tell you where they were.

[00:20:28.26] We did have one interesting little incident that happened I shared this with my son last night. He had never heard the story before, but-- one of the things that the Viet Cong would do after they'd shot at you-- they knew that we had overwhelming air support and artillery fire support. And we'd of course immediately react with as much firepower as we could bring in on whoever was shooting at us. Well, they would get down in a hole in the ground. Most of them had tunnels that were small cities under the dirt.

[00:21:03.67] And on this particular instance, one of my men spotted a hole. They were very, very well camouflaged. But he said, I think this is going to lead to a tunnel. And he said, I'd like to go down and look.

[00:21:18.45] I take my hat off to that man. I think I've done reckless things and dangerous things, but this tunnel rat took a flashlight and .45-caliber pistol, crawled down a hole that was-- literally his shoulders had to squeeze in to get down that little tiny hole. And he disappeared for about three or four minutes. And we heard a single shot.

[00:21:41.04] And I thought, oh my God. You know, I haven't been over here more than a week, and already I've lost my first troop. But about four or five minutes later, he came crawling up out of that hole and held up his hand. And he had somebody's ankle in his hand.

[00:21:58.47] And he pulled this guy out. The guy was still alive. He'd been shot in the leg. And he was screaming bloody murder, a) because he didn't want to be pulled out of that hole and b) because his leg hurt and he was getting dirt in it. So we called the medic over, and we took care of the guy. Gave him water and gave him a little, I think, C-rations. And when he finally realized that he was not going to be killed on the spot, I called for a helicopter to come in and take him back to battalion headquarters and let them interrogate him and send him on back to POW camp.

[00:22:34.27] And it just so happened that by that time I was more interested in deploying my platoons to get out and create a security perimeter so the bird could come in. And everybody else was occupied at the moment the bird landed, so I went over and picked the little kid up, carried

him to the helicopter and got him on board. And the last thing he did was reach back and give me a hug. [LAUGHS]

[00:22:58.71] MARK FRANKLIN: Really?

[00:22:58.93] DON MUNSON: Yes. How old do you think he was?

[00:23:01.21] MARK FRANKLIN: Oh, I guess he was 18. Yeah, but he looked like he was 10 or 12. I mean, the bottom line is, yeah, he was a grown man, but he did look like a kid-- because they're very small people.

[00:23:17.31] DON MUNSON: That is a bond that continues to this day, I still write to some of them, still send Christmas cards. We periodically get together at reunions. But yeah, that's a very special relationship. My fondest relationship was with the battalion commander who later became the chief of staff of Fort Benning. And my battalion command during the twilight of my career was a command assignment at Fort Benning. So we got reunited that way.

[00:23:48.06] And the other battalion commander-- we'll get into that one in a minute-- after I came back to Vietnam from a hospitalization, they didn't have a slot for a major-- because I'd been promoted while I was at the hospital. And they assigned me to the 2d Battalion. I was still in the 7th Cav, but the 2d Battalion.

[00:24:09.45] And the new battalion commander came in. It was Roscoe Robinson, who was a company commander in the same battle group with me in the 82nd Airborne Division. So we had instant rapport, became best of friends, and I followed his career for the rest of my life. And as you well know, 82nd Airborne Division commander went on to four stars.

[00:24:32.65] MARK FRANKLIN: Absolutely, yeah.

[00:24:33.28] DON MUNSON: Yeah. Roscoe was my hero.

[00:24:35.71] MARK FRANKLIN: Describe the living conditions for a infantry company in Vietnam.

[00:24:39.70] DON MUNSON: Archaic and barbaric. I mean, you're literally living in a dirt hole. There's no break from the weather. The weather, believe it or not-- a lot of people think of everything about the jungle as being hot.

[00:24:55.72] But the fact of the matter is when you get into the winter days, particularly the way things panned out for my career-- '67 and '68-- by the time you got into the November/December, we had been moved up into I Corps, because the Marines were surrounded in a little place called Khe Sanh. And they began moving Marines up closer to the combat base, and that left a larger portion of their AO unoccupied. So General Westmoreland told our division commander, move up.

[00:25:33.02] So we were outside of-- was it Quang Tri? where they had a little base called Camp Evans, the division headquarters. And Camp Evans in November and December when the sun goes down was miserably cold.

[00:25:49.26] MARK FRANKLIN: Really?

[00:25:49.42] DON MUNSON: And we're sitting here in jungle fatigues that are tissue thin. That's some of the coldest I have been. So you think of it as hot, but there was extreme weather conditions.

[00:26:00.62] MARK FRANKLIN: So there's a lot of social tension and so forth in the States. Did any of that make its way over to your unit?

[00:26:06.58] DON MUNSON: Yes, sir. Oh yes, sir.

[00:26:08.11] MARK FRANKLIN: Talk a little about that.

[00:26:09.32] DON MUNSON: It devastated Roscoe to know that was happening. I remember one day in April, I came over for breakfast. We always had breakfast together. And as soon as we were finished breakfast, he and I would get in the helicopter, and we'd be airborne for the next 10 hours. And we had just gotten the word that Robert Kennedy had been killed. And that was as devastating to him as the death of President Kennedy was to all the rest of the nation.

[00:26:36.58] MARK FRANKLIN: And also Martin Luther King.

[00:26:38.11] DON MUNSON: Yes. And then shortly-- that's right, he was first, and then Kennedy. You're right.

[00:26:42.43] MARK FRANKLIN: Did any of that affect the unit?

[00:26:44.44] DON MUNSON: I don't think so. I think when you're in combat, politics is further down your list of priorities. But as a social impact on your life, on knowing what you're going to go home to, everybody was aware it's going to be a whole different world. And it was.

[00:27:01.38] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you have much time to yourself? Because the next question is going to be, what did you do for recreation, if you had any time for recreation.

[00:27:09.16] DON MUNSON: Well, we did. We did play a little volleyball. And we played combat rules. [LAUGHS] So we spent a lot of people to the hospital playing volleyball. But in terms of time to yourself, no. As I say, when I came back from the hospital, I was a major-- and by this time no longer eligible to be company commander.

[00:27:30.36] So I was the battalion operations officer. And there's never enough hours in the day for operations-- an ops officer in combat-- to do everything that needs to be done, to check everything, to make sure all the companies understand clearly what's going on and what's expected of them.

[00:27:48.37] And then Roscoe and I visited every company, every day. It was a magnificent experience from my point of view-- maybe not so much from the guys that were still on the ground, but from the sky it was beautiful.

[00:28:01.35] MARK FRANKLIN: Any memories of the music or a movie or a book from that time, that if you hear it today-- ?

[00:28:07.73] DON MUNSON: Everybody in the world-- if you're talking music everybody in the world remembers waking up at the crack of dawn to Good Morning, Vietnam. And of course, Nancy Sinatra at that time was singing "Boots Are Made For Walking." Yeah, music was everywhere.

[00:28:24.97] MARK FRANKLIN: Any memorable--

[00:28:25.93] DON MUNSON: Armed Forces Radio would play 24/7. Every once in a while, they'd sneak in a little report about what's going on in the States, or what's going on worldwide. But no, 90% of it was just music.

[00:28:39.19] MARK FRANKLIN: It was just music. So you didn't get a whole lot of news about what was happening back home?

[00:28:41.89] DON MUNSON: Not really. We did, because it was battalion headquarters. The troops down in the field may not have gotten quite as much, although we did send the Stars and Stripes forward every day. So I'd get to read the Stars and Stripes. But even that, a lot of the newspaper was talking about what we were doing, not what was going on stateside.

[00:29:07.45] MARK FRANKLIN: What area of operations did you primarily serve in once you-- as a company commander?

[00:29:11.86] DON MUNSON: Well, we started, as I mentioned, down in II Corps. And An Khe had the largest AO, I believe, of any other division, because of the air capability we had. And we moved from there to the Bong Son. From there we moved north up toward the border with the I Corp region, which was basically 3 MAF. Third Marine Amphibious Force had the northern area of operations.

[00:29:39.03] And I got a little taste of all of the different topography of Vietnam. Because at first we started in triple canopy jungle, then we moved out into the plains, and from there our next assignment was closer to the South China Sea, where we were practically in beach areas, where there was a lot of open terrain and sandy area.

[00:30:07.29] Yeah. One of the interesting combat situations I had existed because we were that close to the South China Sea that there was not as much vegetation. There was actually a wide open space, almost like a giant drop zone. And we spotted a couple of the VC that were trying to get away from capture, because a company had been chasing them. And they had radioed to our helicopter explaining what was going on.

[00:30:35.51] And they said, we've got all but about four of them, and they're about to get away. And they broke out of the tree line. And from the helicopter, we spotted them instantly.

[00:30:45.17] And it didn't take nuclear physicists to figure out what they were doing. They were trying to get to that little village that was out on the coast. And if they got there, we were afraid they could blend in, or possibly that's where their tunnel complex was located.

[00:30:59.74] But I told Roscoe, we need to settle down and separate them from getting to the shore. And he didn't want to risk the helicopter, because all four of them are armed. So he said, I can't. And I said, tell you what, just put me down, and I'll create a blocking force. The company is right behind him, so it's not like I'm going to be all by myself down there--

[00:31:25.63] MARK FRANKLIN: Except you were by yourself.

[00:31:26.56] DON MUNSON: --except I was by myself. But I had him overhead with cover, so I knew I was OK. And I came to the crest of a hill, and they were still about, I don't know, 100 meters away-- about a football field.

[00:31:40.47] And I made sure they spotted me-- fired off a couple of rounds to make sure they saw where I was. And then I went into my histrionics. OK, you guys on the left-- so they thought that I must have had at least a battalion in support. And by the time they decided surrender is a better part of valor, before they figured out that idiot's there by himself.

[00:32:04.73] MARK FRANKLIN: That's great. Describe the quality of your leadership.

[00:32:08.55] DON MUNSON: Well, of course the first leader I had was Roscoe. And as far as I'm concerned, that man walked on water. And he did the one thing that I loved the most about a commander. He had a concept of what we were to accomplish today.

[00:32:26.73] And from that point on, he left it to me to execute it. Which is technically, according to the school curriculum, that's kind of the way it's supposed to happen. He gives commander's guidance. I do the operational execution. And we worked beautifully the whole time we were there.

[00:32:47.59] The higher headquarters, and I hope I'm not stepping on any toes on this, but I always thought from brigade and division, they were too far in the sky and too far removed. Now, I know that they went out and visited troops as much as they could. But platoon leaders and company commanders was the highest level to understand what the combat situation was. Everybody else was just doing map exercises.

[00:33:14.50] MARK FRANKLIN: Just too far removed from everything. What was your-- describe significant operations that you participated in. Any stand out?

[00:33:22.76] DON MUNSON: Well, the most important one is, of course, the Tet Offensive of 1968. And for the years from when the first Special Forces unit went over there in about '63, all

the way through '65 when the Marines arrived, and then late '65 when the 1st Cav came and divisions began to pile on, the war at that time, I think, was being fought at small-unit level.

[00:33:55.34] What happened during Tet is that for all of the time from '63 up until '68, there had not been a major offensive by the enemy force. And in 1968, they literally assaulted virtually every major city-- and in many cases, all the major headquarters of the military forces on the ground. And it was a complete shock-- total surprise. More power to them. Their leadership had done that thing in apparent absolute secrecy, because our intel had not picked up what was about to happen.

[00:34:34.38] And although it was successful for the first 24 to 48 hours, within 48 hours almost everywhere that they had had success, the Americans were back in charge. The one or two places that was not true was downtown Saigon they had a while, because they'd literally occupied the embassy.

[00:34:55.47] And the other was in the ancient city capital of Hue. The Marines, of course, had that in their area of operations. And they said, we can handle it. And unfortunately, in typical Marine style, it was charge into the breach. And they took some serious losses. And in doing so, they needed reinforcement. And that's where my battalion was called upon.

[00:35:23.53] So we had two companies that were chopped to the Marines during that operation. But they were put in a support role. I don't know if the Marines didn't trust them, or didn't-- they weren't aware of what their capability was. But the Marines would have the primary responsibility, and our unit was in backup during that period of time.

[00:35:47.70] We had an unfortunate incident. Some of the troops had dug a foxhole, that was not more than about a four by four hole in the ground-- six feet deep. The only way a bullet can get to that is to come straight down. Well, bullets don't do that, but mortars do. And a mortar round went in, and we lost a bunch of people on that one. Yeah.

[00:36:10.44] But other than that the only impact of the Tet operation was it took all of the focus off of Khe Sanh, where the Marines had been surrounded. And they continued to be surrounded throughout January, February and March.

[00:36:26.88] And in articles I've read and books that I have read since the war, apparently the consensus of opinion is that General Westmoreland, who was the strategic planner for how the troops were to be deployed and where the priority was, had figured, they're trying to give me a little Dien Bien Phu. They want to wipe out those Marines. Well, I'm going to suck them in. And as soon as I've got them where I want them, then I'll pounce, and we'll get this battle over with.

[00:36:55.74] Well, finally he realized the noose had begun to tighten around that combat base. And he said, I need to bail them out. And so he committed the most powerful force he had at the time.

[00:37:07.96] And that was the 1st Cav. And I don't know if it was a result of the historical record of the fighting of the Ia Drang Valley and a couple of other company and battalion-size

operations, but I think that was one of the darlings of the division commander. So when it was time to launch into Khe Sanh, it was our battalion that was the first to move into the log base and then the first to move into the combat base.

[00:37:37.08] MARK FRANKLIN: So 2/7?

[00:37:38.37] DON MUNSON: 2/7.

[00:37:39.72] MARK FRANKLIN: 2/7 went into Khe Sanh?

[00:37:40.68] DON MUNSON: Right. We were the first ones.

[00:37:42.03] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:37:42.96] DON MUNSON: Unfortunately, it was not as vicious as you might have thought it would be. Because by that time, I think, the North Vietnamese-- because we were not fighting at this time Viet Cong, we were fighting the North Vietnamese Army-- had realized that the air power of the Cav-- and I remember the operation. They moved us up from Camp Evans up to Quang Tri. And that was the marshaling area for launching Operation PEGASUS.

[00:38:12.69] I had seen air operations now daily. And like I say, most of it was platoon and company-size operations. And you would get as many as four to five, maybe an occasional six birds at one time. And they would do multiple lifts in order to move a whole company. We moved the battalion to that hilltop, and the sky filled with helicopters. I've never seen that many helicopters. There must have been 50 birds in the air that day.

[00:38:42.15] And we lifted the entire battalion to include the artillery on that first lift. And that kind of sent a strong signal to the people that were trying to get into Khe Sanh. And by the time we got there 48 hours later-- maybe it was 72 hours later-- the fighting had ceased. They had pulled out, right. Don't tell that to the Marines. The Marines fought their way out.

[00:39:10.00] MARK FRANKLIN: Or the Air Force bombed the bad guys.

[00:39:11.38] DON MUNSON: Or the Air Force bombed them, right.

[00:39:18.69] DON MUNSON: Probably that operation, if for no other because it was the one that was in all the press. It was where we anticipated the biggest fighting. All of the press reporting and all the intelligence reports we got said that there were going to be a minimum of two North Vietnamese divisions that were digging tunnel complexes.

[00:39:39.06] And a la World War I, they were concentric circles that were connected by adjoining tunnels. And they were simply closing the noose around that combat base. And as we flew over it the first time, it really just looked like a child's game of this is the way you go through a siege. And that's what it was, a siege.

[00:40:04.47] So I vividly remembered the operation. But in terms of hand-to-hand combat or any fixed fighting, didn't really happen. I did have one incident that-- I don't know, it vividly sticks out because I was disappointed at one of the company commanders. And I was not the battalion commander. I'm the operations officer. But I was number two at that time.

[00:40:29.52] And I went down because he had had a little skirmish-- a fight. You know, somebody was shooting at his men, and he was firing back. But unfortunately, one of his non-commissioned officers had been hit because they were trying to move forward. He got hit, went down, and they pulled back to their last good defensive position. And when I got there, you could tell the man was still alive. And I said, you need to bring him in. We don't just leave guys on the battlefield.

[00:40:58.14] And he was a little less aggressive than I had been trained to be. And I realized that by that time the intensity of the fighting had ceased. And I don't know, it's not a Superman complex, but when you're 20-something years old, you're going to live forever. And so I simply-- I said a couple of harsh words toward him, and I went out and picked up the guy and brought him back in.

[00:41:29.95] In hindsight, it was a stupid thing to do. You do stupid things sometimes. And when I look back on it, I'm glad I did it, and I wouldn't do it again.

[00:41:41.11] MARK FRANKLIN: Now, you were awarded the Silver Star.

[00:41:43.69] DON MUNSON: I was.

[00:41:44.29] MARK FRANKLIN: Was it for that action?

[00:41:45.70] DON MUNSON: It was for the action that I previously mentioned where we captured a guy-- captured three of them that were coming across the beach

[00:41:53.56] MARK FRANKLIN: When you went down by yourself.

[00:41:53.98] DON MUNSON: Right, and I went down by myself. Yeah. Roscoe was impressed with that, that I got out of the helicopter while he said, I'll provide you with protection.

[00:42:07.54] DON MUNSON: Probably getting hit. It was not because of a battle. We had been harassed by I guess a single sniper. And it just so happened that I was on the radio reporting back to battalion headquarters that I'm receiving fire. Just so happened on that particular day, I was the only company in the battalion that was receiving fire. So I got a lot of personal attention from the battalion.

[00:42:34.30] And in the midst of my conversation with him, trying to explain it's no big thing, it's a gun and we'll find him, if he hasn't jumped into his hole yet. The FAC, the United States Air Force forward air controller, came on station and used my call sign and said, I've got four F1 fighters here, that had a mission up in North Vietnam, but it was cloudy. And they're going to

have to go pickle their load out in the South China Sea, and they don't want to do that. And you got a target. I'd like them to come in get a little target practice.

[00:43:13.88] So I pulled out my .45 pistol. And it just so happened-- there's a story behind it, which I won't bother with, but I used to carry tracer ammo for my .45.

[00:43:26.88] So when the FAC came over and he said, can you identify the target? And I said, yeah, he's right here. And I fired at the last location where the guy had fired. And of course that tracer is just like shooting a flaming arrow. And the FAC kind of giggled and said, OK, I got it. You know, mark your location. And in came these-- we had four F1s, and they took up a big wagon-wheel formation. And first they came in and unloaded their 500-pound bombs.

[00:43:55.68] And then they came back in and they unloaded their 22-millimeter cannons. And I'm sure that whoever that individual was that was shooting at us, he said, God, don't piss them off. [LAUGHS] MARK FRANKLIN: I'll never do that again. DON MUNSON: I'll never do that again.

[00:44:10.29] MARK FRANKLIN: So did you ever figure out whether you got the guy or not?

[00:44:13.02] DON MUNSON: No. As far as we know, he's sitting down that tunnel saying-- and he may have been snickering, laughing at us for wasting so much ammo, because we could have been 100 meters off of his location. But I'm sure he said, I got their attention.

[00:44:34.82] DON MUNSON: Well, I shouldn't say that, but my best day was when it was time for R&R, I got one of the first flights out of Vietnam into Sydney, Australia. That was a good day. But when I came back, I guess my best day was probably Thanksgiving. I mentioned that I'd been wounded.

[00:44:53.76] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah, we didn't talk about that. You didn't talk about how you got wounded.

[00:44:57.50] DON MUNSON: Because it was not very dramatic. I was moving the company. Actually, we'd been out on patrol all day. We'd not made any contact. We hadn't found anybody. We hadn't been shot at.

[00:45:08.06] And I called back to the company commander and said, we're going to button down for the night. And he said, no, I want you to move over to another location and button down there, and I'm going to send in birds to lift you.

[00:45:19.74] So the first company had already been moved out. I moved the company headquarters, which consisted of myself, the radio telephone operators, the artillery liaison officer, and a mortar round came in. And it was a non-lethal injury to one of the radio operators. It was just a scratch on the head to the artillery liaison officer.

[00:45:48.72] I had on a big backpack, and I took a huge hit in the back, but it didn't hit me. I got a little flechette on the side. But the one piece of shrapnel that was the my trip to vacation land came over my shoulder and went through my cheek and blew out about nine of the teeth.

[00:46:10.86] So I was medevacked back to the local field hospital. And I was there for about maybe 48 hours. And the doctor came in and said, there's all sorts of bacteria in the area. Your wound has become infected. We're going to send you back to Camp Zama in Japan. I got on the airplane-- the medevac-- and they landed in the Philippines and a typhoon hit. And it sat there for three days. And nothing could come in and nothing could go out. And so I'm just enjoying a three-day vacation. Because it's a facial wound, I'm ambulatory.

[00:46:52.40] But after three days, the typhoon finally lifted. And the doctor came in and said, listen, your wound is minimal compared to some of the problems we've had in the last three days in country, so I'm giving your bed in Camp Zama away. I'm moving you out to another hospital.

[00:47:07.64] And I said, well, I certainly understand. Where am I going? And he said, you're going to Tripler. And I said, I've heard of that. Now, where is Tripler again? And of course, I then spent my restoration and facial reconstructive surgery in Honolulu, Hawaii. And that, yeah, what was my fondest memory of the war, was Honolulu. [LAUGHS]

[00:47:30.42] MARK FRANKLIN: How about how about Australia? What'd you do in Australia on your R&R?

[00:47:33.30] DON MUNSON: Oh, that was the most magnificent thing. Because I don't know if it was intentional or if they'd planned it that way, but we landed for our week of R&R on Anzac Day, which is the day that the Australians and the New Zealanders celebrate their participation in World War II. And if you remember, this is not all that-- it's one generation from World War II. And every family in Australia participates, because everybody had somebody who served. And in fact, the island of Australia was attacked by the Japanese. It wasn't a major invasion, but yeah. So they were very, very aware of the contribution of the Americans during that war.

[00:48:19.77] And our plane landed. We got booked into a hotel for our R&R time. And I'm standing out on the street corner enjoying the parade going by. And I've later done a lot of parades myself for the Veterans Day. This was for Anzac New Zealand. And while I was standing on that street corner, at least five families came up and said, you're a Yank, aren't you? Yes, I am. They said, yeah, we read in the paper you guys were going to come here. Do you know anybody in town? No, I don't. Would you like to come out to the house for dinner?

[00:48:54.32] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:48:54.84] DON MUNSON: Five invitations by standing on the street corner. I'm in love with the Australians.

[00:49:06.04] DON MUNSON: No, we did not. No, the Cav moved a great deal, and I'm not aware that-- no.

[00:49:16.56] DON MUNSON: Well, we did-- I did have a great deal of personal contact with the locals, because we saw our mission twofold. Number one was find and fix and finish the enemy.

[00:49:28.89] Number two was assist the local province leaders. What can we do to help? What kind of defensive posture are you in? We're going to be operating in your area of operations. Tell me where the problems are. Tell me where the free-fire zones are.

[00:49:45.18] And we work very closely with several of those province chiefs. And we actually had one who lived on a little stretch-- if you get out a map-- as a matter of fact, I've got a map I'll share with you-- that was right out on the South China Sea. And it was like a lengthy peninsula, about four miles long. And he said, we need to be out of here. And I said, we just might be able to help you on that, because there was a place further south that they wanted to relocate. And he said, I've got about 150 locals from this province that I would like you to move.

[00:50:26.08] So we called up, got a couple of Chinook helicopters, came in and landed. And on the day of the move, the 150 became more like 350. And they brought all their pigs and all their chickens and all that. And it was quite an eye-opening experience. But yeah, we did work closely with the locals, the South Vietnamese.

[00:50:47.08] MARK FRANKLIN: What was your impression of the Vietnamese people?

[00:50:48.64] DON MUNSON: I was very impressed with them. They probably, in many people's eyes, were not as aggressive as the American military. I mean, a lot of troops over there said, if I've got to be in war, I might as well go ahead and earn my reputation as a legendary fighter. But the South Vietnamese had been at war for 20 years by the time we got there. And yeah, I think this guy was doing his best to simply survive until it was all over, so he could rear his family.

[00:51:27.36] DON MUNSON: I was personally involved in one of the best things that happened to the medical field in combat, and that is helicopter recovery of a wounded. Even though Korea had established that helicopters are a valuable source of medical evacuation, they hadn't perfected it anywhere near what Dust Off had done in Vietnam. And the Dust Off missions were dedicated medical evac personnel. They always had on board a trained medic. In some cases, they actually had doctors on board.

[00:52:06.63] We had multiple occasions where people would be wounded. And you could only provide so many helicopter lifts. Roscoe would look at me, and he and I would give each other a thumbs up and say, let's go get him. So we landed on many occasions and would say, OK, put all the most wounded aboard those choppers, because that's where the medical personnel-- we'll take the ones that are slightly less in trouble, and we'll help take them back.

[00:52:35.32] And yeah, we had a couple like that. I remember one guy who had stepped on a land mine and had almost lost the lower half of his body. But he was still breathing. And they were praying they could get him to the hospital. Because with medevac, if you could make it to

the hospital, your chances of survival soared. And yeah, and statistics after that war that they gathered said, it's phenomenal the number of people.

[00:53:00.28] Yeah, what we now have in our American society is a lot more people who have prosthetic limbs, but it's simply because they're not dead. And it's because of medevac.

[00:53:09.85] MARK FRANKLIN: And you personally witnessed this.

[00:53:11.20] DON MUNSON: And I personally participated in one of those.

[00:53:19.63] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you have much communication with your family back home?

[00:53:23.26] DON MUNSON: Did not. Although it's wonderful that you mention that. Because yes, that was one of the memorable things about Vietnam, was we had MARS radio stations. I know we had one An Khe, the-- our division headquarters. An Khe had somehow worked it out where there was land-line communication to our brigade headquarters. And on one or two occasions, my battalion was co-located with brigade. So if you could get 10 minutes away from your radio, go back to the MARS station, and stand in a long line because everybody in the country wants to get on the air.

[00:54:04.09] And what you would do is you'd be talking to somebody. It'd be 2,000 miles away. And he was a radio ham operator, and he would have contact with somebody in Seattle, Washington, who would have contact with somebody in Chicago, who would link you up to your home in Dallas. And the way the MARS station worked, it's not a telephone. It's a radio communication. So you can't both talk at the same time. So the caller would end his transmission by saying, over, flip the switch, and the person on the other end gets to speak.

[00:54:39.84] And a lot of wives weren't into that over stuff for a while, but they got used to it after a while. And there was always the squeamish young 17-year-old who wanted to end his conversation with something romantic to say, but there's 50 guys behind him. And it was wonderful listening to the guys sign off with, I love you, and hearing about 15 cat calls from the guys in line. But yeah, I thought MARS radio was a wonderful contribution.

[00:55:06.53] And of course, nowadays we've got cell phone radios and satellite communication. So they don't understand what we went through. And we don't understand what the previous wars went through, because we could communicate with home and they could not.

[00:55:22.43] I did love the gifts that would come from the States, because there was always somebody who thought you would love a box of chocolates, which looked like goo by the time it arrived. There's always somebody that sent brownies. But troops overseas would devour it like it had just come out of the oven-- loved every minute of it. I got the best one of all.

[00:55:48.19] MARK FRANKLIN: What'd you get?

[00:55:49.22] DON MUNSON: I got a birthday present. It was a can of popcorn, one of the big-- what is it, about a gallon of popcorn? And I called a couple of the guys over. Help me eat this. You always share everything you get in the mail. And we were going through that popcorn. I got about a quarter of the way down the can, and I realized she'd put a bottle of wine in there.
[LAUGHS]

[00:56:15.40] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:56:16.12] DON MUNSON: That was clever. And I thoroughly enjoyed it.

[00:56:18.61] MARK FRANKLIN: You didn't share that?

[00:56:19.55] DON MUNSON: No, I didn't. Well, yes, I did.

[00:56:21.55] MARK FRANKLIN: OK. Did you tell your family much about what you were doing when you talked to them?

[00:56:27.47] DON MUNSON: No. No, did not. By that time my mom was gone. My dad, I think, was simply glad that I was still alive. I don't think he-- he didn't want to pry.

[00:56:37.79] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure. Get much news about what was going on back in the States? I kind of alluded to that earlier, about news from home and what was going on back in the country.

[00:56:46.25] DON MUNSON: Like I say, because I was at battalion headquarters for the second half of the tour, I did get to read the Stars and Stripes periodically. And it was funny reading about what was happening in Khe Sanh and Operation PEGASUS while you're in Khe Sanh and Operation PEGASUS. But other than that, no, it was a very superficial awareness of what was going on. You had a higher sense of priority, what was in front of you right now.

[00:57:21.27] DON MUNSON: Came home in late '68. At that time the biggest thing was producing young officers to fill the ranks of the military. And they always say, your career field should be balanced between command time, staff time, and instructor time. And of course, all over the United States of America there were reserve officer training units that had openings. And so I ended up with another two-year assignment as an instructor at the University of Delaware.

[00:57:55.02] MARK FRANKLIN: What was that like?

[00:57:55.92] DON MUNSON: Fun assignment. Well, particularly good because the University of Delaware is on the East Coast. And at that time there was an awful lot of antiwar protesting going on in cities like Washington and Philadelphia. Skip over us and go up to Jersey and into New York. But Delaware is a-- kind of a conservative-- I hate to say rural, but yeah, it's more rural than the rest of the coastline.

[00:58:24.16] And when I got there, there were four other guys, all from the Cav, that had been assigned to that same location. And I was, again, the senior. So I got the seniors, which is the best of the assignments you can have in an ROTC unit. And because I had Ranger training, I got the guys that were into being a little cut above.

[00:58:45.88] And yeah, we had a great professor of military science, an old colonel by the name of Frank Nemethy, who had been an old 101st Airborne. And he let these young majors take the bit in the mouth and run with it. I was able to increase our volunteer-- in my unit, the little Ranger outfit, we started out with 25, ended up with 150.

[00:59:14.29] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:59:14.59] DON MUNSON: Yeah, they liked what we did. We did all the kinds of things you do at Ranger school that sound dangerous, and they're mostly fun-- did a lot of mountaineering and rappelling and stuff like that.

[00:59:25.39] MARK FRANKLIN: When you came back, did you come back on military aircraft, or commercial?

[00:59:29.32] DON MUNSON: It was a commercial aircraft.

[00:59:31.60] MARK FRANKLIN: What was that like? Describe that journey back home.

[00:59:33.62] DON MUNSON: Oh, let me tell you, it's the liftoff that's the first part and about all the rest of it you're sound asleep. But yeah, to see a round-eyed girl for the first time after a year in a foreign country is always a joy and a pleasure. And they were little sweethearts. They did a great job.

[00:59:52.15] MARK FRANKLIN: What was your reception like when you landed and got home?

[00:59:55.03] DON MUNSON: I didn't have the problem that a lot of people had. And I understand where the country was at that time. Maybe it was just timing, or whatever. But no, as I walked through the terminal, I didn't have any rudeness.

[01:00:12.82] And when I got to Delaware, as I say, it's more conservative. It's a lot more patriotic, I think, than I appear-- than some of the larger cities that had the demonstrations. So no, I thoroughly enjoyed most of my time.

[01:00:32.74] MARK FRANKLIN: After your ROTC assignment at the University of Delaware, you stayed in the military?

[01:00:37.15] DON MUNSON: I did. And from there, I went to the Command and General Staff College. And by that time, I was starting to become a senior major. And they began to say, if you have aspirations for staying in the military for a full career, you probably are going to want an advanced degree. You probably want to do assignments in this level and this.

[01:00:57.28] And Department of the Army at that time had also come up with the realization that people serving in the combat arms, particularly infantry, armor, artillery, don't have the same marketable skill, say-- they've got a great work ethic record. They've got great managerial and executive skills, but those don't really transfer as much in the mind of the hiring authority in civilian life.

[01:01:21.86] So what they did is came up with a program called dual track. And dual track meant we'd like you to have a secondary skill. And if you're going to go back to an advanced degree program, pick a field in one of the following.

[01:01:34.99] And they would show you some of the fields that were a major contribution to the Army, but also would probably give you a foot in the door if you went out trying to be hired after your career was over. And it just so happened, I still felt, first of all, the best assignment I'd ever had other than combat command was my time in Special Forces.

[01:02:00.85] Well, Special Forces was all oriented toward Russia and the Warsaw Pact, not the least of which is Bad Tolz sits down in the Bavarian Alps. And right about half an hour away is a little lovely city called Garmisch. And Garmisch is a ski capital of Europe. And I loved to go to Garmisch every weekend. And so I had fond memories of Germany. And it just so happened that Garmisch was also the headquarters of the US Army Foreign Area Specialty Program for Russia and Eastern Europe.

[01:02:40.15] So I had visions of another two years in Garmisch, Germany and applied for the Foreign Area Program. And they said, a) you're accepted, and b) we'll help you get into college. And when you finish there, we're going to send you on an immersion program in Eastern Europe.

[01:03:00.46] And I said, yeah, I know about Eastern Europe. I'm going to be in Garmisch, Germany. I said, no, no, no, no, we've got you slated for the only one of the East European countries-- of all of the countries of Eastern Europe, there's only one that allows an exchange program with the United States Army. And that's Tito's Yugoslavia.

[01:03:18.31] So I ended up-- instead of being in Garmisch, Germany, I was over in Yugoslavia. And loved every minute of it. The Yugoslav people were wonderful. The country was communist. That meant the government was, but the people were all very Western. And they loved all the Western freedoms. And they snuck out every chance. They even went over to Italy and come back with Western styles. And yeah, I love the Yugoslav people.

[01:03:44.69] And it was not one country, it was seven countries, ruled by a dictator. So they were all in line. And I remember, I would ask them, what what's it like? Wouldn't you rather be in Western-- oh no, we're doing fine. And of course what they were comparing with under this guy where we now have electricity and running water versus World War I where we didn't have that. What the hell, this is a good lifestyle.

[01:04:07.88] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[01:04:09.05] DON MUNSON: All things are relative.

[01:04:10.37] MARK FRANKLIN: So it worked for them.

[01:04:11.21] DON MUNSON: That's right.

[01:04:12.02] MARK FRANKLIN: What did you do after that training?

[01:04:14.30] DON MUNSON: Then they sent me to a Pentanence tour in Washington, DC. I was originally slated to be out in one of these offshoot annexes, which they called the research arm of Defense Intelligence. And the research arm is like being the librarian. You go back in these old dusty corridors, and you got books. And it's all of the background research, and they write the Foreign Area Program coverage on the various countries in which we deploy people.

[01:04:53.03] But when I went in and reported to the man that was going to ultimately assign me, I found out that he was unhappy with his job in the Pentagon, because he was in current operations. And current operations is what's happening today, never mind what happened last year and 50 years ago. And he didn't want to be in estimates, which is what's going to happen five years from now. This is the assignment that requires you really to be involved.

[01:05:23.54] Because that's what everyone wants. Give the briefing today. I want to know what's going on right now and how's that impact tomorrow. And so he said, you know, why don't you take my job, and I'll go take your job out in the library. And I said, I love it. And I did. Because it meant every day the director of the DIA, the Defense Intelligence Agency, would come in. We'd give him the briefing.

[01:05:47.96] We had a pot going because it included not only the Soviets but also the Warsaw Pact. And it just so happened that DIA included as part of the Warsaw Pact Albania, which was not technically in the Warsaw Pact. So my Intel specialists all had a pot going. You'd throw a quarter a week into there.

[01:06:12.62] The first guy that could get an article that mentioned Albania in the daily briefing collects the pot. That thing got up to about \$400. And they would do anything to try to win that. China is doing something terrible, and Albania agrees. No, no, that's not going to cut it. They would scratch that out of the briefing.

[01:06:34.28] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow, so you were part of the presentations, too.

[01:06:36.50] DON MUNSON: I did. And I loved it. Because I had, as the chief of the Soviet/Warsaw branch for current affairs, I had a Soviet specialty sub division-- had Army, had Navy, Air Force, and missiles and space launch, and one other-- political military affairs.

[01:06:59.30] But the Navy analyst was one of these guys-- I just loved him-- he was the quintessential slob genius. I mean, the guy was just brilliant, and he could piece things together. And he had this photographic memory of things he'd read a month or a week ago. But he never combed his hair. He had a five-o'clock shadow all the time, had his tie undone. But brilliant.

[01:07:27.13] And he put together a briefing. It was just an intelligence item at the time, but it was such a good item that the division chief said, turn that into a briefing. We're going to send that one up to the head of-- director of DIA, who at that time was General Sam Wilson-- a World War II Merrill's Marauder. What a great guy he was-- and one of the guys you interviewed.

[01:07:52.21] Anyway, what he had found was that an exercise that the Soviets did in Eastern Germany, where they occupied. Every six months, they would rotate units in and out of Eastern Germany. And we would track that. In fact, they would notify us, so that we don't think that something's amiss and there be an unfortunate misunderstanding.

[01:08:17.05] So we knew that they were doing exchanges of troops in the forward area. The Navy, meanwhile, was having exercises, just as we do. And these were communication exercises and deployment and exercises in mutual communications. At the same time, the Air Force has worldwide exercises.

[01:08:37.25] Well, they would all take place at different times of the year. And this little genius said, that exercise that usually took place in April is now taking place in May. And this Navy exercise is taking place at the same time. And that Air Force global exercise is taking place at the same time. We don't know that they're going to war. But if they ever do, this is probably what it's going to look like.

[01:09:02.27] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[01:09:02.92] DON MUNSON: Well, that got everybody's attention. So I ended up-- I told him, you're going to have to go brief that. And the division commander looked at him and said, Munson, you better brief this one. [LAUGHS] And I felt terrible telling him that. But he said, I don't want to brief the damn thing.

[01:09:19.05] So I briefed it to our director of DIA, who took it up to the State Department and briefed it there. He then came and got me and said, we've got to go brief it over at the White House. And we were going to brief the President of the United States, who at that time was Ronald Reagan. Unfortunately, he was tied up in some worldwide problem-- couldn't come down. But George Bush came down, so I got to brief--

[01:09:46.16] MARK FRANKLIN: You got to brief him.

[01:09:46.94] DON MUNSON: Yeah.

[01:09:47.48] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[01:09:47.72] DON MUNSON: Bush number 41.

[01:09:49.13] MARK FRANKLIN: How about that? Yeah,

[01:09:50.48] DON MUNSON: That was enjoyable.

[01:09:52.25] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you have any trouble adjusting to life after-- ?

[01:09:53.61] DON MUNSON: I did not. And I probably should have, if I was smart and understood how unprepared I was. I should have been nervous. But it just so happened there was a dear friend of mine, that I'd known from 10th Special Forces in Germany, who had gotten out a couple of years earlier. And he'd gone down to Dallas, Texas. And he got there just as Ronald Reagan had-- oh, what's the term? He had deregulated the banks.

[01:10:23.15] Because after the Carter administration, inflation had taken off. It was up around 20 percent, or something like that. And the banks were bleeding money, because they had all their credit out at three percent and they're paying interest at twenty percent. They were losing money big time. And the deregulation said, you banks can get into more speculative ventures and save yourself.

[01:10:48.87] We're not going to bail you out-- which I wish we had done that in several other administrations. But the fact of the matter was banks would open their vault to somebody that had a great venture and was willing to let the bank participate at better than three percent.

[01:11:07.60] So I went down and joined him for a couple of years and things went just gangbusters. We were doing great and making money like we knew what we were doing. And all of a sudden, there was another one of those Middle Eastern wars, that seem to pop up every 7 or 8 years-- where the Arabs and the Israelis disagreed with one another.

[01:11:28.98] And the Israelis, for the fifth time in a row, were declared the victors of the war when the major powers came in, forced separation, and a negotiated settlement. And the Saudi Arabians and OPEC said, we need to get America's attention. They just keep treating us like second-class citizens.

[01:11:54.36] So they overproduced. Instead of cutting off the supply of oil, they overproduced the oil. And the price just plummeted. And states like Texas and Oklahoma and California and Louisiana just took it in the ear. And we didn't have deep pockets. The company went out of business.

[01:12:15.99] MARK FRANKLIN: Was it a finance company?

[01:12:17.43] DON MUNSON: How's that?

[01:12:17.85] MARK FRANKLIN: Was it a finance company?

[01:12:18.75] DON MUNSON: No, it was in development-- real estate development. Yeah, we were doing mostly industrial projects and that kind of thing. But the good friend of mine with whom I had kept in contact over the years said, if you don't mind traveling-- well, that's all I did in the military was travel. He said, there's an opening, and they're looking for people that have the kind of background you have. It's in Saudi Arabia. I said-- wasn't sure my wife would be happy with that.

[01:12:48.04] MARK FRANKLIN: And so you're married now

[01:12:48.84] DON MUNSON: Yes, I was at that time. And she said, listen, why don't you go do it for about six months. And a) if it's what you think it is, and b) if there's housing over there, I'll come and join you.

[01:13:02.58] So I thought this is a good compromise. So she stayed home, kept the house. I went over and came back six months later and said, this is great. All these things you hear about how terrible things are and how they treat women like second-class citizens, not true.

[01:13:18.54] Yeah, they ask you to cover up when you go outside. But as long as you're in your own compound, which we lived in a little American community, it's Little America. And if you want to go downtown, how difficult it is to put a little black scarf on, or something like that. And that's all they wanted. They just wanted you to nod to their conservative attitudes. And so we stayed over there for almost eight years.

[01:13:43.92] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[01:13:44.40] DON MUNSON: And yeah, I got very close to the company that had hired us. It was composed-- it was a Department of Defense program. And the company that had the contract worked closely-- it was a bunch of retired generals who worked closely with the Pentagon. And after I finished that eight years, they called me back and said, we've got a problem.

[01:14:08.55] And-- same kind of thing you just did over there in Saudi Arabia, we'd like you to help us with a problem we're having in a place called Bosnia. So I got to spend a year in Bosnia and came home and said, OK, thank you very much, guys. I appreciate it, but I'm out of here now. I'm going to go retire.

[01:14:26.13] And about three, four years later, I got a call from them again. Listen, I know this is-- and they dangled some cheese that I couldn't refuse. And so I went back this time to a place called Iraq. And got the-- I had the dubious distinction of being in the headquarters of the Coalition Authority, the CPA, the Coalition Provisional Authority, of Paul Bremer.

[01:14:52.27] And he worked right down the hall. I was in operations and doing the same kind of planning I did in Vietnam and the rest of my career. So it was fun. So my post-military assignment was a bunch of military assignments.

[01:15:07.90] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you stay in touch with your fellow veterans from Vietnam?

[01:15:10.36] DON MUNSON: I do. I try to. And of course I'm very, very involved in the local Dallas chapter of one of many veterans organizations. I belong to a bunch of them. But the one I'm really devoted to is called the Military Order of the World Wars, which was established by John J. Pershing at the end of World War I. When he came back home at the end of that war, he

could have run for king if he wanted to. He was treated like royalty. The people gave him parades and named streets after him.

[01:15:42.67] And anyway, he called an assembly of his staff from Europe and said, this wave of patriotism in this country is great, and we need to perpetuate that. And so he said, I want us to start an organization and devote ourselves to passing on these customs and traditions to the next generation. So the order-- the MOWW order-- devotes itself primarily to a lot of youth activities. We're involved in the ROTC programs. We're involved in Boy and Girl Scouting.

[01:16:18.31] And the biggest and best thing I think we do is something called the Youth Leadership Conferences. So that every summer we in Texas-- the four North Texas chapters-- put together fundraisers. And at \$350 a head, we send about 300 kids off to these conferences at one of the four universities that sponsors them.

[01:16:46.31] And we teach them things they're not getting in high school anymore-- a lot of patriotism, a lot of citizenship, great deal of leadership. And we talk about the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. And it's really great.

[01:16:59.84] And everybody that's ever been to one of those, particularly all the guest speakers that we bring in and all the parents that sit in and listen to them, will come away with the same statement: the future of our country is in good hands.

[01:17:13.46] MARK FRANKLIN: Did this organization develop that curriculum, or did you have an outside source?

[01:17:16.22] DON MUNSON: Yes, we did. No, we developed that.

[01:17:17.60] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[01:17:18.12] DON MUNSON: Yeah.

[01:17:22.74] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you think your experience in Vietnam affected your life afterwards, or did it?

[01:17:26.85] DON MUNSON: I don't think it did. Yeah, I really worried about that for a long time, that maybe I took it too lightly-- maybe I didn't make the contribution that I thought I had. But the fact of the matter was I came back and said, I did my duty. Again I'll say, I took great pride in the fact that while I was in command nobody died.

[01:17:49.69] MARK FRANKLIN: You didn't lost anybody. That's amazing.

[01:17:50.59] DON MUNSON: I didn't lose anybody.

[01:17:51.79] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you think-- or did your Vietnam experience affect the way you think about troops coming home off the battlefields today?

[01:17:58.81] DON MUNSON: I do. And I have the greatest admiration for the troops that we have today. I don't understand sometimes why we're in some of the far flung places that we keep sending people. I read the excuse of-- not the excuse, but the rationale that the local politicians will spin on why this is necessary and why we're staying so long. But the ground-pounding Soldier, just as good over in Afghanistan and Iraq as he was in Vietnam.

[01:18:35.35] I know a lot of people look back and say, well, that's the war we lost. The military didn't lose that war. The military never lost a battle in that war. It was the politicians who cut off the money to support when we pulled out. And the Vietnamization program was to provide them enough equipment and enough support and enough training that they could do the job themselves. The day the North attacked, they just collapsed like a house of cards. It was kind of sad.

[01:19:09.05] MARK FRANKLIN: What do you think that war meant to your generation?

[01:19:11.93] DON MUNSON: To my generation? I think sad. I think there were a lot of people in my generation that served. As I recall, the last time I read it was something like four-and-a-half million had participated over the ten years that they call the Vietnam Era. And they would have liked a better outcome-- kind of like I wish we'd had a better outcome with the women's soccer game yesterday.

[01:19:36.43] MARK FRANKLIN: [LAUGHS] How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[01:19:41.96] DON MUNSON: Good question. Because we're now celebrating, or we did very recently, the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War, the thing that I think back on when I was a young person and 50 years before that had been the First World War, the First World War was about as close to me as the Revolutionary War or the Civil War.

[01:20:07.91] It was ancient history. So it's very personal to me. I remember being there. I remember what I did. But when I look in the face of a little 17-year-old, I say, you know what, he sees me like I saw the First World War veteran. It's just ancient history.

[01:20:27.02] MARK FRANKLIN: Do you have any lessons that you took from Vietnam that you'd like to pass on to future generations?

[01:20:31.40] DON MUNSON: The lesson-- and I'm plagiarizing this, because one of my favorite military movies-- and I go to every war movie that I can see, simply because old Soldiers never die, they just fade away. My favorite was Saving Private Ryan. That opening scene of the invasion of Normandy is heart stopping. It is so realistically well done. Hats off to Tom Hanks and everybody else involved in that movie.

[01:21:05.10] But as the movie goes on and tells its story, it's really one about the honor that they're bringing to save one person-- because that mother had given up so much. And at the end of the movie, the character Ryan goes back to Normandy and visits the grave and finds the captain who had given his life for him.

[01:21:33.18] And his wife comes up, because she sees that he's been visibly affected by the memory of that moment, and said, are you OK? And he looked at her and said, have I been a good man? And that's what I like to think. Have I been a good man?

[01:21:50.49] MARK FRANKLIN: My life mattered, yeah.

[01:21:51.51] DON MUNSON: Right.

[01:21:58.35] DON MUNSON: I've been there several times. I know a bunch of the guys up there.

[01:22:01.62] MARK FRANKLIN: What are your impressions of that memorial?

[01:22:03.84] DON MUNSON: Well, I was like a lot of people. I wanted some statue of a man on a horse, or something dramatic with-- but it's a beautiful monument. I know people said, no, it's an upside down V-- you know, it's a hole in the ground. But it evokes memories because carved into that Wall are names, and we know those names.

[01:22:29.16] And even if you don't-- if you look at that monument and see those names up there, particularly if you read the names, you realize that's the melting pot that's America. They come from all over the world. And it doesn't take any genius to realize that represents the youth of our country. Almost everybody up there is a teenager or 20-year-old. It really leaves a lasting impression.

[01:22:56.64] Now, I've also been to the World War II Memorial. And there's a particular wall. And the comparison is painful. Because in the World War II Memorial, rather than having a name for everybody who's lost because of the obvious volume is so much greater, instead they put a star for every 100 that had died. And there's 1,000 stars. The star, while it's symbolic, doesn't carry that same visceral impression as seeing a man's name up there.

[01:23:36.97] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah. The Korean War Memorial has done the same thing now. They've--

[01:23:41.56] DON MUNSON: And I love that one. I particularly love the Korean War Memorial at night, because they've got the little single light that comes up from the foot. And the shadows on the faces, that's creepy beautiful.

[01:24:00.11] DON MUNSON: I think it's great. And as I mentioned to you before we got started, we participated in an event down at Dallas to recognize those who had participated in the Vietnam War and-- about 500 people-- 500 people who had participated attended that gathering. A congressman came and gave a very powerful presentation. My friend Alan was there-- made a presentation.

[01:24:32.93] And then we had a presentation-- I thought this was a really nice touch. A young 30-year-old gentleman who was a native of Vietnam came to the United States as a child with

just the shirt on his back-- no shoes, culture shock, diet problems-- just thrown off of the refugee boat into the new country.

[01:25:00.32] And of course, 16 years later, he's an honor graduate from his local high school-- went on and got his college degree-- became a commissioned officer in the military. And we asked him, why? And he said, I owe it to this country.

[01:25:16.19] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[01:25:16.58] DON MUNSON: Yeah, so.

[01:25:17.93] MARK FRANKLIN: Thank you so, so much--

[01:25:19.40] DON MUNSON: Thank you. Thank you so much.

[01:25:20.18] MARK FRANKLIN: --for spending your time with us today.

[01:25:21.70] DON MUNSON: You guys do do great work.