

Okerman, John US Marine Corps

[00:00:16.52] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:00:21.05] JOHN OKERMAN: 24. I have to think back on that.

[00:00:27.08] JOE GALLOWAY: An older guy.

[00:00:28.64] JOHN OKERMAN: I was an older one, yes. JOHN OKERMAN: I was single. I had graduated from college, I crammed a four year program into five years and then went on for a master's degree, so that's one reason I was older. Just before I joined the Marines I found the love of my life and I fell in love but I had to put it on hold. So when I went to Vietnam we were engaged.

[00:01:06.32] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your hometown?

[00:01:08.36] JOHN OKERMAN: I was born and raised in Billings, Montana.

[00:01:12.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, you were officer or enlisted?

[00:01:15.98] JOHN OKERMAN: Officer.

[00:01:16.73] JOE GALLOWAY: You were-- how did you come to be commissioned? Through ROTC?

[00:01:22.34] JOHN OKERMAN: I went through Officer Candidate School. I had been looking at options since the end of my freshman year in college but didn't really want to make that kind of commitment I thought I might change my mind. And so when I received my bachelor's degree just before I went down to the Marine officer-- selection officer here in Seattle, I applied, I passed the test. They said, you'll hear from us probably by the middle of the summer. I never did, so I went to graduate school here at the University of Washington. I was-- received an assistant-- a teaching assistantship there. And I heard from the Marines about October of the year I started my assistantship. They said, congratulations. You can start in January at OCS. I said, thanks but no thanks, I'm in graduate school. Maybe next year. And so the following year I did join the Marines.

[00:02:32.55] JOHN OKERMAN: With the Marines every one, officer or enlisted, is trained as a rifleman. And that starts almost from the first day of OCS or boot camp. And I went through OCS, or Officer Candidate School. And so that-- I had 12 weeks of training there with the basic skills that every Marine has. Once I was commissioned we went through 23 weeks of what is called the Basic School in Quantico--

[00:03:06.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Basic School, yeah.

[00:03:08.28] JOHN OKERMAN: --in Quantico, Virginia. And they train you-- first they train you on how to be an officer of Marines, but they also train you on how to be an infantry officer.

So technically upon graduation from Officer-- or from the Basic School all of us are trained as an infantry officer and at least to be assigned a rifle platoon-- rifle company platoon. I was designated as an artillery officer, so upon graduation from Officer-- from the Basic School I went on to 12 weeks of artillery school at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. And that's where they trained us in everything you need to know about being an artillery officer and firing cannons and all the things that a junior lieutenant would do once they're assigned to a battery. JOHN OKERMAN: It was October 12th I believe, it was a Wednesday. And I remember that because I--

[00:04:19.99] JOE GALLOWAY: What year?

[00:04:20.69] JOHN OKERMAN: 1960-- 1968. I graduated from artillery school on Friday the 5th of October, I believe it was at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, drove back to Billings, Montana, picked up my girlfriend along the way, and on that following Wednesday the 12th I was on an airplane headed to Vietnam. So they did not--

[00:04:52.78] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't waste any time with you.

[00:04:54.62] JOHN OKERMAN: They didn't waste any time. Yes sir, that's exactly right.

[00:05:00.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe your first impressions on landing in Vietnam.

[00:05:05.68] JOHN OKERMAN: I was pretty nervous. I did-- first, I knew that-- we changed planes in Okinawa, and oftentimes, you maybe had a four or five day delay. I don't know, my group didn't have a delay. It was maybe-- I think we spent the night.

[00:05:22.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Switch planes and gone.

[00:05:24.28] JOHN OKERMAN: We were on the next one, I remember it was a Continental Airlines, contract flight. And I was nervous. I couldn't really enjoy the flight. The stewardesses were extremely nice. And I expected the plane to land and there'd be bombs bursting and antiaircraft fire and all these things happening. And we basically landed, I remember this Marine Corp master sergeant said, we have chow in the mess hall that was right there at the airfield. I even remember it was decorated with plaid tablecloths. And we had spaghetti. And so it wasn't quite like I imagined. And that night the accommodations were quite comfortable. It was a bed with--

[00:06:13.53] JOE GALLOWAY: They would get worse.

[00:06:15.34] JOHN OKERMAN: They would. Yes sir.

[00:06:18.05] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your initial duties?

[00:06:20.41] JOHN OKERMAN: I was assigned to an artillery battery. It was Delta Battery of the 2nd Battalion of the 12th Marine Regiment as part of the 3rd Marine Division in the northern part of Vietnam, northern I Corps. And I was initially a fire direction officer. So my job--

[00:06:47.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Where was your battery located?

[00:06:49.60] JOHN OKERMAN: It was located-- it was headquartered in Dong Ha, which is north, between 6 and 12 miles from the demilitarized zone. And the battery was never there in Dong Ha. We were out on mountaintops out to the west.

[00:07:08.17] JOE GALLOWAY: They moved you around.

[00:07:10.06] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes sir. They would move us to fire support bases. We would either go to one that had already been built or, in at least one case I remember, I was the advance party. We were sent to the top of a mountain, they brought in a bulldozer, he cleared some ground, and that became a fire support base. And then the battery followed shortly after that. JOHN OKERMAN: Well, there was somewhat of a routine with the battery. You would-- it was-- first of all it was 24 hours a day, seven days a week so that was part of the routine. And there was-- when you arrived in country there was a calendar, usually had a picture on it with numbers, and you would cross off the numbers. And after a while you got mixed up on the days of the week because they were all the same.

[00:08:14.18] We would start about 7:00 when everybody-- zero 6, zero 7 in the morning, everybody was expected to be up and working. Essentially we would shoot fire missions throughout the day, the gun crews would do maintenance on the guns, we might move ammo around, we would get resupply missions. And then in the evening we would start to do the night shifts. And so the night shift depended-- for a junior officer in the battery it depended on how many of us there were. There was usually two or three. So you would maybe work from 7:00, 8:00 in the evening till 2:00 in the morning, and then you could go to bed, and then get up about 5:00 or 6:00 the next morning. Sometimes you had the mid watch so you would go to bed till 10:00 in the evening, get up, then work till 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning. So you didn't get a lot of sleep. That was pretty-- sleep was pretty sparse, you get used to that.

[00:09:27.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me about your job as a junior officer in a fire direction center. Were you running a gun crew or on the radios working out fire plots and things like that?

[00:09:41.96] JOHN OKERMAN: We were on the radios working out the fire plots. So I had a crew of three to five Marines and we would receive a fire mission, we would plot it out, where the target was located, the data that you would put on the guns. The Marine Corps-- the Army had started using computers, the Marine Corps decided to wait. So we used firing tables. Those are books of numbers. And we would plot that out and then we would send the data down to the gun crews. And there were six guns in a battery. And these were 105 millimeter howitzers, basically they were from World War II.

[00:10:34.55] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like, your quarters if you had some?

[00:10:41.64] JOHN OKERMAN: They were out in the bush, on the mountain tops. Your living quarter was basically a poncho liner.

[00:10:52.96] JOE GALLOWAY: And a hole in the ground, if you dug one.

[00:10:54.51] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes, you dug a hole and you just-- I was able to get an air mattress, we called them rubber ladies. And so I had an air mattress because it made it a little more comfortable. You slept on a poncho, that was your hooch and then the poncho liner was your blanket, so to speak. And sometimes you would sleep under a howitzer, just wherever there was room. It was pretty limited space.

[00:11:26.08] JOE GALLOWAY: What was the chow like?

[00:11:28.32] [LAUGH]

[00:11:29.71] JOHN OKERMAN: Oh, it was pretty much the same. You had 12 choices.

[00:11:33.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, C-rations.

[00:11:34.66] JOHN OKERMAN: C-rations. Meal Combat, individual. I learned both as the fire direction officer and then a forward observer with the infantry-- I found that I could live pretty well for two to three days on what we called the John Wayne crackers. Those were the round crackers, they had 53 holes. And I liked the peanut butter.

[00:12:02.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Peanut butter.

[00:12:03.03] JOHN OKERMAN: You could do peanut butter. And it was hard for them to mess up the fruit that came in cans or the applesauce. And then after about three days you had to have a main course.

[00:12:14.72] [LAUGH]

[00:12:18.78] JOE GALLOWAY: What responsibilities consumed most of your time? Obviously the time in the fire direction center. You were putting in how many hours a day there?

[00:12:31.83] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, I think overall, I mean, I would say if you were working 12 to 16 hours-- probably 12 to 16 hours a day maybe a bit more--

[00:12:45.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Seven days a week.

[00:12:46.89] JOHN OKERMAN: --seven days a week. If you had the night watch you were basically the officer on duty. So fire missions would come in-- generally the battalion would send down fire missions for you to do, they called them harassing and interdiction fires, H&I fires. My impression was they were more harassing to us than they were the enemy.

[00:13:15.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Nobody is going to sleep through it.

[00:13:18.22] JOHN OKERMAN: That's right. And they would wait till about 11 o'clock at night before they would send these missions. And they were basically a battery, one round at a

target. That meant you would work up the data on the guns, once all the guns had all the information you would have the battery fire one round and then you'd go on to the next target and repeat the process. It was a process if it started at 11:00 to get through all the targets they assigned probably went till 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning. And it-- because it would take you all between 10 and 15 minutes as I recall per shot, per target.

[00:14:09.56] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were blowing up the jungle.

[00:14:13.33] JOHN OKERMAN: I thought for the most part we were blowing up the jungle. I never had any feedback that we--

[00:14:20.31] JOE GALLOWAY: We killed a bunch of them.

[00:14:21.77] JOHN OKERMAN: Yeah.

[00:14:28.55] JOHN OKERMAN: My impressions were very limited because I had-- I really only saw the people-- I never-- I can't recall, I think maybe once or twice I talked to some Vietnamese, I think one was a barber back in the rear. So I really didn't have any contact with them. My impressions were that they were very primitive, and of course they-- sometimes you couldn't tell who the good guy and the bad guy was. The enemy, the South Vietnamese, from the North Vietnamese, or Vietnamese who was a farmer in the field at night was a North Vietnamese in the evening out to do damage to you. So my impression has since changed quite a bit because many of them live here now and I'd say that is one of the things that I wish I could have had more contact being over there.

[00:15:41.21] JOHN OKERMAN: The friendships were very, very strong. My impressions of my fellow Marines was very positive. I thought about that question. I would say for me it was sort of a life changing experience. I stayed in the Marine Corps for 30 years. Most of it was Reserves, but what I saw is, I think there's a number of things, but number 1, unlike a civilian job where you work with the people from 8:00 to 5:00 and then you go home, they go home, and you do other things. You're with these people in Vietnam 24/7 and they become-- not all of them, but you develop very close friendships and very close relationships. And because of the conditions you're working under, a combat type condition, I think that's somewhat unique as compared to a lot of civilian jobs. And I felt that those Marines-- and I would say this for all the people in Vietnam as a group, it was a sense of service. I realize some were drafted, but it was a sense of service to the country. And as I reflect back on it I have even stronger feelings that way.

[00:17:14.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial or social backgrounds during your time in Vietnam that you might never have had in civilian life?

[00:17:26.86] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes sir, I feel like I did. I would say it was more on the social backgrounds because I can't recall a lot of the racial mix that I see in the service today. But I felt it was social backgrounds. I think there were people there that I had a chance to interact with them and talk with them in a way that-- I do think I would have missed that had I not had that experience.

[00:18:08.79] JOE GALLOWAY: You obviously didn't have a lot of time for recreation or off duty, but when you did have some what did you do?

[00:18:18.87] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, if it was out in the bush, you read. You could read a book or you could sleep when you had a chance. So that's what I saw as recreation. If you got back to the rear, which there were-- we did get back, you could go to movies. They had-- they had a lot of movies so that was always fun to do. You'd go to the club and drink beer or just eat hot chow.

[00:18:59.52] JOHN OKERMAN: My memories of the movies would be, as I look back now, they were clearly of the late '60s, the hairstyles, the kinds of things. The movies I recall, but I think it was just before I went to Vietnam, that really stand out are Doctor Zhivago, I do recall that. I recall The Odd Couple, the movie. So those are ones that stand out. When I returned from Vietnam M*A*S*H was a popular movie. Only I never really got it that it was a satire on the military, so it was-- in Vietnam. So it was more of a comedy to me. But those would be the ones that stood out. There was a lady who wrote novels, and I can't recall her name, but they were California girls and things like that, but I can't recall.

[00:20:00.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Sounds like Jacqueline Susann.

[00:20:02.00] JOHN OKERMAN: That is the one, she is the one. I do remember reading some of her novels.

[00:20:15.23] JOE GALLOWAY: And your area of operations was totally focused in northern I Corps?

[00:20:21.65] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes sir.

[00:20:22.34] JOE GALLOWAY: The whole tour?

[00:20:23.99] JOHN OKERMAN: I was there-- for my time in Vietnam we were in the northern I Corps area. It seemed like there were three separate areas, we would call them areas of operation. And it seemed like we would just go from one to another, but wherever we were the enemy wasn't is pretty much how it was until--

[00:20:52.29] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a good arrangement.

[00:20:53.58] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, it actually is. I mean, it's a little different than I suspected-- I expected when you arrived in Vietnam it would just be constant firefights and it would never end. And I found out from my experience it was a lot of boredom. It's long periods of boredom followed by moments of sheer terror.

[00:21:21.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, but don't complain about it.

[00:21:23.61] JOHN OKERMAN: No, I wasn't. That's exactly right.

[00:21:28.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions that you witnessed? Combat operations in which you participated?

[00:21:38.09] JOHN OKERMAN: I looked at that question and I tried to come up with the names of some of the operations. I looked in my record book, I couldn't find those records. But I remember being in Operation DEWEY CANYON. That's where the enemy and the Marines and the Army were in the same spot at one time. And the way-- in my experience, I think it was fortunate but at the time when DEWEY CANYON started I was a forward observer with Alpha Company, 1st Battalion, 9th Marines.

[00:22:24.23] JOE GALLOWAY: So they had put you out with a unit.

[00:22:27.02] JOHN OKERMAN: They had put me out with a unit. I was out there about three months. And as it turned out, about 10 days-- 10 or 11 days after I left the company everyone in the command group of the company was either killed or wounded. The company commander received the Medal of Honor. And our command group was about 10 people. The company commander was Lieutenant Wesley Fox.

[00:23:00.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[00:23:00.70] JOHN OKERMAN: And he had received the Medal of Honor.

[00:23:04.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes he did.

[00:23:05.68] JOHN OKERMAN: And I often thought about it because I was sent back to an artillery school and they said, why don't you stay? And I thought about it and thought, no I should do what I was told. And I recently learned that one of the reasons everyone in the command group of these 10 people were either killed or wounded is that a mortar round landed right in the center of the group. So it was pretty tough time.

[00:23:34.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Wesley Fox is a fine officer.

[00:23:38.16] JOHN OKERMAN: Wesley Fox in my mind-- certain people, they're born or they're born and raised to have certain jobs. Wesley Fox was put on this Earth to be a Marine Corps infantryman and leader of-- infantry officer. And I can't think of a better person for that. And he was the kind of person that you would follow not because he was in charge and ordered you to you did it for because he was Wesley Fox.

[00:24:15.03] JOE GALLOWAY: He was a leader.

[00:24:16.00] JOHN OKERMAN: He was a true leader. He was the right man for the job. He actually had been in Vietnam a year and he extended for six months to have command of this company. He is a Marine's Marine. I feel proud and honored, that's one of the highlights of-- that I had an opportunity to work for him. And it's just the luck of the draw.

[00:24:51.93] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your emotional state at the time?

[00:24:57.59] JOHN OKERMAN: I think it's pretty normal, pretty calm. My personality, I'm pretty much a laid back type of person. I'm not what people maybe stereotype as the Marine officer, especially a ground officer. I can accept a lot of things, I'm pretty relaxed, pretty accepting. And once I was there and realized what you had to do, I was accepting of that. And I actually-- for me I liked my time in Vietnam. I was engaged to be married, so I planned to return home at the end of my tour. But according to my wife I came close to receiving a Dear John letter. Had I received it-- and we've been married 46 years, so I didn't get it. But had I received it I would have extended in Vietnam. It's a dangerous place but people-- the slang term is people don't mess with you. You don't have all of these inspections and all the things that you do in garrison. You pretty much do your job and people allow you to do that. And in that sense is very positive.

[00:26:32.46] JOHN OKERMAN: It's probably the time I served as the forward observer. And just being out in the bush. That was the slang term, being in the bush. I'm sure you're familiar with that. But it's basically being out in the jungle all the time.

[00:26:51.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Beating the jungle.

[00:26:53.06] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes sir.

[00:26:55.26] JOE GALLOWAY: And you liked that?

[00:26:56.88] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, I guess yes and no, I got used to it. I've reflected on that, I'm not a big camper. I've spent time camping but my idea if you're not at home is if you're traveling stay in a Holiday Inn or something.

[00:27:18.20] JOE GALLOWAY: I had a rule after Vietnam, any time I had to sleep on the ground I charged them Hilton Hotel rates.

[00:27:25.60] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, that's a good one. And I do have-- one of the things I brought back is I take a shower or a bath just about every day. There might be five days in a year I miss doing that, but not often.

[00:27:44.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Me too.

[00:27:45.14] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes. JOHN OKERMAN: I think besides probably the day I left but that one wouldn't count. We did have an in-country R&R at the mouth of the Cua Viet River. It was actually two days and it was extremely good, they were good, great days. It was in December. I would suspect the temperature was in the high 90s, probably 100% humidity, but you were used to it by then. The water was like a bathtub, the ocean water.

[00:28:25.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Lukewarm.

[00:28:27.40] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes, lukewarm. And the sand was so hot you couldn't walk on it. And you could go in the water, you could lay on the beach. They had USO shows, you

could watch movies, there was great food. That was a very relaxing time and I think everybody enjoyed that. So-- excuse me-- I would say that was one of the best times.

[00:28:48.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you get an R&R out of the country?

[00:28:51.97] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes sir, I did.

[00:28:53.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you go and who did you see?

[00:28:56.20] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, I went to Hawaii to see my wife. I always wanted to go to Australia, but I thought I better-- and I did get to Australia later.

[00:29:06.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Or you would have got that Dear John letter.

[00:29:08.47] JOHN OKERMAN: I would have for sure. My wife came with her mother and her aunt to Hawaii. The plane stopped in Guam and the alcohol was pretty cheap so I bought like five bottles of alcohol and I traded them-- I gave them to my future mother-in-law for her daughter. And so we had-- we had five good days.

[00:29:40.03] JOHN OKERMAN: I would say the worst day I had is I was with the rifle company, we were at a fire support base. I can't remember the name of the base, but I had surveyed it in as a second lieutenant, so I knew exactly where we were. We were stuck on this base for about three weeks because it was in January, the weather was socked in, and the helicopters couldn't fly in, they couldn't resupply us, they couldn't extract us. And so we did these night defensive fires which are the harassing and interdiction fires and each day I would plot them farther out.

[00:30:23.33] So for this particular night, and it was towards the end of the three weeks, I had plotted them over 1,000 meters from our position, that's quite a long ways out. And about 12:30 in the morning we received a radio message, stand-by because there might be some friendly fire, but don't be alarmed. And about 1 o'clock-- and 12, it was shortly after that, around 1:00 in the morning, a round landed right in our position. And it killed one Marine, it literally blew him probably 50 to 100 feet up the hill. It severely wounded another Marine and injured a third Marine. And that night we were out there picking up body parts. The biggest body part was probably the size of the tip of your finger. And you could smell it.

[00:31:17.50] JOE GALLOWAY: They knew it was coming, how come they didn't stop it?

[00:31:21.11] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, that's the rest of the story. I was able to plot-- I was able to plot the reverse, where the round came from.

[00:31:33.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, the azimuth.

[00:31:34.80] JOHN OKERMAN: You take the reverse azimuth and you bisect it. And I was pretty good at that. And so I took it right back to another battery. And what had happened, when these artillery batteries were on these mountaintops there are six guns, and they were fairly close

together. And so the Marines used aiming stakes, the old fashioned way. But the aiming stakes because of the tightness they're in much closer to the guns, so it would be easy to get on the wrong aiming stake. Well, one of the guns was on the wrong aiming stake as I recall. And the other thing, which was worse, is the lieutenant who was supposed to do the night watch didn't like to stay up all night so he trained a corporal to do it or taught a corporal. Now, I assume the corporal was well intended, but the corporal wasn't trained to do that. The lieutenant was. So the lieutenant was asleep, the battery commander was out of the area, and just like the perfect storm the round landed right in our position.

[00:32:52.92] JOE GALLOWAY: A cascade of bad effects.

[00:32:56.55] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes sir, exactly right. And I can remember I traced it back. I was right, it went right back to that battery. And then I wrote a report about it, and I wrote it just like I saw it. And the battery commander, two or three weeks later, this was on DEWEY CANYON because I returned to the battery, said, you know John, you wrote a pretty scathing report. Are you sure you don't want to retract anything? And I said, no, sir. That's exactly the way it was. And he didn't pressure me, which I felt very good about because--

[00:33:39.16] JOE GALLOWAY: He figured you had it right.

[00:33:40.77] JOHN OKERMAN: I think he did and--

[00:33:42.81] JOE GALLOWAY: I wonder that you didn't at least consider dropping a round back down that azimuth.

[00:33:49.29] JOHN OKERMAN: [LAUGHS] Yeah. I just knew-- when it happened we didn't know, but I traced it back to that battery.

[00:33:58.44] JOE GALLOWAY: The thing that catches me is that they alerted you, you may get a bad round.

[00:34:03.75] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes. And I can't-- at the time there was a logical reason for that and I don't think it was like the rounds were going to land closer than what we had plotted or something. But it made sense, but not that a round was going to land in our position. And this Marine who was killed was a squad leader, or a section leader, and he had just-- he had warned his troops and they were-- the other two or three Marines-- and they were just sleeping right out in the open like the rest of us were. And the round hit right--

[00:34:42.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Smack in the middle of them.

[00:34:43.35] JOHN OKERMAN: Just-- it would be where you and I are talking it would land right in between us. And so that was the bad day. And that's probably the worst experience, and I'm not sure what the right word would be, closest to combat. I mean, I didn't have my best friend die in my arms or anything like that. But that was pretty bad.

[00:35:13.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty bad. Pretty bad. And you know that somewhere out there was a lieutenant who didn't do his job.

[00:35:18.13] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes. And I suspect-- I know the battery commander was relieved, and he wasn't even there. And I suspect the lieutenant had some consequences-- had some major consequences, too. I never heard. But it was--

[00:35:35.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, you kind of hope that maybe he still lives with the ghost of that man he killed.

[00:35:42.11] JOHN OKERMAN: I would think so. And it was-- I remember a couple of years later, Carol Burnett made a movie, I think it was titled Friendly Fire, and it was a TV movie. But I can still remember watching that movie and I thought, wow, because she played the mother of a son who was killed by friendly fire and I thought, I was on the end of that before it got to the parents. So I thought there was a lot of truth to that movie.

[00:36:22.68] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact if any, did you have with allies? Like the Aussies, the New Zealanders, the Koreans, any of those.

[00:36:34.38] JOHN OKERMAN: I can't recall any contact. When you mentioned Koreans the only thing I can think of is the USO shows had Korean rock bands. But I had some contact with the Army, but even that was limited. So DEWEY CANYON was a joint operation between the Army and the Marines, but--

[00:37:00.97] JOE GALLOWAY: They were in their place and you were in yours.

[00:37:03.31] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes sir. From my perspective at my level it was just Marines.

[00:37:10.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any contact with the South Vietnamese to speak up? By that I mean the army.

[00:37:20.01] JOHN OKERMAN: It was limited. One time-- we had two occasions. One time we were back in the rear and we caught this South Vietnamese soldier. He was stealing stuff from our-- he was in our area. And I think the battery had gone on an in-country R&R and so we were-- a small group of us stayed behind. And so we caught this guy and then we harassed him a little, which we shouldn't have done, but we turned him over to his company commander. and that guy was-- you could tell by his facial expressions, I didn't know what he said, but I had a pretty good idea. He beat this guy and he was not at all pleased. That was the biggest contact we had. So-- that's the biggest contact I had. But they didn't have a real good reputation as I recall. So we didn't seek them out as partners.

[00:38:40.55] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, I had letters. My father had since passed away so my mother would write me and send me care packages. And then my wife, who I was engaged to, I think she wrote a letter most every day. One time we talked on the MARS radio. So you say, hello. Over. So one time-- what I remember about the conversation, which was short because you only had three or four minutes, I said, I love you. Over. And she couldn't hear me, so she asked

the guy. And he said-- he had to communicate-- he said, he loves you. Over. So that was-- but-- quite a bit in terms of letters, certainly not like today with the internet and Skype and all these other technology things.

[00:39:35.86] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news if any, did you receive about the war from home?

[00:39:44.78] JOHN OKERMAN: I'm not sure-- I know I received some news. I'm not sure I was interested in receiving a lot of news. I can remember one time my wife sent me a letter and she said, she had seen on the news that there was incoming from North Vietnam and she was really worried because it was right near the DMZ. And as I was reading the letter I was sitting in a foxhole because we were getting the incoming. But that's what I recall. But I can't recall-- I know I received news, but I don't think I was paying a lot of attention to it and I felt like whatever I received, it was enough, and I think it was somewhat limited.

[00:40:31.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you aware of any particular political or social events or movements going on back home?

[00:40:39.79] JOHN OKERMAN: No sir, not until after I returned. When I was looking at joining the Marines, when I actually was in the-- was in the Marines, and I feel it's my generation or our generation, they were pretty traditional, they weren't protesting they were pretty accepting, kind of like the late '50s and early '60s. It's when I returned from Vietnam, that's when I became aware of it, or it might have been just prior to returning. But I didn't realize there was all this protest and all this going on. I know the hairstyles had changed from short hair to sideburns and-- excuse me-- those were changes I missed, so-- that I learned about later.

[00:41:41.62] JOHN OKERMAN: A year later, like October 10th or 12th of 1969. And when I went over there the Army had 12 months tours, the Marines had 13 month tours. Well, they changed it for us while I was there. And then I think from the first day I landed the rumor was President Nixon was going to pull us out. And that was just going on and on and on. But what happened is they finally reached a point, yeah, they were going to pull some troops out. And we thought, well, they're going to pull out all the people in the rear, the supply people. And they didn't do that, they pulled out-- they pulled out the 9th Marine Regiment, and our battery supported that. So in July of 1969 we were pulled out and sent to Okinawa. So I spent nine months in Vietnam and about 2 and 1/2, 3 months in Okinawa.

[00:42:45.81] JOE GALLOWAY: In Okinawa.

[00:42:47.31] JOHN OKERMAN: And life changed big time.

[00:42:49.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Big time. How much contact have you had with fellow Marine veterans over the years? People you served with in Vietnam.

[00:43:08.89] JOHN OKERMAN: With the people who I actually served with probably that's somewhat limited. Our Basic School class has reunions, they'll have one this October. I've been to two of them. I think this will be the fifth one, and I plan to go to this one. So with some of

those people I've had contact and-- personal contact. And I have two roommates from the Basic School. We talk every year. We have personal contact and we all three served at the same time. I stayed in the Reserves for a total of 30 years, so I've had contact with Marines who I didn't serve with in Vietnam, but they were there for that entire time. And I think that's probably because I was in Vietnam, I think I initially subconsciously sought that out. But that's one reason I stayed in.

[00:44:20.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after the war?

[00:44:27.08] JOHN OKERMAN: I don't think I did. I think that I came back, and some of it is related to my personality I think, but I was able to-- well, when I returned I was married, probably had-- because it's the first year of marriage we probably had some difficulties. I was a little surprised about some things after you got married. But I don't think that would have been any different had I'd gone to Vietnam or not gone to Vietnam. That was just normal. And I felt like that was a pretty normal thing.

[00:45:09.86] Reflecting back on it, because I thought about that question, when I got out of the Marine Corps I spent a year in sales. I found out that was probably not my calling so I went to education, which I had been trained at-- trained in, and was a fifth grade teacher. In Washington state if you were a teacher you didn't have to serve in the military. You could have a draft deferment. And this was during the time of the draft. So if you didn't have a job or you weren't in school, if you didn't have certain jobs you were going to be drafted.

[00:45:49.12] Well, most of the male teachers had not served. And it seemed like as a group they were pretty liberal and not in favor of the war. So I always felt that when I told them I had served in Vietnam, first they looked at me and they said, well, I don't see anything physically wrong with you, so you must have some psychological problems. So we'll just watch you to see. And I don't think they could find any that would relate to Vietnam. That was just my attitude. And they thought I was-- they couldn't believe that, first of all anyone would join the military, much less the Marines, and go to Vietnam.

[00:46:49.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your time in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life?

[00:47:04.08] JOHN OKERMAN: I would say I felt good about serving in Vietnam. It's not something I'd want to do on a regular basis but I take a lot of pride in that. I think it's the people I worked with over there. It's been in a combat support unit and being out in the bush, I take a lot of pride in that. And I felt like I did a good job and made my contributions. A lot of people did a lot more but others did a lot less too.

[00:47:39.67] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans returning from combat today?

[00:47:50.06] JOHN OKERMAN: In a major way. This statement relates to the last question of how do I feel about serving in Vietnam? I was in Vietnam and you were to-- we were Vietnam veterans before it was popular. Now it's popular and you share it and everyone thanks you for

your service. You can wear the-- you can wear the Vietnam ribbon with pride and all that. There was a time when I don't think you could do that. I do think today the veterans, and on a volunteer basis I've done work with veterans. It's better than it was but these young veterans come home from serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. Things like PTSD are better identified, they're more accepting, but they come home, and they come home to a society that says, thank you for your service but I'm not sure we want to hire you, you don't have qualifications. We're worried you have PTSD and you're going to be violent or do something crazy.

[00:49:05.88] And I attribute that to, in part, there's an all volunteer force. That's good news. The bad news is less than 1% of our country has served. And their families represent less than 5%.

[00:49:25.05] JOE GALLOWAY: No skin in the game.

[00:49:26.79] JOHN OKERMAN: There's no skin in the game. And the rumor was in Iraq and Afghanistan, while America is busy shopping at the mall, we're protecting them.

[00:49:39.84] JOE GALLOWAY: That's what the president dictated.

[00:49:42.48] JOHN OKERMAN: Yes sir.

[00:49:42.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Go shop at the mall. We'll take care of the war.

[00:49:45.87] JOHN OKERMAN: That's right and it's out of sight, out of mind. So if you work on a computer program at Microsoft, well, I don't really know exactly what they're doing. A lot of people don't unless you work at Microsoft or Amazon. But that's different, that's a business. I think people should have a greater awareness of service to their country. And I think it ought to be-- I don't know the exact solution but there ought to be more than 1% of our nation involved in serving to protect our freedoms.

[00:50:22.62] JOE GALLOWAY: I don't think our founding fathers thought this was what it was going to come down to.

[00:50:28.10] JOHN OKERMAN: That could very well be, but that's kind of what it is. And they all thank us, but they don't really know. And I've done volunteer work and worked for United Way here. They do a lot of work with homeless veterans. But I've been in meetings where the HR directors, these are the ones who want to hire veterans, have reservations about it.

[00:50:56.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, the CEOs will subscribe to it and they're willing. The HR people who actually do the hiring, not so much.

[00:51:09.24] JOHN OKERMAN: Not so much. And I think one of the keys to changing that is-- and a person told me this, well, you need to go talk to the CEO, because if the CEO tells the HR director, I want you to hire veterans, they'll get hired. There's a better chance, you've got a hope. And I see things like Howard Schultz came out with the book about veterans, I think that has a huge influence. Companies like Amazon, if you have the skills and you're a veteran you'll get hired. The key is you have to have the skills.

[00:51:46.78] And there are a couple other companies here that are pretty direct about it and it is improving. But if you have a background, for example, in logistics and you want to get hired by a logistics company here, well, you're competing with the person who already works for that company or in that industry, so you're already at a disadvantage. I don't think you should be.

[00:52:16.75] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today in our society? Or is it?

[00:52:26.53] JOHN OKERMAN: It's remembered-- I think first of all, I think it's remembered a lot less than it was because our generation is older and a lot of other things have happened. I think it's remembered now as something we probably shouldn't have got into. And reflecting back on it I probably agree we shouldn't have gone. But I didn't feel that way at the time and it's like Monday morning quarterbacking. So I think the leaders who did it at the time made the right decisions based on what they had experienced in the world up to that point.

[00:53:12.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:53:21.48] JOHN OKERMAN: Absolutely, yes, I would say. I'd say overall I took more from that. And it's probably the pride in serving as a Marine. When I joined the Marine Corps I wanted to serve my country, I thought you should do that. But I had no-- I was just going to serve my three years and get out. Thanks for the memories, this is all I really need. The longer I stayed in the better I liked it, including Vietnam. And I thought, I don't think I want to do this as a full time job because you'll be away from your family too much. But I really liked it as the Reserves. And I identify myself, I guess, today's word would be brand, myself more as a Marine than I do a teacher or other jobs. And I think it's Vietnam, the people you worked with, the sense of service.

[00:54:31.41] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from your Vietnam service that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans?

[00:54:41.27] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, I would say, first of all, you're doing-- first of all, you're doing service to your country. You're willing to step up to the plate and do a job that potentially is life threatening. You can be seriously injured or killed. But the service to your country is a rewarding thing because you're serving your fellow citizens. By the sacrifice you make you're allowing them to do that, to continue with our way of life. We may not be perfect but we have-- I think in America we have a lot of good things going. The second thing is you learn how to work as a team, you learn how to work long hours, you have to exercise innovation and leadership and follow directions and work towards a goal. So those are good takeaways that apply in today's world.

[00:55:45.81] JOHN OKERMAN: It's a very solemn place, each time I go there I look up two names, Mike Ross, who was my battery commander, and Dutch Nichols, who was the executive officer. Two outstanding Marines who were killed. And I look their names up every time. I think I can pretty much go to the plate where they are without looking up the number and all that. They were outstanding, outstanding individuals who died too early in life.

[00:56:29.00] JOHN OKERMAN: I've heard about the 50th anniversary just kind of in passing. And I guess, I didn't want to look at it too close because 50 years-- I'm one of them. That's a long ways down the road. Now I know a little more about it.

[00:56:47.42] JOE GALLOWAY: What are your thoughts about that effort?

[00:56:51.22] JOHN OKERMAN: Well, I think it's positive. I think if you can commemorate it you're acknowledging the people who served in it. And I know they've done that for Korea, for World War II. I remember particularly World War II here in Seattle the 50th was quite a big-- quite a big event.

[00:57:13.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Mr Okerman.

[00:57:16.30] JOHN OKERMAN: Thank you, sir. I appreciate the time.