

Prouty, Charles USN

[00:00:17.10] CHARLES PROUTY: I was born in Jersey City, New Jersey in 1945 and when I first went to Vietnam, my first tour I was 25 and my second tour I was 27.

[00:00:30.36] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. And your hometown is Jersey City?

[00:00:32.94] CHARLES PROUTY: My hometown is Woodbridge, Connecticut.

[00:00:34.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Woodbridge.

[00:00:35.79] CHARLES PROUTY: I grew up in Woodbridge, Connecticut.

[00:00:38.90] JOE GALLOWAY: And your family status? Brothers, sisters--

[00:00:41.75] CHARLES PROUTY: No. No family.

[00:00:43.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Only child.

[00:00:44.21] CHARLES PROUTY: Yes.

[00:00:44.88] JOE GALLOWAY: OK.

[00:00:50.68] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, I always wanted from as about 12 years old my dad was in the Navy in World War II. He was out in Pearl Harbor after the attack and he always talked about the Navy fondly. And so I wanted to go into the Navy and I enlisted when I was 17 when I was still a senior in high school. And my purpose in enlisting was I wanted to go to the Naval Academy. And so I thought that might be a means of getting there, coming in through the fleet. And sure enough, that is what got me to the Naval Academy.

[00:01:25.87] JOE GALLOWAY: You were a Naval Academy graduate then? That's how you were taken in.

[00:01:28.00] CHARLES PROUTY: Yes 1967, right.

[00:01:30.85] JOE GALLOWAY: But you came in through an enlisted rank?

[00:01:35.86] CHARLES PROUTY: Right. Started as enlisted, but never really-- I was a senior in high school, so I drilled but I never went to boot camp.

[00:01:42.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Never went to boot camp or any of that?

[00:01:44.31] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah.

[00:01:46.06] JOE GALLOWAY: So you were class of-- ?

[00:01:48.07] CHARLES PROUTY: 1967.

[00:01:49.27] JOE GALLOWAY: '67. You're graduating, the Vietnam War is really rolling. What was your sense of that war as you were coming out of the Naval Academy?

[00:02:00.94] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, you know of course, I had no sense of it going into it because we weren't in the war yet. I had some sense of it. We talked about it at the Naval Academy, but I didn't have-- and I read the newspapers of course, but I didn't have a strong sense or a strong feel for what was going on at the time. I mean, I understood that we were in war and it was a serious situation. But I didn't have much of a sense. I didn't spend too much time thinking about it.

[00:02:33.37] JOE GALLOWAY: When you came out of the Academy you choose a branch of the Naval service. What was your choice?

[00:02:40.66] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, my choice was-- my dad had talked about shipboard life and I always thought that shipboard life would be terrific to be on a big ship. And so I started on a cruiser, but I found out that shipboard life didn't agree with me the way I thought it would. And so I called my detailer in Washington and I said I'd like to get off the ship, what are my options? And they said, well, really you have probably two options. They said, you could be a Marine or you could be a SEAL.

[00:03:16.51] And I knew I wasn't man enough to be a Marine, so I opted the SEAL route, and that's what got me to BUD/S training in 1968. CHARLES PROUTY: Well, it was-- probably the strongest motivating factor getting through that-- and we did lose a lot of people and in our class, more than half-- but the strongest motivational factor I think was knowing that I was going to have to go back to the ship and see the same buddies that I had just left that gave me a nice going away party and I have to come back and tell them that I couldn't make it. So I had to stay with it.

[00:03:53.23] JOE GALLOWAY: It's very rigorous as I recall.

[00:03:55.78] CHARLES PROUTY: It was challenging, but the further I get away from it the less challenging it seems to have been.

[00:04:05.17] JOE GALLOWAY: The better it appears. CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. Right. JOE GALLOWAY: Well, the stories get better.

[00:04:06.73] CHARLES PROUTY: The stories do get better. We have six months of training and then we went down to Fort Benning for the three week jump school. And then we had-- and then there was another-- there's a much more extensive and far better, much more developed and more mature program now for training after you get into the SEAL teams to prepare you to go into combat. There really was about another six weeks of training, Special Operations training, weapons, and some additional small unit tactics and that kind of thing.

[00:04:45.04] Then they gave me a platoon, a 14 man platoon. I was assigned a Mike platoon and I had an assistant platoon commander, another officer and then 12 SEALs.

[00:04:56.46] JOE GALLOWAY: East Coast or West Coast?

[00:04:57.01] CHARLES PROUTY: West Coast. Yeah. I went to training in Coronado. And they said, so you're going to-- this was probably in February-- and they said, you're going to deploy to Vietnam in August. So part of your responsibility is to prepare your platoon to get ready to go over. So fortunately, I had-- there was four men in my platoon who had already been over before and we all sat down and we mapped out pre-deployment training, which of course included training in a small unit tactics, weapons, and calling in air, and ambushes, patrolling, small boats, working off of small boats.

[00:05:37.12] So fortunately, I had a terrific group of guys, half of which I had just been through training with, which was really good because they knew me and I knew them and I knew what they were capable of doing. And we'd all just made it through training, so we felt good about one another.

[00:05:53.55] JOE GALLOWAY: So you've got a period of months there to build a team that you're going to deploy with?

[00:05:59.38] CHARLES PROUTY: Right.

[00:05:59.98] JOE GALLOWAY: That's pretty good.

[00:06:01.21] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, and I was very, very fortunate. My leading petty officer who was a first class, an E6, had been over four other times. And so I didn't have a chief. Theoretically every platoon would have a chief, an E7, but he was every bit of what a chief could have done for me. And he helped put together our pre-deployment training. So I felt when we left, I felt the platoon was well-trained and ready for what was to come.

[00:06:34.85] CHARLES PROUTY: So we had our own plane, which is good and bad. It was an old DC 4 and we stopped at every island on the way over to refuel. And the pilots had to--

[00:06:46.60] JOE GALLOWAY: The scenic route.

[00:06:47.38] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. The pilots had to rest, so we stopped at some place in the Marshall Islands. I can't remember where. We stopped at Hawaii, that was a good stop, Marshall Islands. We stopped in Guam and then the Philippines. Wake I think was-- yes. That's the other stop that we made. But because we were bringing over so much weaponry and equipment and so on they gave us a-- flew us over in our own plane.

[00:07:10.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you land in Vietnam?

[00:07:12.07] CHARLES PROUTY: So we landed in Tan Son Nhut, and my leading petty officer had-- his last tour over had been at Tet, and Tan Son Nhut had been taking rockets and so on. So he said-- that was the way he left. So he said, well, we have to be prepared when we get here because it's a combat zone and so everybody mounted out. I mean, we put all of our gear on,

our weapons. As soon as the door opened we all set a perimeter up around the plane in Tan Son Nhut.

[00:07:44.47] And I'm sure the pilots probably felt good about the fact that their plane was protected, but the people working the base were probably wondering, what the heck is going on here? Of course, nothing. It was completely pacified. The first place we went to was in Cat Lo, which is in the-- and we operated in the Rung Sat, which is down just the southern tip of the Long Tau shipping channel.

[00:08:12.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Right. Just down from Saigon.

[00:08:14.18] CHARLES PROUTY: From Saigon, right.

[00:08:15.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Nasty country.

[00:08:16.72] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, it was thick and of course, by the time we got there it had been defoliated pretty extensively. And actually we were there for--

[00:08:27.40] JOE GALLOWAY: This is what year now?

[00:08:28.57] CHARLES PROUTY: This is '69. So actually, we ran an operation every other night and didn't make any enemy contact for a month and a half.

[00:08:42.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:08:43.15] CHARLES PROUTY: And of course everybody in the platoon was saying, well, this isn't what we expected. And then things changed and that was pretty good living too. We had a Butler building we lived in, we had a mess hall. I remember getting-- in fact, I saw this the other day. I remember there was a free fire zone in the channel out there. And to occupy themselves my guys in my platoon were out waterskiing behind the SEAL support craft, the high powered jet SEAL support craft.

[00:09:18.04] And I got a memo from the commander in charge of the base saying, you will immediately cease and desist waterskiing in a free fire zone. But there really wasn't much going on. Then we went, as I say, then we transferred down to an area that was hot. We went down to a SEA FLOAT, which was nine barges tied together in the middle of the Song Ong Doc river in-- actually in the Nam Can peninsula, very tip almost of Vietnam.

[00:09:50.11] And there was lots of action down there. I mean, these nine barges were tied together. There was a plywood shack that we lived in. There was actually two SEAL platoons there and they had the Riverine Force was there and the Swift boats would tie up there. We had one barge where the helicopters would land and then they did H&I fire with mortars and .50 cal on all the corners every night. They would do that all night and we used to see-- we used to look at a movie.

[00:10:20.20] They had a one open barge where we could see-- open air barge where we could see a movie. The fleet would send movies in. And we were all watching the movie and all of a sudden, bang, bang. And we looked over and one of-- the Marine top sergeant that was there had walked along the barge and he had found a VC sapper with explosives on his body that was coming in to blow up the barge. And he leaned over and killed him right there, shot him right there.

[00:10:51.88] And that sort of got everybody-- we were kind of upset about the H&I fire all night, but that made it clear it was pretty important to have that.

[00:11:01.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Good thing he looked.

[00:11:02.86] CHARLES PROUTY: Yes, he did a terrific job. CHARLES PROUTY: The good thing about being a SEAL platoon commander is that I had-- there was an officer in charge that was in Binh Thuy, but for all intents and purposes, I ran the platoon and I decided what operations we would go on. I would send out our-- a couple of the petty officers were kind of designated-- I guess everybody was, but these guys did it more than others, as the intel guys and they would go to the POW camps and interview VC that were in there and interview villagers and so on to try to identify intelligence that we could act on.

[00:11:51.26] If there was a VC supply route or if there was a VC village chief that was-- of course, they had a parallel infrastructure to the legitimate South Vietnamese government and mayor. They had a VC mayor. And we'd find out where he was and some of our operations would be to go in and try to do a body snatch or shoot him if we couldn't do that. But if we could pull him out and get intelligence from him--

[00:12:19.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. So you were Sneaky Pete-ing all over those canals down there.

[00:12:24.77] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, we tried to, yes. I mean, if we spent any more than-- if we'd get into a firefight we were in trouble because there was only five or six of us in a group. And then we'd run out of ammunition quickly and we'd have to try to get out of there, so it would be better not to have that happen.

[00:12:38.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you split your platoon--

[00:12:40.04] CHARLES PROUTY: Yes.

[00:12:40.34] JOE GALLOWAY: --or you were doing two or three operations-- ?

[00:12:42.06] CHARLES PROUTY: We'd only do one. Every other night, the squad-- my squad would do it one night, my assistant platoon commander's squad would operate the next night. CHARLES PROUTY: I mean, there was a plywood shack. We had old spring double decker bunk beds. As I recall there wasn't a shower, but to wash off-- and we usually got pretty muddy on operations-- you could jump off the side of the barge and the river had a tremendous tidal current. It must have been, I swear it was five or six knots.

[00:13:17.52] And you have a line off the side of the barge. You jump off and hold on to that line and it would just wash all the mud off. You had to make sure you didn't let go of that line because you were gone. We really had a terrific group of military Vietnamese SEALs that we worked with, Loc and Sean. Loc-- and I always felt bad for these guys because they were Vietnamese SEALs. And yes, we went back home after seven months, but these guys just went to the next platoon and Loc was eventually killed.

[00:13:57.74] And they were very courageous. They would often take point, so they were checking for booby traps. They would be the one that would-- not all the time-- but sometimes they would do that.

[00:14:10.58] JOE GALLOWAY: So your operations always included the Vietnamese?

[00:14:13.70] CHARLES PROUTY: Yes. So somebody that could speak the language. Now, my second tour I operated with and trained-- was the officer in charge of training the Vietnamese SEALs up in Da Nang. And so I had three SEALs and three Force Recon Marines as part of my staff and they were the trainers and then we would operate with them. And they were impressive, I have to say. I felt badly that the life that was ahead of them of continuous fighting--

[00:14:47.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Until you're killed.

[00:14:49.04] CHARLES PROUTY: until-- yeah, or disabled or something like that. And there were sure a lot of poor disabled soldiers with one leg and one crutch.

[00:14:58.59] JOE GALLOWAY: And I'm sure they were not treated very well when the other side won the damn war.

[00:15:03.45] CHARLES PROUTY: Yes, well, they all went to those concentration--

[00:15:06.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Re-education--

[00:15:06.75] CHARLES PROUTY: re-education camps. Yeah I mean, we think that our VA-- that we don't treat our Soldiers very well. The VA falls short, but there was no VA over there. They had--

[00:15:19.50] JOE GALLOWAY: They used them to clear mines.

[00:15:21.15] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. CHARLES PROUTY: Having gone through training with half of the guys in my platoon, I knew what they were capable of. I knew that they had made it through training. And really it was I think the classic band of brothers. I knew I could count on them, they knew that they could count on me. Even to this day they know they can reach out to me. I know I can reach out to them. So it was a very strong, tight-knit, deeply bonded group. But we operated every other night.

[00:15:57.26] I was thinking about in SEA FLOAT, when I was down at SEA FLOAT. We operated every other night, so you'd sleep the next day, clean your weapon a couple of times to

make sure that it was going to work for you. And we used these Stoner-- Cadillac Gage made a weapon called a Stoner, which is a .556, drum-fed, really high rate of fire. And that is a beautiful weapon, but it just wasn't-- unlike an AK 47, if it got sand--

[00:16:26.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, it had to be cleaned.

[00:16:28.22] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. And our first ambush actually where we got a hit, none of the Stoners worked, so we were operating with our M16s and we all realized, not only do we have to clean it when we come back, but you have to clean it before we go back out, and don't let it get in the sand, and try to avoid getting it dirty at all. So really there wasn't much. JOE GALLOWAY: Hard if you're a SEAL. CHARLES PROUTY: And it's really hard because you're going to be in mud and you know water is going to--

[00:17:01.83] I mean, oftentimes we'd set an ambush and the tide was-- I think there was like an eight or nine foot tide. You would sit on a bank where you knew you were on a VC supply route. And it'd be dry as could be and by the time-- the tide at the middle of your ambush the water would be up to here. And I'd have-- you know, we had those old Starlight scopes, the real heavy-- I mean, unlike what they have today. They were big and heavy and the only person that carried it was the platoon leader.

[00:17:30.74] So I would put it up in the tree to keep it from getting wet. And I remember one time that a branch broke and all of a sudden, bang, it hit me on the head and almost knocked me out. Once a week the LST would come up to resupply us, would come up the Son Ong Doc and they got hit a couple of times coming up. And they would give us just enough beer so that everybody would have one can of beer. But that wasn't enough, one hot can of beer. So my guys would sit around and gamble until one guy won all the beer then they'd all sit around and watch him drink it and get drunk.

[00:18:09.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you have any specific memories of the popular culture at that time? Songs that stick in your head that say Vietnam to you?

[00:18:19.95] CHARLES PROUTY: Not really. I mean, the protest songs in the United States probably are the songs that you think about "Leaving on a Jet Plane" or "We've Got To Get Out of This Place" or those kind of things.

[00:18:31.51] I don't know, but I mean-- I mean, I remember the beautiful-- there was a lot of beautiful woman wearing those orange flowing ao dais and very shy, demure kind of--

[00:18:43.58] JOE GALLOWAY: You're talking Vietnamese ladies.

[00:18:45.05] CHARLES PROUTY: Vietnamese ladies, yeah. Well, I never saw-- the only time we ever saw any American women, I think, was in Da Nang. There were some nurses.

[00:18:58.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions that you participated in?

[00:19:04.55] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, we did have-- there was one in particular that-- and most of our actions were small. Two or three VC on a resupply route, where we would ambush them and take--

[00:19:16.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Get a tax collector, or somebody that--

[00:19:18.23] CHARLES PROUTY: Right. Exactly right. Yeah, but in this particular case, we had-- one of the guys went to a POW camp and found a VC who told us he could take us into a big VC medical cache. So we took him out of the camp. And we had about-- it was about 12 of us who went in.

[00:19:41.24] And he said there was lots of medicine of all kinds. So we found the cache sure enough. It was right where he said it was. We got some VC flags. And then we were-- we had the helicopter that we came in on. We had a big cargo net. And we loaded into the cargo net.

[00:20:01.79] And as they were pulling it up, suddenly they started taking fire. And they called down, and they said they took a couple of rounds to the rotor. And you could see that they weren't getting much lift. And they said they couldn't stay. So they left and left us there.

[00:20:17.05] JOE GALLOWAY: And left you on the ground.

[00:20:17.45] CHARLES PROUTY: And what we discovered later was that inadvertently we had inserted into the middle of two VC companies that were coming back from R&R in the U-Minh Forest. So we didn't realize until later how many of them there were. But we called in our Seawolves, which were our helicopter support, a Seawolf-- we had a Seawolf detachment, HAL-4. Great guys.

[00:20:45.98] And they called down to us. We marked our position. They called down and said, well, we can't suppress the fire. We're getting way too much all around you, and so we were going to call in OV-10s, the Black Ponies, and-- who had more firepower, had the 20 millimeter cannons. And they had a lot more firepower.

[00:21:05.60] And my radioman says to me, sir-- he says-- once the Black Ponies get overhead, he said, sir. He said, one of the pilots called down and said he wants to know if there's anybody, if there's a SEAL down here that lives at 1640 McGill Avenue. I said, yeah, that's my address. And he said, he wants to talk to you. He's my next door neighbor.

[00:21:26.93] Charlie Sapp was class of '65. And he says, Jesus. He said, I was taking a nap. If I knew it was you down there, I'd have finished my nap before they scrambled me. He says, but don't worry. He says, you're catching a lot. He says, we'll get you out of there. Don't worry.

[00:21:42.44] Well, at that point, he finally called back down and he said, well, we're not having much luck suppressing it either. He said, we're going to call in A-37 bombers, the small bomber. And so they came in. They dropped those 500 pound bombs. I thought they'd drop them on us.

[00:22:01.10] JOE GALLOWAY: That tends to discourage the--

[00:22:02.74] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. But we found out later that we had killed 24 by-- 24 of the VC by air, mostly by air. But anyway. So finally they suppressed it enough to get in another helicopter to pull us out and that was a couple of hours. And we all jumped into the helicopter. We were thrilled.

[00:22:20.71] And I remember my machine gunner got a couple of rounds in his box, his ammo box. And so the helicopter starts to bounce. And what we didn't know was we had all come in on a Hotel model. And this was a Delta model, a smaller engine. And he couldn't get us all out.

[00:22:39.22] And he looked back and he said-- the pilot had this stricken look on his face. He says, I can't lift you out. Somebody was going to have to get off. And I knew if anybody get off, I knew I was going to have to be part-- as a platoon leader, I knew I was going to have to be one of the ones to get off.

[00:22:53.98] So I jumped off. And I had my machine gunner and radioman. And then that leading petty officer jumped off too. So that got him off. And then it was just the four of us down there. And at the time, I didn't really think much of it. I thought, well, OK, there's rivers all around. If necessary, we can swim back out. I'm sure we can get out of here.

[00:23:16.69] But anyway, we were still calling the Seawolves and hoping to get another helicopter. And finally there wasn't a chance. It was starting to get dark and raining and stuff. And one of the helicopter-- one of the Seawolves said, well, we'll pick you up. We're going to pick you up. Thank goodness for this pilot. He threw out anything heavy out of the-- he threw out their weapon, the--

[00:23:39.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Ammo.

[00:23:39.73] CHARLES PROUTY: --machine gun, ammo, everything heavy. And they came down. And we jumped on and he was able to lift off. My machine gunner-- apparently they were listening back at SEA FLOAT to this whole thing, and he said a couple of things he probably shouldn't have said on the radio. He was so thrilled to be picked up.

[00:23:59.59] The pilot had-- actually had no gas left. His red warning light was on, but he gave it a shot. And he got us outside the perimeter. And probably a mile outside the perimeter he said, well, that's it. I've got no gas. And he auto--

[00:24:14.83] JOE GALLOWAY: No gas.

[00:24:15.00] CHARLES PROUTY: --autorotated down. Fortunately, there was one of those South Vietnamese outposts. And he autorotated down to this little outpost. And eventually they brought more gas out and pumped it up. So that was probably--

[00:24:26.82] JOE GALLOWAY: You guys could have used--

[00:24:27.22] CHARLES PROUTY: That was--

[00:24:28.09] JOE GALLOWAY: You guys could have used the Chinook.

[00:24:30.60] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, definitely. So that was probably one of the more significant actions that we had. Probably the most significant really.

[00:24:38.69] JOE GALLOWAY: You're lucky you survived that one.

[00:24:40.69] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, when I think back on it, I didn't think about it at the time, but I'm very, very grateful, particularly for that helo pilot.

[00:24:53.00] CHARLES PROUTY: So my most vivid memory is probably this-- is probably the same as-- is the same as my worst day in Vietnam. Because my most vivid memory is an operation that we went on when my corpsman was killed.

[00:25:12.75] We were going in after some VC tax collectors. And it was sort of a narrow landing zone. And the pilot, the young Army pilot warrant officer, said that he could land in there, felt that he could land in there. And there probably was enough room for him except when he came down a couple of the VC came out of the hooch and started shooting at us.

[00:25:34.46] And he either had-- either he hit the line going to the tail rotor, or he backed it into a palm tree. And he knocked the-- anyway, the tail rotor was knocked out. And at about 60 feet, the helicopter went-- started spinning with the main rotor. It kind of corkscrewed into the ground.

[00:25:51.95] And Doc saw the guy shooting at us and thought that if he jumped out he could take the guy under fire. He jumped out ahead of the helicopter but unfortunately didn't work that way. And the blade hit him.

[00:26:04.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, the blade got him.

[00:26:05.75] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. And a number of other guys-- I mean, I broke a collarbone, and one guy broke part of his back and a couple of other minor injuries but--

[00:26:18.02] JOE GALLOWAY: You say you were on that chopper yourself? CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. JOE GALLOWAY: And you broke your collarbone?

[00:26:22.19] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. Well, it came down and started burning. And, of course, we had 40 millimeter rounds in there that we were afraid we're going to go off. But it started to burn immediately as soon as it hit. And one basic rule of combat that the VC forgot was-- in this case, was if you're going to shoot down a helicopter, be sure you're not underneath it. Because there were armed VC arms and legs coming out. I mean, I think it killed all of the--

[00:26:47.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Got all of them.

[00:26:48.76] CHARLES PROUTY: It killed all of them too, but-- yeah. CHARLES PROUTY: My best day was the same as everybody that's come in here on these interviews was the day that bird took off-- on both tours--

[00:27:03.80] JOE GALLOWAY: On both tours.

[00:27:04.91] CHARLES PROUTY: --to head back to the United States.

[00:27:07.55]

[00:27:13.91] CHARLES PROUTY: In Cat Lo, the next province over, Phuóc Tuy province was the Australians' province. And they were terrific. They would operate with us. They'd send one man over to operate with us. And we had an exchange system where I'd send somebody over to operate with them. The Australian SAS.

[00:27:33.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Did they send you a SEAL, or--

[00:27:34.55] CHARLES PROUTY: No, SAS. Well, same thing-- I mean, SAS. And so we had a wonderful relationship.

[00:27:39.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Those were high speed dudes.

[00:27:39.90] CHARLES PROUTY: They were very high speed. And they were great soldiers, great partyers.

[00:27:45.47] JOE GALLOWAY: All of that.

[00:27:45.99] CHARLES PROUTY: Just fine people. And Koreans-- the only real experience I had with a Korean was we-- the operations that we were doing up in Da Nang were over-the-beach ops. And we would, at the-- and the DMZ. And we would go up by these Nasty class, which were essentially Swift-- not Swift boats, but the PT boats.

[00:28:11.80] And they take us up there. We would get into rubber rafts and go in towards the beach and then leave the rafts out and swim in probably the last 400 or 500 yards. And we conducted an operation up in the DMZ right next to where the ROKs, the Koreans, had a base. And so we would then gather up on the berm and we'd patrol in.

[00:28:39.43] And in these operations I was the only American. It was all Vietnamese SEALs. And I was bringing in-- I was there so that I could call in support and so on. And I had taken-- in between my tours, I'd taken three-month Vietnamese language school. So I could speak Vietnamese a little bit and definitely enough to get by with these guys because they could speak English a little bit.

[00:29:03.23] So as we patrolled in-- and I had notified sector. I had notified the Koreans that we were going to be in this area. I had done all the proper things to let them know we were going to

be there. And as we patrolled up from the berm, all of a sudden the Vietnamese who was on point stopped us. And he said, dai uy, he says, I see VC. I see VC.

[00:29:25.54] I look and I can see outlines probably 100 yards away. I could see there's a couple of people there. But something didn't sound right. I'm thinking, I've never been this successful in patrolling in and suddenly coming right into some of the enemy. That's not usually the way it works. And something told me-- they wanted to shoot. We shoot. We shoot. And I said, well, no, no. I said, let me-- just stay here.

[00:29:51.82] So I called back to sector. And I said, hey-- I said, you need to check and find out if there's any friendlies in my area because I'm about 400 yards from the beach, and there's some folks real close to us. They checked again. And they came back in a few minutes. They said, well, those are Koreans. I went, oh, Jesus.

[00:30:11.29] JOE GALLOWAY: And you didn't want to start a fight with them.

[00:30:13.21] CHARLES PROUTY: Because they'd had it all mapped out already. They had mortars. And I thought, my God. And the reason they'd come out was because we were coming in. And they thought that we knew where there was some enemy or some VC. And they wanted to be part of it too. So we turned back around and went out. I said, no this is not an area that we can operate in. But I think that might have been a close call.

[00:30:34.51] JOE GALLOWAY: A close call, yeah.

[00:30:41.61] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, like everybody, I guess, I tried to write a letter every day or so or every other day. And--

[00:30:48.06] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you get a MARS call now and then?

[00:30:50.61] CHARLES PROUTY: No, I never had-- no, I never had that. I mean, I'd get letters back. My wife was very good about writing letters back. And actually I remember her sending us-- when I was at SEA FLOAT I remember her sending a Christmas package with all kinds of stuff in it. And my whole platoon sat around while we opened it up. And I handed out cookies and candy and--

[00:31:12.69] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war you were fighting while you were fighting it?

[00:31:18.18] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, I think just-- not much. I mean, the Stars and Stripes was pretty good about talking about big battles, the Ia Drang. I'm sure those kinds of things. I mean, I wasn't over there when that was going on. But I mean, there were some reporting in the Stars and Stripes. And other SEALs.

[00:31:32.15] There were six-- a total of six SEAL platoons over. And they worked out of Na Bay and other areas in the Delta. And I found out from them what was going on. They operated in those areas and oftentimes with the regular Army units.

[00:31:51.06] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, we landed in North Island coming back. I took my platoon back. And we landed at North Island since we were based in Coronado. So I've been gone seven months on that tour. Yeah, it's about seven months-- seven and a half months.

[00:32:04.48] And I took a cab home. And I knew that-- I knew that my wife was pregnant, but I had-- the last time I saw her, she was a 22-year-old young girl. And when I walked in, she was about-- she was nine months pregnant.

[00:32:21.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, my.

[00:32:22.14] CHARLES PROUTY: So it was a surprise, a shock to see her. But, of course, I was thrilled to be home.

[00:32:30.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any confrontations or--

[00:32:35.52] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, not really--

[00:32:37.32] JOE GALLOWAY: --if you will.

[00:32:38.31] CHARLES PROUTY: I knew about it because my wife-- I mean-- went back to her folks in Connecticut for a while. And that was when the Black Panthers were-- there was a lot of antiwar demonstrations, and the Black Panthers in New Haven were demonstrating. So I knew a little bit about it. And, of course, Stars and Stripes, the newspaper over there wasn't-- didn't cover it too extensively.

[00:33:02.04] But really I didn't see that much. I mean, I don't think I personally was insulted or verbally assaulted in any way. I mean, I knew-- certainly knew people that were. And since that time, people who were protesters have apologized to me for it. But I don't think-- I don't really remember seeing that at all. I mean, it was a close knit Navy community. And I stayed in that.

[00:33:23.08] JOE GALLOWAY: And you stayed within those walls?

[00:33:25.86] CHARLES PROUTY: Right.

[00:33:27.18] JOE GALLOWAY: How long did you stay in the Navy?

[00:33:28.80] CHARLES PROUTY: Six years.

[00:33:29.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Six years?

[00:33:30.39] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah.

[00:33:30.78] JOE GALLOWAY: And you left as a--

[00:33:32.73] CHARLES PROUTY: Lieutenant.

[00:33:33.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Lieutenant.

[00:33:34.39] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah. Stayed in the Reserves, retired as a captain, but stayed in for six. CHARLES PROUTY: I mean, first of all, I was proud to have had the opportunity to do that. I really do think it made me much more patriotic. I had deep sense of pride about my country.

[00:34:01.91] And actually I think that might have been why I got into the FBI after I left the Navy. I enjoyed serving. I think it instilled in me a stronger sense of civic responsibility.

[00:34:17.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your own experience in combat affect the way you think about veterans coming home from our wars today?

[00:34:25.26] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah, I'm thrilled that we're treating them like-- that we've separated the cause from the Soldier. I'm thrilled to see that we're treating them so well. I'm very, very happy about that. And we should.

[00:34:38.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society, generally in our society today?

[00:34:48.93] CHARLES PROUTY: Well--

[00:34:49.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Or is it?

[00:34:50.46] CHARLES PROUTY: I mean, I think part of-- there was such a divisive period. I think part of that sort of is in the rear-view mirror now. People don't think about it. And it's not as real or as dramatic as it was back then.

[00:35:08.71] But I do think that it certainly was a signal event in my generation. And I have this sense that we really didn't answer the call. I mean, it showed the difference between us and the greatest generation that almost to a man that stood up and answered the call. And a lot of my contemporaries didn't.

[00:35:35.09] And I think that's sad. And I think many of them regret that now that they didn't. And I always thought that these-- the anti-draft folks and the-- a lot of the college students, the students that demonstrated-- I thought the reason-- they're not opposed to the war. They're opposed to going over there and risking-- and taking the risk that comes with being in war.

[00:35:54.61] They're not willing to step up and fight. And I always feel a sense of kinship with those that did answer the call. And I have to say I still look kind of askance at those that didn't.

[00:36:06.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:36:13.88] CHARLES PROUTY: Oh, definitely, absolutely. As I said, I mean-- I am tremendously appreciative of having had the opportunity to serve. And everybody thinks

everybody has this sense. Well, if things get critical, am I capable? What am I capable of? Am I capable of responding?

[00:36:31.23] And I think I did in a satisfactory way, which gives me a sense of self-confidence. And the other thing too I think is I'll often think back, it gives me a sense of perspective. If things are bad at work or at home or anywhere, I can always think back and say, hey, it's not that bad. I mean--

[00:36:52.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Nobody's shooting at you.

[00:36:54.12] CHARLES PROUTY: Yeah, nobody's shooting at me. So, yeah.

[00:36:59.93] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you would like to pass on to future generations of our country?

[00:37:06.84] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, I'm always distressed when our leaders have not-- when we don't have leaders that have had military experience. I mean, I think it's so important if you're going to send young men to war to be able to understand what-- not just in a capability brief, but to understand how the-- a combat unit interacts and how they function together.

[00:37:32.79] And I'm sorry that we don't have more. I'm glad to see some Iraq and Afghanistan veterans in Congress. I'm sorry that we don't have more. I think that's so important. The greatest generation-- of those leaders, all had served in the military. And you don't have to be in combat, just having served in the military gives you that sense I think.

[00:37:52.49] And the other thing I would-- the other thing that I think is a lesson that we seem to keep forgetting is that if-- it's so important if you're going to go to war-- and you might not have to go to war. I mean, war is not the first resort. It's a last resort, but it's got to be a viable resort.

[00:38:14.03] I mean, diplomatic-- and just the mere fact that they know that you might go to war, you might use military force, I think can sometimes facilitate diplomatic efforts. But if we do go to war, that the politicians need to stay out of it. They can't micromanage it. They have to let the military-- trust the military, and let them win the war, let them run it. Because you think back. What's the last war that we won?

[00:38:44.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Gulf.

[00:38:45.44] CHARLES PROUTY: World War II.

[00:38:46.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Gulf.

[00:38:46.89] CHARLES PROUTY: Well, Gulf War too. And that was a short war, and it didn't take-- there wasn't one any politicians micromanaging it.

[00:38:53.82] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:38:59.22] CHARLES PROUTY: So I'm grateful for the sacrifice of the people whose names are on there, tremendously grateful. I'm so glad that my name is not there. But I am tremendously-- it's hallowed ground, and I'm tremendously appreciative of the people that stepped forward and made that sacrifice.

[00:39:20.81] CHARLES PROUTY: Yes, and that's a great idea. I went down to Congress and did that commemorative event. I thought it was terrific. I think it's a great way to say thank you, a great way to commemorate a difficult time. But the people that are being recognized and commemorated are the people that stepped up.

[00:39:40.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Captain Prouty--

[00:39:41.86] CHARLES PROUTY: Yes, sir.

[00:39:42.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you.

[00:39:43.27] CHARLES PROUTY: Great. Thanks, Joe.

[00:39:43.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Appreciate it. Good interview.

[00:39:44.63] CHARLES PROUTY: Appreciate that.