

Omasta, Robert US Army

[00:00:17.71] ROBERT OMASTA: Born in Western Massachusetts, small agricultural area. Hatfield, to be specific. 25 June, 1944.

[00:00:25.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were your family members?

[00:00:28.33] ROBERT OMASTA: My father was Michael Omasta, mother Nellie. I had two younger brothers, Ron and Richard. My grandparents lived on the next farm just up the road from us.

[00:00:39.28] JOE GALLOWAY: What did your dad do?

[00:00:40.96] ROBERT OMASTA: He was a farmer during the growing season and an oil deliveryman during the winter.

[00:00:47.59] JOE GALLOWAY: During the winter.

[00:00:54.16] ROBERT OMASTA: It was a small cigar tobacco farm in the Connecticut Valley, and we also raised a few beef cattle, cucumbers, corn, and hay. Schools, went to Smith Academy High School. It was a public high school. And from there, to Norwich University.

[00:01:17.49] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you come to enter the military?

[00:01:20.07] ROBERT OMASTA: Well, the way the war and conflicts were shaping up, it looked like if I didn't go on my own, I'd be drafted. So I figured better to go in as an officer, and that's one reason I selected Norwich. And grateful that I did.

[00:01:37.23] JOE GALLOWAY: So your commission is ROTC from Norwich.

[00:01:41.07] ROBERT OMASTA: That's correct.

[00:01:41.91] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. And you were commissioned what year?

[00:01:47.64] ROBERT OMASTA: I was commissioned RA officer in June 1966.

[00:01:54.15] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. Vietnam is well underway by then.

[00:01:57.45] ROBERT OMASTA: Yeah. We had a number of my classmates went there. Unfortunately, five of them didn't come back.

[00:02:05.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Tough year. Tough year. In your last couple of years at Norwich, was there discussion of Vietnam and the war?

[00:02:18.24] ROBERT OMASTA: It was prevalent more in the background, but our ROTC instructors would keep us informed throughout the course of activities.

[00:02:30.58] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. And you were commissioned as what sort of officer?

[00:02:38.40] ROBERT OMASTA: I had a two-year armor officer commitment followed by military intelligence after that.

[00:02:46.14] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. JOE GALLOWAY: So off you went to Fort Knox for officer basic.

[00:02:56.42] ROBERT OMASTA: That's correct, Fort Knox, and then followed by a-- supposed to be a three-year tour in Germany with the 14th Armored Cav in Bad Hersfeld.

[00:03:07.31] From there, though, since I was on the rifle team at Norwich, I got picked up for the USAREUR rifle team, so I went with the 24th Infantry Division in Munich for the next nine months or so. And great assignment. International competition. And then from there, I went to Frankfurt, Germany, because my MI commitment kicked in at that point.

[00:03:33.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Now had you double MOS'd there, armor and intel, or did you switch at some point?

[00:03:41.69] ROBERT OMASTA: I switched. In fact, I hadn't had any direct MI training at that point, but they cut my tour in half. Said, enough beer and schnitzel, time for nuoc mam and banh mi ba, and sent me to Vietnam.

[00:03:56.48] JOE GALLOWAY: As an MI officer?

[00:03:58.43] ROBERT OMASTA: Right. From Germany. I went to Fort Holabird to take the Imagery Interpretation and Aerial Surveillance course. That was a long course, a little over five months.

[00:04:15.90] JOE GALLOWAY: So you've got orders now for Vietnam and it's, what? Late '66, early '67?

[00:04:24.53] ROBERT OMASTA: No, the time frame now is late '68. Graduated in October and I reported there at the end of the month to Vietnam. ROBERT OMASTA: Yeah, we started off from Oakland via military charter jet. Landed Saigon, Tan Son Nhut airfield.

[00:04:50.44] JOE GALLOWAY: And did you have a specific assignment, or were you thrown into the repo depot?

[00:04:57.29] ROBERT OMASTA: Well, I think it was in the-- being so junior, at the repo depot. And wound up-- I guess fortunately for me, it was a great opportunity to become the G-2 Air down with MACV Team 51 in Bac Lieu.

[00:05:15.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Which is down on the coast--

[00:05:17.07] ROBERT OMASTA: Way, way south.

[00:05:18.04] JOE GALLOWAY: --way way south. IV Corps--

[00:05:21.79] ROBERT OMASTA: IV Corps. Almost to the tip of the-- southern tip of the country.

[00:05:25.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, lovely down there.

[00:05:27.16] ROBERT OMASTA: Yeah. Only Ca Mau was further down.

[00:05:29.11] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:05:30.40] ROBERT OMASTA: And the U Minh Forest. Being the aerial surveillance officer, I was attached with the G-2 and their shop. But as the G-2 Air, one of our other duties was to oversee the interpretation and training of the ARVN force that was there. They had their own imagery section as well.

[00:05:52.94] And so I had myself and one of the best guys-- NCOs-- I had run across was Sergeant First Class William Klazinsky. Just outstanding troop. And we had a great chemistry. You know, I provided the direction and command, and he took it from there with the training and the keeping track of the troops. Just couldn't have worked better.

[00:06:19.49] JOE GALLOWAY: What are you doing with this photo interpretation? Where are you getting the pictures from, and how do you look at them and discern what you need to know?

[00:06:34.57] ROBERT OMASTA: The source of the photos was multiple. We had a lot of Air Force imagery with RF-4s. And we had a MIBARS unit that was there that would use Mohawk camera systems. And then we developed-- Sergeant Klazinsky came up-- the beautiful part about Vietnam is you could get anything for anything, and we happened to have an M29R2 expandable van there which we used as our headquarters.

[00:07:08.56] But in order to develop the film for our handheld camera program, we needed an air conditioning unit, because that's critical for developing photos. So I forget exactly what we swapped to come up with a giant air conditioning unit, but we did.

[00:07:35.51] On the handheld part, we had a 35-millimeter lens camera with a 300 and a 500-millimeter lens on it. So you had kind of the overall and then the close-up. I would fly backseat in the O-1 Bird Dog out and around the six provinces that we covered in our AO in the Delta.

[00:08:01.36] It was a little easier with the map. You could follow and know exactly where you were. The canal system and the meandering canals and interstitial areas was easy to track. And after you did it a few times, you just knew what was what and where was where.

[00:08:20.85] You'd go up looking for new developments, things that were there, huts that weren't there, foxholes that might show up, integrate it with any incoming intelligence reports you've had and try and track it, match it against the imagery we were getting from the Air Force.

[00:08:40.03] JOE GALLOWAY: And you're up there in this Bird Dog. You're shooting pictures as well?

[00:08:44.74] ROBERT OMASTA: Yes, correct, with a 35-millimeter camera. I would hang out the window and shoot away. We usually flew around 2,000 feet or so above, so you had a good view.

[00:08:59.68] And occasionally, you'd see a convoy of sampans coming down one of the canals. And if they started scattering or heading under the brush, you knew that these weren't just rice farmers, so you'd try to call in an airstrike. But you had to go through the senior province adviser, and if you didn't get the thumbs up from him, you couldn't do anything. And usually, by the time the order got put through--

[00:09:28.75] JOE GALLOWAY: They were already long gone.

[00:09:29.77] ROBERT OMASTA: --they were dispersed and nothing to hit. And the other interesting thing we did with the handheld was the Arc Light program, the B-52 strikes. We'd go up and cover the BDA on that. It was quite impressive to see. The Air Force did a magnificent job.

[00:09:46.11] JOE GALLOWAY: They could blow some really big holes in the ground.

[00:09:50.83] ROBERT OMASTA: In the Delta, they created a lot of VC swimming holes, swimming pools. Yeah.

[00:10:01.76] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like down there in Nowhereville?

[00:10:06.86] ROBERT OMASTA: Actually, because the compound was built in the early '60s, they had a good jump on it. So the officers, we had two-men hooches. The enlisted had a little larger one. They slept four to six in those.

[00:10:24.05] But the thing about it-- because the sign at the Bac Lieu Airfield, which was essentially a PSP and mud runway. Very short. In fact, the largest aircraft we could accommodate was a Caribou. And that was only if they had the JATO, Jet Assist Takeoff system with it.

[00:10:43.73] When we were getting imagery delivered, it came in cans and rolls. During the monsoon season, the plane, usually a Porter, would fly over it and throw it out there. So we'd have to chase it down the runway as it rolled into the mud or hopefully not into the canal. Yeah, the elevation at Bac Lieu during the dry season was two feet above sea level, and during the monsoon season, it was two feet below.

[00:11:18.85] JOE GALLOWAY: Below, yeah.

[00:11:26.11] ROBERT OMASTA: I tell you, we had a real good mix of folks. Most had been drafted and were serving their time there. But everybody came with the right attitude. They had a good-- a lot of professionalism, dedicated work effort, and ethics. Our CO-- we had two colonels while we were there. One was Colonel Knight. He was a Soldier's Soldier. He'd attack the mission and he'd take care of the troops, so couldn't ask for more there.

[00:12:01.80] As far as friendships, I'd say I maintained a friendship with all the folks that were there. But once the tour was over, that sort of terminated any further friendship.

[00:12:13.98] My roommate there was an Army captain, Ron Owens. He was with the Texas A&M engineers. So he was there as a civil engineer. So we hit it off with A&M and Norwich connection there. If you've been to one school, you've been to them all.

[00:12:31.53] JOE GALLOWAY: That's it. There's a lot of social tension and racial tension and all that going on back in the States. Is any of that coming over to where you are?

[00:12:43.62] ROBERT OMASTA: I guess because we're a smaller size outfit and living where we were, I really didn't observe anything that was significant in that regard.

[00:12:52.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What did you guys do for recreation or off-duty time, if you had any?

[00:12:59.16] ROBERT OMASTA: The biggest-- when we weren't in the field and we were back at the main compound. The ARVNs generally took like an hour-and-a-half lunch break to eat.

[00:13:09.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Siesta.

[00:13:10.89] ROBERT OMASTA: Right. So we started a combat volleyball game. It was legal to go over the net. So anyway, we'd do that most of the time. I think we sustained more injuries on that than we did in the field for the most part.

[00:13:30.03] JOE GALLOWAY: Exactly.

[00:13:30.81] ROBERT OMASTA: Other than that, there was an officer's club and an enlisted club, and there was a movie night. We were far off the celebrity USO trail, so the biggest one that we had was Coach Woody Hayes, the coach of the Ohio State at that time. And he gave a presentation. I was ready to get up and play linebacker for him after hearing him speak.

[00:13:52.98] And the next biggest one we had, you may recall The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet and their sons, Ricky and David. Well, they weren't there, but one of the other characters in the show, Wally--

[00:14:06.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Ah, Wally.

[00:14:08.11] ROBERT OMASTA: Wally was there along with three Playboy Playmates. So that was the height of our--

[00:14:13.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Interesting. Now you pulled your complete tour down in Bac Lieu?

[00:14:19.80] ROBERT OMASTA: Yes, I did. In fact, since our G-2 had left and they hadn't had a replacement yet, I actually extended my tour for a couple of months and acted as the G-2 till the next one came on board. So from there, I went back to the US and served a three-year tour in Washington, DC with the Defense Intelligence Agency.

[00:14:50.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe any what you would consider real advances that you were able to do with your photo technology?

[00:15:04.09] ROBERT OMASTA: Yes. I was fortunate, again, with Sergeant Klazinsky manning that and operating the photo lab, in being able to marry the intelligence reports with what you saw on the ground, to either confirm or deny it, because you were getting a lot of reports in that were maybe specious at best. Occasionally, you'd hit on a gem. But since they were getting paid for intelligence reports, you got a lot of them, real or not.

[00:15:37.94] JOE GALLOWAY: And you could, with the photo interpretation, nail it down.

[00:15:43.39] ROBERT OMASTA: It would help us, yes.

[00:15:44.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Now the enemy in that area were pretty good at camouflage.

[00:15:54.57] ROBERT OMASTA: During the day, you'd never see one. Not identify them. You may see them out there as a rice farmer or fisherman or any other activity that they did. But yeah, they were pretty stealthy.

[00:16:07.80] The one activity that really comes to mind, they had a sapper unit that attacked our airfield out there, which came in. It blew up a number of trucks, transport vehicles, a lot of our light aircraft, the Huey. Just did a lot of damage. Fortunately, the ARVN troops, which were stationed nearby, went out there and--

[00:16:36.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Blew them up?

[00:16:37.62] ROBERT OMASTA: --took care of the rest, yeah. So the next day, they had all the bodies and weapons laid out there. But my first impression when I saw these VC laying there was they've got to be pretty determined people, because they were wearing a minimum number of clothes, had a minimal number of weapon systems comparable to ours, and they still were loyal to their cause.

[00:17:03.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe for us the stereoscope and what it was used for.

[00:17:08.61] ROBERT OMASTA: OK. When the Air Force cameras and all take photos, they're contiguous with the movement there. You can lay them side by side and come up with a-- rather than looking at them in a 2D dimension, you can come up with, using the stereoscope, a 3D dimension. So it gives you a height, a depth, a little bit exaggerated in each case.

[00:17:36.16] So we had these two-power and four-power scopes. You'd lay your-- we had a light table, which provided a source from underneath, because you're looking not just at photos, but you're looking at the clear photo. Sort of like looking at a positive negative, if you will. And you could lay them down there, adjust them accordingly, and then pick out whether you're looking at a foxhole, you're looking at a bunker, whatever.

[00:18:06.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Gives you resolution that you might not otherwise have.

[00:18:09.63] ROBERT OMASTA: Exactly. And along with that, we had a small 10-power scope that you could put down an Aleuve loupe and help you determine what the object might be.

[00:18:26.68] We had intelligence officers co-located with the elements out in each of the six provinces. So they would collect from their ARVN sources from private citizens, from the other soldiers out there, from interrogation reports.

[00:18:47.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Interrogation reports from enemy POWs.

[00:18:52.41] ROBERT OMASTA: Right. You'd get a lot of chieu hois come in, especially after you had an Arc Light strike. They became believers as they get blown from one side of the canal to the other.

[00:19:05.62] So there were multiple sources of information. And you try to plot it out on a map and then see if there's any validity to it. If there was, you could use it against their next operation. Hey, we're going in this area. What do you have down there? And they'd go in. Or if you had the BDA counts, you would look for secondary explosions or fires.

[00:19:31.62] So one of the first things, I went up in the air. I made multiple flights, backseat of an O-1 Bird Dog. But one of the warrant officer pilots gave me a few lessons how to essentially crash land in case we had a problem. Thankfully-- I mean, we came back with a few more bullet holes than we left with, but nothing-- any severe damage. But hey, that taught me enough to bring it down if we had to.

[00:20:07.40] ROBERT OMASTA: Oh, that would be December 31, 1968, New Year's Eve. We were conducting an operation in the U Minh Forest, and that was the one where Lieutenant/Major Nicky Rowe was spotted, and they pulled him out of there. He'd been a captive of the Vietnam-- Viet Cong for several years.

[00:20:33.30] JOE GALLOWAY: You guys rescued him.

[00:20:35.33] ROBERT OMASTA: Not me personally, but it was part of the operation that we had the helicopter force was there. The crew spotted him and realized since he had a beard and all that this was not your normal VC. So they were wise enough to drop down and pick him up and haul him out of there.

[00:20:57.62] ROBERT OMASTA: The worst day, there were probably a couple, and only because-- in fact, in the very first few days I was there, there were a couple-- there was a suicide as a result of a Dear John letter that the individual had received, so that was pretty crushing.

[00:21:19.48] ROBERT OMASTA: Very limited. I think we had a little bit with the Aussies, but that was it. Other-- yeah, I mean, just our daily contact with the ARVN.

[00:21:36.54] ROBERT OMASTA: Yeah, my direct counterpart was Dai Uy An, Captain An. And the families of the soldiers all lived right there in the community, just outside our compound. So I'd be invited to go to dinners there occasionally and meet his family.

[00:21:58.48] He had three young daughters and a very young son living in a small place. You'd go to eat, and you had the dirt floor. And while you're eating, you know, the pigs and dogs were running under the table, getting the scraps.

[00:22:15.06] One of the other occasions that crossed my mind when we were eating with the ARVN G-2, we went to a restaurant outside of town, and came out and realized they had put a squad of troops around the whole restaurant to look out for our better interest while we were in there having a good time and a good meal.

[00:22:44.39] ROBERT OMASTA: Mostly all letter writing. And I'd try to send about a letter a week and received letters from them, my relatives. Care packages. Only got to make two MARS calls in the time I was there, one to my folks, and one to a girlfriend I had.

[00:23:05.27] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war that you're conducting here? Stars and Stripes, Armed Forces Radio. What else?

[00:23:18.78] ROBERT OMASTA: Those were the primary ones. I read Stars and Stripes daily, and you'd catch whatever news they deemed to put on the AVN. And in the evening, I'd always listen to Don Doremus and his nighttime music, which usually put me to sleep.

[00:23:43.94] ROBERT OMASTA: I landed in-- New York was my final flight, and then took a bus into Western Mass from there. Greeted by parents, brothers, relatives. And then it was right-- just before Thanksgiving 1969.

[00:24:03.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Any antiwar protesters?

[00:24:05.77] ROBERT OMASTA: I really didn't encounter any. I mean, I was wearing my uniform, and there were no repercussions or any problems.

[00:24:13.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you going to stay in the Army and do a career?

[00:24:18.11] ROBERT OMASTA: That was my plan, yes. That was another reason I went to Norwich. It looked like a great career to pursue. Had a good retirement program and a lot of opportunities.

[00:24:31.95] JOE GALLOWAY: So what did you do after you finished your combat tour?

[00:24:35.84] ROBERT OMASTA: From there, I was assigned to the Defense Intelligence Agency. Back then, they still had officers on the light tables as imagery analysts. So I did that for three years, which was good, because it established a foothold for me to further that pursuit and make a few contacts there.

[00:24:56.21] From there, I went to the Military Intelligence Captains Career course out at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Finished up with that and was reassigned for a tour with the 18th Airborne Corps, the 1st MI Battalion at Fort Bragg. But being an MI officer, I knew I already had a strike against me, because you don't go to Fort Bragg and be a leg. So I applied for jump school as well and went to Fort Benning for the July of 1973.

[00:25:32.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, you picked the month.

[00:25:33.17] ROBERT OMASTA: Oh, it was brutal.

[00:25:34.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Very good. [LAUGHS]

[00:25:35.15] ROBERT OMASTA: You want to do it when you're younger too.

[00:25:36.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, exactly. [LAUGHS] But you made it through.

[00:25:41.39] ROBERT OMASTA: Yes, I did.

[00:25:44.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after a war zone?

[00:25:51.41] ROBERT OMASTA: Fortunately, no. I just I think took things as they come. I think, again, Norwich was a good learning ground and prepared you for a lot of things.

[00:26:01.73] JOE GALLOWAY: And you're staying in the Army perimeter anyway.

[00:26:04.97] ROBERT OMASTA: Correct.

[00:26:05.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:26:12.10] ROBERT OMASTA: There were over two million people I think went to Vietnam. Everyone's got a different story. For me, I think it worked out for the good. I was able to practice what we had learned, what we had been taught in school, et cetera.

[00:26:31.28] I liked all the tours I had, but I would actually say Vietnam was my best one, because you had the troops you could control. You did the operation. You had the opportunity to create and do things. It just-- for me you had a feeling of independence, like you were making a contribution as well.

[00:27:00.10] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today?

[00:27:06.27] ROBERT OMASTA: I think most people are trying to forget it. Even those that were there I think would not remember it in a fond manner. At the time, a young professional, you think, this is what I'm here to do.

[00:27:22.42] You think, we're trying to prevent a communist domino from falling. We want to bring peace, prosperity, and democracy and independence to the South Vietnamese people. But when you find out that the main operation center is being run out of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, you know you're in for a long, ugly, protracted, expensive--

[00:27:48.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Debacle.

[00:27:48.91] ROBERT OMASTA: --conflict. Yeah, debacle. Right. Fortunately, I guess I wasn't politically savvy enough there, so naively I [LAUGHS] escaped that.

[00:28:03.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Are there lessons you took from your time in Vietnam that you would like to pass on?

[00:28:13.38] ROBERT OMASTA: I think it's more the experiences and the team building operations, both between the US troops that were there and the activities and operations you did with your ARVN counterparts. You had to learn a bit of diplomacy while you were there. And I think it all paid off in the long run, myself.

[00:28:51.68] ROBERT OMASTA: It was several years before I went there. I think it was in the late '80s before I opted to. And I mainly decided to go down Memorial Day weekend and see my Norwich brothers on the Wall. It's a moving experience to go down there. I just signed up with another classmate who was in Vietnam. We're going back there this February 2020 to do a tour, Bac Lieu being off the normal tourist path.

[00:29:28.14] JOE GALLOWAY: You're going to Bac Lieu?

[00:29:29.35] ROBERT OMASTA: I had to set up-- go there a couple days early, set up a special side trip to do that. So I will do that and then link up with him back in Saigon, and we'll go from there all the way up to Hanoi over a two-week period.

[00:29:45.15] JOE GALLOWAY: That sounds good.

[00:29:46.21] ROBERT OMASTA: As far as I've been north was to Saigon.

[00:29:56.36] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard of the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration. You're part of it today. What do you think of that?

[00:30:04.16] ROBERT OMASTA: Oh, I think that's great. A lot of people sacrificed a lot to do what they did, and I think it's nice they're being remembered in a wonderful fashion.

[00:30:17.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you received your Vietnam veteran lapel pin?

[00:30:21.39] ROBERT OMASTA: I have attended a ceremony where they have--

[00:30:24.68] JOE GALLOWAY: You've got it. All right. Then we won't stick you again.

[00:30:28.46] ROBERT OMASTA: [LAUGHS] I wear it proudly. I have it on my lapel.

[00:30:32.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you for coming in. Appreciate it.