

## **Sonstelie, Richard US Army**

[00:00:15.74] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:00:19.24] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I was 23.

[00:00:20.61] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your family status at that point?

[00:00:23.77] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I wasn't married. My father had just come back from Vietnam the year before.

[00:00:31.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Really?

[00:00:31.93] RICHARD SONSTELIE: So that made it fairly interesting family-wise.

[00:00:36.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Ah. He was an officer?

[00:00:37.68] RICHARD SONSTELIE: He was. He was a full colonel at that point, and he was an adviser to a Vietnamese division.

[00:00:51.49] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, I was an Army brat, Joe. So there's no hometown for Army brats.

[00:00:55.00] JOE GALLOWAY: There's no hometown for Army brats.

[00:00:57.17] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I've lived in Seattle for 40 years, so it feels like home.

[00:00:59.56] JOE GALLOWAY: This is home now.

[00:01:00.53] RICHARD SONSTELIE: It is.

[00:01:03.86] JOE GALLOWAY: You came into the Army through West Point.

[00:01:07.04] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yes, I did. I graduated in 1966.

[00:01:10.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Right into the heart of the war. You must have seen it coming through your West Point years. What was your sense of Vietnam by the time you were graduating?

[00:01:29.32] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, there were none of us in the class that didn't know we were going there. And I think all of us anticipated that that's what we've been trained for. So I think there was a sense of wanting to get there and do our job.

[00:01:49.81] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, interestingly with me, most of it was from the West Point years, because right after graduation, the Army sent me to graduate school. I went to airborne and Ranger school before I went to Vietnam and was stationed with the 82nd Airborne

at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. So the training I was getting there was really not particularly Vietnam-oriented, but it was very good training.

[00:02:20.27] RICHARD SONSTELIE: September of 1968.

[00:02:22.06] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on arriving there?

[00:02:27.79] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I remember flying in on a regular civilian aircraft that had what we call stewardesses back then, flight attendants. And it struck me as so incongruous that we'd be flying into a combat zone at Tan Son Nhut Airport.

[00:02:44.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Drinking champagne.

[00:02:45.64] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yes, exactly. And there we were in the civilian aircraft with stewardesses, and I was looking anxiously out the window figuring, boy, we're landing in a combat zone. This must be dangerous. I wonder if they know. And of course, I was very naive. Tan Son Nhut Air Force Base was a great, enormous Air Force base, that was at that point very secure.

[00:03:08.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. And on landing and when they opened the door?

[00:03:14.75] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, it was very green countryside. I could see that much. And like the Army will do, they started processing us right away. I can remember going to a very long line where-- in theory, you had an assignment before you got there. In fact, they reserved the right to assign you wherever they wanted to, which again was kind of the Army way of doing things. So I stood in quite a long line, which I was used to from the Army.

[00:03:43.41] JOE GALLOWAY: At this point, you were a 23-year-old lieutenant?

[00:03:46.91] RICHARD SONSTELIE: No, I was a captain.

[00:03:48.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Captain by then.

[00:03:49.23] RICHARD SONSTELIE: That was a time period when you made captain-- you made second lieutenant to first lieutenant in 12 months. And first lieutenant to captain in 12 months. Even though only about three or four months of that had I really been a Soldier and not in graduate school. So they were probably taking quite a risk.

[00:04:07.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. When you got to the head of that line, where did they decide that they could best use you?

[00:04:15.21] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, when I got to the head of the line, the man said, we've been looking for an airborne Ranger captain because we need a new commander of the long range reconnaissance patrols out of Cu Chi, which is where I was headed. I wasn't real excited about that. Not because I knew that much about long range reconnaissance patrols, but

what I learned would have made me far less excited. But I was an engineer officer, and I really wanted to be with an engineer unit.

[00:04:49.26] And fortunately for me, about two people behind me was another young captain who said, that's why I'm here, I want that. And so--

[00:05:00.51] JOE GALLOWAY: He saved you from LRRP.

[00:05:01.62] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I think I got saved by that young captain, whoever he was. I probably ought to be thanking him.

[00:05:12.20] JOE GALLOWAY: So you fell back to an engineer outfit?

[00:05:17.50] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yes. I think you probably know, but I probably ought to explain that in the 25th Infantry Division, which is where I was going to Cu Chi, there are typically two kinds of engineer units. There are combat engineer units, and there's a battalion attached to every Army Division that's a combat engineer battalion. And then in the bigger bases, and Cu Chi was one of those, there's a construction engineer battalion. So I went to the 65th Engineers, which is the combat engineer battalion, which is really where I wanted to go.

[00:05:50.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Where you wanted to go?

[00:05:52.02] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yes.

[00:05:52.43] JOE GALLOWAY: And within the 25th Division.

[00:05:55.35] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yes, it was. It was a subunit of the 25th Infantry Division, and it had companies out with each of the brigades of the division. So it was the main support.

[00:06:06.72] JOE GALLOWAY: So they weren't kidding when they said combat engineers?

[00:06:09.67] RICHARD SONSTELIE: They weren't kidding. It's quite different. We had some equipment, but not the big, heavy equipment that the construction battalions had.

[00:06:18.31] JOE GALLOWAY: You were going to be blowing LZs and things like that?

[00:06:22.09] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yeah. In that area, one of the things we had to do more than anything else was keep the roads open. I mean, those units had to be resupplied every day, and it was very expensive to do it by air, you wanted to do it by ground.

[00:06:36.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Rebuild the bridge every morning.

[00:06:39.37] RICHARD SONSTELIE: You had to rebuild bridges, you had to clear mines, you had to fly over. My first job with a battalion was S-2 intelligence officer. And all that meant-- I wasn't bringing much intelligence to the game. But what that meant was I flew every morning in

something called the dawn patrol-- and I wasn't a flyer, I was the passenger-- over all the roads of the division had to see whether any had been blown during the night. Yeah.

[00:07:12.36] JOE GALLOWAY: So tell me what your initial duties were.

[00:07:16.99] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, initially again, I was the intelligence officer for the battalion reporting to the battalion commander. I did that for about four or five months. And most of what I did, I got up before dawn and flew, came back, and reported back to the infantry division what the status was-- first to my battalion and then to the infantry division as to what the status was of the roads. And then other people would then make the decision based on that information as to what-- maybe repairs that had to be made or whatever it might be.

[00:07:53.53] JOE GALLOWAY: And that was your daily routine?

[00:07:56.83] RICHARD SONSTELIE: That was my daily routine for about three or four months.

[00:08:00.14] JOE GALLOWAY: And after that?

[00:08:01.87] RICHARD SONSTELIE: After that, I had two other jobs basically during my year there. The second job, I was an assistant S-3. The S-3 is operations.

[00:08:14.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Operations.

[00:08:15.87] RICHARD SONSTELIE: And the operations officer in most any battalion, certainly an engineer battalion, is a major. So I was the assistant to him. And as such, I just did basically whatever he wanted. And then they made me assistant division engineer. That's a bit of a misnomer. The division engineer for an infantry division is by definition the commander of the engineer battalion.

[00:08:45.91] So the lieutenant colonel who commanded that, my boss, the battalion is also the division engineer. But they put a more junior officer on the staff of the division, and that's called the assistant division engineer. And that was the job I had.

[00:09:00.88] JOE GALLOWAY: And he did all the work.

[00:09:02.38] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, what he does really is he does the reporting. And so they were doing things like one of the biggest areas that we had to work in, that the division had to work in, is there were rubber plantations all over that part of Vietnam. And it was dangerous country for the infantry to maneuver through.

[00:09:26.39] And so we would basically-- the engineers would be out there clearing areas for the infantry to be able to move through. So I've got to every day report at the division staff meeting on areas that had been cleared of trees basically. And that was the strategy, is clear enough-- we didn't certainly clear out the huge Michelin Rubber Plantation, which is there-- we

didn't decimate it. But there were smaller rubber plantations that were in the area of major enemy activity. And probably, unfortunately for history, many of those were cleared out.

[00:10:08.75] Again, our job was at that point to support the infantry. They were doing the toughest work and the most dangerous work, and we had the capability to make their lives a little bit safer, and that's what we were ordered to do.

[00:10:27.31] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living quarters like? Engineers always lived in.

[00:10:31.34] RICHARD SONSTELIE: When I was at battalion, we had-- the buzzword is hooch. We had a small, not barracks but small buildings typically held two or three or four officers, each with our own sort of little private area, shared bathroom. They were actually pretty nice. And the nicest ones, which didn't include junior officers like me, were air conditioned. Not all of them were, and the mess area was air conditioned. So you had some relief from the heat there.

[00:11:06.51] But the living conditions were pretty darn good compared to people that were out in the field. Because Cu Chi was a very big base. But my last job, Joe, was a company commander. So you were asking what I did afterwards. The last six months I was there, I commanded Delta Company of the 65th engineers, which was up in a place called Dau Tieng, which was at the Michelin Rubber Plantation, the biggest rubber plantation I think in all of Vietnam.

[00:11:35.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. How was that?

[00:11:42.90] RICHARD SONSTELIE: A much better learning experience for me. And I think a more positive experience in many ways, particularly for my growth and leadership because I was out-- I was the engineer there. I had a company, there was a brigade of the 25th Infantry that was there, a full Colonel commanding that brigade. And I was his engineer. And so that was a pretty heady thing for a 23-- probably by that time-- 24-year-old. But it was really exciting work and rewarding work being out in the field with an infantry division.

[00:12:20.27] JOE GALLOWAY: What did that do for your daily routine?

[00:12:24.17] RICHARD SONSTELIE: The people in my unit were out in the field all the time. So they were either clearing the roads, putting in temporary bridges, building revetments, and-- not a full base, but they might build a temporary fire support base when they were going into an area and they wanted artillery located there. So it was very, very busy. Not that it hadn't been busy back at division headquarters, but compared to division headquarters it was much busier.

[00:12:55.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Serious hands-on stuff.

[00:12:58.51] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Really serious good work. And I felt like the sort of thing I'd been trained for, which is very important to particularly a young person.

[00:13:14.58] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I was incredibly impressed and I had a chance that most people didn't get, because my father had been there the year before, was the senior adviser to a Vietnamese division, the 5th ARVN, A-R-V-N, Army of the Republic of Vietnam.

[00:13:33.40] And General Thuan, who was the commanding general, went out of his way-- they were located maybe an hour away from us-- to invite me over at Christmas, at Easter, at Thanksgiving. He was Christian and celebrated those. And it was an incredible opportunity for me, that I'm sure many people didn't get, to really spend time with a fabulous Vietnamese family that was his family. As well as the daily Vietnamese I met, they were an incredible-- and are-- an incredible people. Gentle and caring, and I was very, very impressed.

[00:14:15.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your father's friend survive the war?

[00:14:20.72] RICHARD SONSTELIE: You know, I know he survived the war. My father tried to find out some things about him after the fall of Saigon and during the time, and he had very little information.

[00:14:32.25] JOE GALLOWAY: He didn't evacuate.

[00:14:33.81] RICHARD SONSTELIE: He did not evacuate. But I think typically, people who had been senior officers in the ARVN--

[00:14:40.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Re-education camp.

[00:14:41.31] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Re-education camp, exactly. I think my father probably would have heard if he had been killed, so I have a feeling he just was reintegrated into the society in a much lower role. He was a very fine man.

[00:14:59.15] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, we were quite a varied lot. I succeeded a man that I admired tremendously when I took over command of this company, a man who had been in the West Point class, one ahead of me. A man named Tad Ono that I still see on occasion, he lives in Hawaii. He had won the Silver Star during a time that Dau Tieng had been under attack, and he'd been quite a hero. I admired him and liked him before that, but even more. So he was one that my opportunity to succeed him in the company was a wonderful opportunity.

[00:15:37.74] And then there was this terrific-- in the officer ranks-- this terrific mix of people. We were all so young, but people that were ROTC, people that were OCS, all just terrific. One young officer who was exactly my age, who was killed in a freak accident with a helicopter, was a Texas A&M grad, maybe the sharpest of any of the officers I met in my unit.

[00:16:07.82] The senior officers were again, a mix, they had come up through all kinds of ways. The man who was my battalion commander for the second half of my time there when I was a company commander was a guy named Ed Gibson, who's still alive today, and one of the finest leaders I've ever met in my life. He just inspired us. And he wasn't a rah rah guy, he was just what leadership is all about.

[00:16:39.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial or social backgrounds during your time in Vietnam that you might not have had in civilian life?

[00:16:51.35] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Absolutely. At that time more social than racial. I had a couple of outstanding African-American sergeants in my unit, I didn't have any African-American officers in my company. But two of our-- our supply sergeant and our mess sergeant, and I think one other, were incredibly capable African-American NCOs from--

[00:17:18.71] I realize that from a societal-- it's not-- class isn't the right word-- but societal background, the NCOs typically came from a somewhat different background. Most of them were not college graduates, although some were. Most of them had joined the Army even younger than the officer Corps had. But wow, were they good.

[00:17:43.87] And I have been told that the first two words, there are two critical words for a company commander to know. And that is first sergeant. That is, he knows far more than you possibly know as a young company commander. And so you better learn to call him when you need him.

[00:18:07.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Call him first.

[00:18:08.54] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Call him first, he knows a lot more than you do, he will be very respectful, and he'll call you sir. But recognize that this is a man who's vastly more experienced, knows a lot more about the Army than you do. And in the case of my first sergeant, he will give you very good advice.

[00:18:26.78] JOE GALLOWAY: To keep you from stepping on your crank, anyway.

[00:18:29.06] RICHARD SONSTELIE: That's exactly right. And he did that many times for me. I wish I'd kept in touch with him. I didn't. But he was terrific.

[00:18:38.88] JOE GALLOWAY: I doubt you had much time for it, but what did you do for recreation or off-duty activities?

[00:18:47.17] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Very little, there just wasn't time. And I will tell you that I really believe that was one of the most positive aspects of the year there in that it went by so fast, I don't think it gave you much time to think about your situation or danger or anything like that, you were kept so busy seven days a week and kind of falling exhausted into bed. But given you were doing what you were trained for, it was a good kind of busy.

[00:19:24.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you have any specific memories of the popular culture at that time? Music, books, film.

[00:19:32.18] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yeah, when the songs are played, the Fifth Dimension, others that were very popular then, it just brings memories streaming back. Because we always had Armed Forces Radio, and when you were out with your engineer unit, there was always

some radio playing in the background with probably Cronauer or whatever his name was. But in any event, I didn't recognize the disk jockeys. But the songs were so important.

[00:19:59.97] And of course, we were also there during the Moon landing. So that culturally was a huge thing. The war almost stopped to listen to the Moon landing, not quite. But I remember that very vividly. But I think what I most remember now is-- and it's not any particular song, and it's ones that I don't even think about. And then they play it on the oldies station and suddenly you go, oh, my gosh, I remember when I was listening to that.

[00:20:31.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions that you witnessed? Combat operations in which you participated?

[00:20:40.07] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, probably the most dramatic was just before I left to go up to Dau Tieng and take over my company. The Cu Chi tunnels of course are famous. And in February of 1969, there was a major breach of the perimeter of the 25th Infantry Division by people that we didn't know, but in fact had come through the Cu Chi tunnels. North Vietnamese regulars and VC. And they blew up I think literally dozens of helicopters in place in the middle of the night.

[00:21:21.04] And part of that perimeter was the responsibility of our unit, the 65th Engineer Battalion. And Colonel Gibson got a hold of me and said, I want you to go out there and find out what's going on and report back to me. We had one tank, I don't know if every combat engineer battalion had a tank, but we did. And so I got to lie on top of the tank while the tankers took us out there. Tanks are pretty blind as they go out.

[00:21:55.06] There was plenty of support infantry out there, but it was just basically the tank and me on top lying there trying to keep a very low profile. And then got out to the perimeter, and it was amazing arriving out there and seeing a dozen or more helicopters all in flames, young Soldiers that had been out there on the perimeter, some wounded and some killed, but a lot of them in a terrible state of panic and confusion.

[00:22:31.25] I think that's something that I took with me more than anything else is the few firefights I was in-- and compared to infantrymen, I was in relatively few-- how incredibly confusing it is, the sound, the light, the noises, most of the movies don't do it justice. It is a very, very difficult time to maintain order and to maintain discipline and to pass on orders. And the few times I experienced that I realized how incredibly difficult the fog of war, how incredibly difficult that is and was for my father and Soldiers in all these wars.

[00:23:24.68] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I think my most vivid memory is the people I worked with, particularly in my company. Once you're a company commander and you have, in my case 155 men that you're responsible for, for getting the work done and for hopefully trying to keep them safe as much as you can and still get the work done. That's a very heady experience, particularly for a 24-year-old.



[00:23:57.99] And I realize that-- I had a long civilian career. I didn't have that much responsibility until very late in my civilian career. It's amazing what responsibility young Army officers were given in that era.

[00:24:11.19] JOE GALLOWAY: No more responsible position in the world than an Army company commander.

[00:24:17.06] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yeah, and that's-- the most vivid memory to me is what it felt like to be a company commander of a combat engineer company out away from the big bosses and this sort of thing, out with these infantrymen. Clearly, I was only one of many responsible for them and for their job. But all of them, I'm sure they were scared, I was scared. But by golly, they did their job.

[00:24:52.85] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I've got to be frank about it, the best day I had was the day I came home.

[00:24:57.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Everybody says that.

[00:24:58.57] RICHARD SONSTELIE: It really was.

[00:24:58.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Everybody says that.

[00:24:59.68] RICHARD SONSTELIE: And everybody has that date tattooed on their forehead. As much as it's the best thing I ever did in the Army from the standpoint of I was prepared for it. And I felt like it was my calling at that point in time. I knew that going back, as they used to say, back to the world, that's what it was called, anything that wasn't in Vietnam. So I knew that date way in advance, and that was the happiest single day.

[00:25:38.40] RICHARD SONSTELIE: The worst day was-- there were two or three of them, because they were all the same worst issue, and that was having people I knew that were killed. I was very fortunate that not one of my 155 men in the unit were killed, but I had three West Point roommates who were killed there. Two while I was there. No, one while I was there, two before I got there. And their names are forever part of me and part of my experience. And the one that was killed when I was there, I was in his wedding party. And when you get that kind of news, that's your worst day.

[00:26:34.84] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Relatively little. I think the 25th Infantry, we had fewer of those than any other unit perhaps because of the area we were in. I did see Republic of Korea troops on occasion, that were moving through the area. But relatively little.

[00:26:59.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Your general impression of the South Vietnamese military people that you interacted with.

[00:27:06.93] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I was impressed with them. I thought the South Vietnamese-- and again, it was flavored significantly by General Thuan. So I got to meet him,

and I got to meet his staff and talk to people who'd worked with my father. So I think they'd have been very impressive people in any event.

[00:27:25.92] The South Vietnamese regular units that were in our area were I thought quite impressive. They were committed. We did work with them on occasion out in areas that-- where particularly of course we had interpreters and others where we had language issues, and I was very impressed with those people.

[00:27:53.83] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Virtually, none. I mean, it was letter-writing in that day. It certainly wasn't the internet, and it certainly wasn't Skype. But it was letters back and forth, and I was pretty good at writing frequently. I was fortunate, which didn't happen to many people, but partway through my tour, about halfway through my tour, my father showed up. He was at that point teaching at what's called ICAF, the Industrial College of the Armed Forces.

[00:28:28.82] And I'm sure he worked pretty hard to get to this assignment, but he was on an assignment to do sort of a research project that had to do with the war. And so he showed up at my engineer battalion, and I had been-- I'd gotten an award, Bronze Star. And I was fortunate enough that my father presented it to me.

[00:28:54.21] JOE GALLOWAY: All right.

[00:28:54.84] RICHARD SONSTELIE: So that was probably my second happiest moment in Vietnam, is my father showing up. And I knew about the award. And Colonel Gibson told me it's generally presented by a general officer. And I said, well Sir, my father's showing up next week. He knew this already. And I said, what do you think if I have him present it? And he said, I think that's a great idea. So that happened. And I don't know how my dad felt about it, but I could see the tears in his eyes. I knew it meant a lot to him.

[00:29:28.95] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war from home?

[00:29:33.80] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Pretty fair amount. We got the Army Times and there were local papers printed on most of these big bases. So Cu Chi, the 25th Infantry had its own information. It didn't dwell on antiwar protesters. I learned most of that after I got back. So there wasn't that much knowledge of that. But certainly, we were aware of it. Every now and then, you'd see television, not typically, but you'd see it on occasion. And so you'd become aware of it through that, but it wasn't--

[00:30:09.31] Again, I think we were so busy. And again, I think that was a blessing. We were so busy that we didn't spend a whole lot of time thinking about that.

[00:30:19.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you aware of any particular political or social events or movements going on back home?

[00:30:27.60] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Not then. I became more aware of that after I got back. Right after I got back was a big Vietnam protest in Washington DC. It happened to be completely coincidentally when my sister was getting married, so I was at her wedding to a

young Army officer, interestingly. And so I was there for that, and it was the same day of the big march in DC. So I became very aware of it when I got back. But not all that aware at the time. I mean, I knew clearly before I'd gone, there was already a significant protest movement going on.

[00:31:12.22] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Boy, I thought I'd have that drilled into my head a little bit more. It was September of 1969, and I don't know the exact date, I must say. I should have.

[00:31:20.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe that experience.

[00:31:24.82] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I flew back into the big air base north of San Francisco there. I can't think what it's called.

[00:31:31.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Travis.

[00:31:31.60] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Travis, thank you. Flew back into Travis. I'd flown out of Travis interestingly, flew back into Travis, and then made a connection. I remember walking into the Air Force base, then I went over to-- JOE GALLOWAY: Oakland? RICHARD SONSTELIE: SFO, because I was going to fly down to-- my father's mother was very ill with cancer and died just a few months later, and I'd been quite close to her growing up. So I was flying to El Paso, Texas, where she lived to see her.

[00:32:06.16] And of course I was in uniform, and you could fly stand by, and you could get really good rates back then if you were in uniform. So I was certainly going to wear the uniform. But I felt pretty conspicuous in San Francisco, I must say. I never got any negative comments or anything like that at that point in time. But you do feel a little conspicuous. And not at the Air Force base, but once you're in that civilian world, you realize, by golly, I'm really in a different world right now.

[00:32:32.34] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your reception like from family and friends?

[00:32:35.92] RICHARD SONSTELIE: It was a wonderful reception. Again, I think for my father and I to have shared that experience made it even more dramatic. And my father, again, had been over there and seen me ever so briefly. But it was just really a very warm homecoming. I again got to see my grandmother before she passed away, and that, I know, meant a lot to my dad. So it was a great homecoming.

[00:33:04.71] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow veterans over the years?

[00:33:11.25] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, I have a lot of contact with my West Point class. We get together for reunions, mini reunions. I just played in a golf tournament down in Phoenix with some of them on-- three days ago. And my wife, whom I met after my West Point time and after my Vietnam time, she's become very close with a lot of them, which is wonderful.

[00:33:36.71] JOE GALLOWAY: You're coming up on your 50th anniversary.

[00:33:38.76] RICHARD SONSTELIE: My 50th a year from now. And we're certainly going to that. But it's been really nice for me that Cindy has made so many good friends. Not just among the wives, but among the classmates. Of course, it was only wives back then, because West Point was strictly 100% male back in those days. But it's been very rewarding to still hang around with that group.

[00:34:03.52] I know only a few from--

[00:34:05.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Your time in Vietnam.

[00:34:07.46] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Yeah, my time in Vietnam who were not West Point classmates or something like that. And only a couple of them have I kept any contact with.

[00:34:16.16] JOE GALLOWAY: You stayed in the Army?

[00:34:18.10] RICHARD SONSTELIE: No, I didn't stay in very long. When I first got back from Vietnam, I was sent to what would be the advanced course for engineer officers at Fort Belvoir. But I'd been there only about a week when they said, we've changed your orders, we are pre-qualifying you for the advanced course. You're going to Los Alamos, New Mexico to work at the laboratory there.

[00:34:41.55] So I ended up my last three years in the Army, '69 to '72, in Los Alamos, New Mexico, one of two Army officers at the laboratory.

[00:34:51.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Beautiful place.

[00:34:53.44] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Beg your pardon.

[00:34:54.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Beautiful place.

[00:34:55.38] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Oh, it's a gorgeous place. There are two New Mexicos. The southern part is desert, the northern part is mountains and gorgeous. And you look right down on Santa Fe from Los Alamos, it was a very interesting three years. And I got married. About a year into that is when Cindy and I were married, and I worked at the lab, she worked at the lab. It's a very idyllic place at 7,200 feet high.

[00:35:20.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. And you decided to get out of the Army.

[00:35:26.04] RICHARD SONSTELIE: It was not an easy decision. I think there were two major factors that made me get out in '72. I got out in July of '72. One was I knew Cindy wanted to have a career too. She had her master's degree and was very well-educated and very interested in her career. It's hard in the Army for the spouse to have a career too. It can happen, but it's very difficult. If you're a teacher or a nurse, that's very transferable. I think it's easier. But that was going to be hard.

[00:35:57.01] And the second reason was an interesting one. My assignment was going to be teaching at the Air Force Academy, which would have been an incredibly wonderful assignment. I was going to teach physics there, they already had let me know that that was my next assignment. Being one of a relatively few people in green amidst all that blue would have been even more fun. That's back when Army beat Air Force on occasion, which doesn't happen much anymore. But it was tough to turn that job down.

[00:36:28.98] But part of what I realized from my father's career and from what I was seeing around me is I had already had some of the best jobs the Army had to offer. And I was probably within a short time going to be promoted to major if I didn't do anything grossly wrong. And it just didn't sound as interesting to me. I was really ready to go have a different career. I'd lived in the Army my whole life as an Army brat, and then West Point, and then the Army career. And I just wanted to do something different. And I went back and got an MBA, and went into business and spent my career there.

[00:37:13.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Was it difficult readjusting to life after the war and after the Army?

[00:37:18.91] RICHARD SONSTELIE: The reason it wasn't so difficult for me was number one, Los Alamos had been a bit of a transition. I never wore a uniform. I was an Army officer assigned there, but I was working in a civilian laboratory, actually attached to the University of California. And then when I went back and got my MBA and went out to Puget Sound Energy, then Puget Power here in this area where I spent my career, the utility industry is not quite-- it's not entrepreneurial, let's put it that way. It's not supposed to be entrepreneurial. It's a very process-oriented industry. That was an easy transition for a guy who'd been around the Army.

[00:38:03.24] There were right ways and wrong ways to do things. You followed procedure, you were regulated by a regulatory commission that made it clear what you could do and not do. So there was I think a comfort level there that probably would not have been present had I immediately gone on to some entrepreneurial enterprise. And I think that made it a more comfortable career for me and a more comfortable transition.

[00:38:37.84] RICHARD SONSTELIE: What had the most lasting influence to me was being trusted at that young age with significant responsibility. It built-- hopefully I didn't get cocky about it, but it built a degree of self-confidence in me that what I was going to have to handle from there on out compared to what I'd done at age 24 in Vietnam was going to be easy.

[00:39:10.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Going to be easy.

[00:39:11.17] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Not easy, but easier. And I think that sense of hopefully a quiet self-confidence, I didn't feel like I talked about it all the time, although I'm talking to you about it, was something that put me in good status. I had assignments after that and as I moved up in my company and that sort of thing. And I think that leadership opportunity that you get so young really stays with you forever.

[00:39:43.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about new veterans returning from combat today?

[00:39:52.65] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Absolutely. Although I didn't personally have any terrible reaction from friends, I did notice when I came to Seattle after I'd finished my MBA and was here working at Puget Power, I was accepted wonderfully at my new company.

[00:40:11.43] But I can remember my wife and I moved up to Capitol Hill just before we had our first kid here in Seattle. Very liberal area. And I can remember wonderful friends up there, neighbors of ours, my age, when they learned that I'd been in the Army and I'd been in Vietnam, they didn't give me a bad time about it. but what they said was, couldn't you get out of it?

[00:40:37.25] And I think my response that I didn't try to get out of it, that's what I was trained to do. Now at that point, I certainly had misgivings as to perhaps whether we ever should have been involved but leaving that aside, I had no shame about my own role in there and those that I worked with and things they were doing. Maybe some of the things weren't the smartest thing to do, but it wasn't out of malintent. It was out of perhaps bad strategy. But there's a difference between the two. So yeah, that was a bit of a shock to have people kind of say, couldn't you get out of it?

[00:41:20.64] But today's Soldiers, I'm so happy to see how different it is today from how they're treated, whether they're in a restaurant. It doesn't matter in a city like Seattle with our strong progressive tradition, and I love this city, it's my favorite place in the world. But it doesn't matter. I swear, somebody on their way to an antiwar protest would see somebody in uniform and say, thank you for your service. That is a really big change--

[00:41:52.14] JOE GALLOWAY: It's how it's supposed to be.

[00:41:53.34] RICHARD SONSTELIE: --over what happened when I came back. And I think it's wonderful for these young people and for the country.

[00:42:00.03] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today? If it is.

[00:42:07.90] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Well, I think for most people that I'm close to and leaving aside my West Point class, there's probably a big division within that. But I think for most people that I spend time with here in Seattle, it's thought of as a mistake that we were ever involved, that we got involved in what was largely a civil war and was not something we should have done.

[00:42:39.38] I think over the years, that has been leavened by this appreciation for those who were there. In other words, it's not assigning blame. If there's blame being assigned, it's at the highest levels and not at the mid and lower levels. But I think it strongly influenced military leadership in recent years about the realization that war is in fact a last resort.

[00:43:13.06] JOE GALLOWAY: Or should be.

[00:43:14.13] RICHARD SONSTELIE: That's not something you embark on lightly, particularly if you have a divided country. And so I think it influences military and civilian leaders to this day, even if they were too young to have really remembered that war. And I think that's good.

[00:43:32.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:43:41.56] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Oh, yes. I took away far more. I mean, my investment, I was never wounded and again, had some difficult moments. But the growth experience for me was so incredible. The people that I got to work with were just amazing. I got to really experience the Vietnamese people in a way that not many who went there did. That was a terrific experience. So I got so far more out of it than I possibly put in.

[00:44:16.56] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans?

[00:44:23.86] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I think to young West Pointers, and I get some opportunity to interact with them-- wrong term, young officers-- I would say trust your training, trust your non-commissioned officers, believe in your men. Those lessons which you learned probably in my case by going the wrong way a few times as you learn. That's just a terrific thing to tell young officers today, whether they're in a combat situation or not, what wonderful people they're going to get to work with in the Army.

[00:45:07.81] The NCOs, the Soldiers that are there, who today are all volunteers, in my era of course heavily draft-oriented among the privates and the corporals and such. But I think telling them that you're about to experience some truly terrific young Americans and how much you can learn and grow from that experience is something that they ought to be excited about.

[00:45:34.85] I've got a young nephew right now who just joined the Army Reserve and went off to basic training. He came back so excited about the Army, and I think he's going to be in ROTC while he's in college and wants to make the Army a career. Wonderful to see him do this with excitement, which he's got.

[00:46:02.51] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I was involved in something called the VVLP, Vietnam Veterans Leadership Project, that was formed during the 1980s, early '80s. And I was involved in setting up the Seattle chapter. And we brought back a half scale replica of the Vietnam Memorial, which was built shortly after the Memorial was, and it toured the country. And it came here to Seattle, and we had a huge turnout for it. It was at Seattle Center, not too far from here.

[00:46:35.27] I'd visited the Memorial before then. And like many before me had done rubbings of certain names of people that had meant a lot to me that had died there. But bringing the Memorial here to Seattle, where a lot of people-- that's a long way to go back to Washington DC, and a lot of people got to see that Memorial and got to see the names that meant a lot to them on this half scale replica, was a terrific thing to do.

[00:47:09.03] RICHARD SONSTELIE: I think it's a wonderful concept. I think memorializing moments like this, it would be so easy just to say, well, we don't feel real good about being involved or something like this, and why don't we just ignore it and put it aside? It would be a terrible disservice to the country, to the people who served there. And there are certainly lessons there that have great value for our future. And I'm just delighted to see that it's happening.

[00:47:39.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, sir.

[00:47:40.90] RICHARD SONSTELIE: Thank you very much.

[00:47:42.14]