

Steele, Orlo USMC

[00:00:16.04] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:00:19.12] ORLO STEELE: I was, I think, 33 or 34. I was married at the time with two children. And my wife was living in Honolulu, which was where she was born and raised. So she had moved back with her family in Honolulu.

[00:00:33.18] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you consider your hometown?

[00:00:36.37] ORLO STEELE: The town in which I'm living now. It's Grass Valley, California, which is located between Sacramento and Lake Tahoe in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

[00:00:45.60] JOE GALLOWAY: And that's where you grew up?

[00:00:47.50] ORLO STEELE: Yes, from age nine on.

[00:00:49.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, what was your rank when you went to Vietnam on your first tour

[00:00:53.23] ORLO STEELE: I was kind of a fresh-caught major. I'd been in grade, I think, for about eight months.

[00:01:07.30] ORLO STEELE: I was commissioned through the officer candidate course. I attended Stanford University and was in Army ROTC for a couple of years. Couldn't stand putting on a uniform one hour a week, so I kind of bailed out of that. And then when I came close to graduation, I applied through the federal office here in San Francisco for the officer candidate course when I graduated. And that was to convene in September of 1954-- excuse me, 1955. And I graduated in March of 1955.

[00:01:52.48] In the meantime, I was working up in a lumber camp, which was always my summer job, piling green lumber and green chain. And then about July, I got a letter from Headquarters Marine Corps, which said, your request for the 14th Officer Candidate Course is disapproved. And then they went on and said, and it's not your personal qualifications. In essence, they said, we've just got more people better qualified than you are.

[00:02:20.51] The Marine Corps was going down in strength in those years, if you remember. It was during the-- and the Army as well. So I accepted that. And I had written my draft board and said, don't draft me because I'm going to go in the Marine Corps in September. So I enlisted.

[00:02:40.58] ORLO STEELE: And enlisted in Sacramento and ended, I think, on the 15th of September at the Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, California as a recruit; and went through that; graduated just before Christmas; signed up to Camp Pendleton for the infantry training school; initially put on 30 days of mess duty; came off mess duty; and went on a ten days boot leave over New Year's. And then went through the infantry training school.

[00:03:20.10] But because I'd made PFC-- I'd been the right guy and made PFC out of boot camp, they were short of troop handlers. And so they made me a troop handler. And so I lived in the duty hut with a couple of corporals and a staff sergeant and everything else. And we had a company commander by the name of Bailey. And so I was a troop handler when I went through as a PFC.

[00:03:48.09] And towards the end, as we were getting towards graduation, Lieutenant Bailey said they're taking nominations for the 16th Officer Candidate Course to convene in March at Quantico and said, I want you to apply. And I said, I've already done that, sir, you know? And in the meantime, I had met many drill instructors who had applied for-- great squared away guys. And I said, there's no way I would do that. He said, I want you to apply. And I said, sir, I've already tried. He said, get your papers together.

[00:04:20.29] So I scrambled around, got the papers together. And then one of the last features we did before we were to move on to our permanent duty station, which was right up the road, we went up to the cold weather training center at Bridgeport, California. And that's when we used to send all of our overseas drafts and people who are graduating in the winter time for cold weather indoctrination, ten days. And they put them into-- so we drew our gear and went there.

[00:04:53.23] And that was my first experience of going into the mountain, which later influenced my life at every rank. And I walked in there as a PFC. And there were composite companies that had just been formed of various not really units, per se. And I went through ten days of there.

[00:05:15.29] They happened to be filming a picture called Hold Back the Night with John Payne. And it was about the Chosin Reservoir. And I remember they had corsairs going. And then they used Marines in there with their old shoe packs and things like that to make it look authentic.

[00:05:33.57] And so I went through that. And by the time I had returned to Camp Pendleton, I'd been accepted to Officer Candidate Course.

[00:05:43.73] JOE GALLOWAY: So you were off to Quantico?

[00:05:45.62] ORLO STEELE: Off to Quantico within a week or two. And yes. And went through that from March until commissioning. I think it was about 10 or 12 weeks, and commissioning 6th of June, as I recall. By the way, I would add that I valued that time. I mean, by the time I went to the Officer Candidate Course, I could tear down a rifle. I could make a rack. I knew left foot from right foot. And we probably had a class of-- classmates of about 125 other college graduates-- who were college graduates. There were--

[00:06:21.23] JOE GALLOWAY: They were commissioned?

[00:06:23.38] ORLO STEELE: I think we commissioned about 75. We lost about 50.

[00:06:29.47] JOE GALLOWAY: That's pretty hard cut.

[00:06:31.09] ORLO STEELE: Yes, it was.

[00:06:38.56] ORLO STEELE: I arrived in August of 1967.

[00:06:47.45] JOE GALLOWAY: '67.

[00:06:47.94] ORLO STEELE: Yes, and it was the 13-month tour. And I left in September of '68.

[00:06:54.03] JOE GALLOWAY: And by then you're a major.

[00:06:55.82] ORLO STEELE: Yes, yes.

[00:06:57.91] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on landing there?

[00:07:03.59] ORLO STEELE: We had flown out with an officer you had interviewed yesterday, General Caulfield. We had been classmates in the Amphibious Warfare School. And I had flown to Honolulu. And so I met them at the airport when they were passing through. We happened to be on the same plane and along with another classmate.

[00:07:32.10] And so we went initially to Okinawa. And we were offloaded at Okinawa for about four days, where we had an opportunity to leave our sea bags and that sort of thing, put away, do some administrative details, and also famfire the M16 rifle, which had just really been issued within the previous few months.

[00:08:00.33] And I'd never had an M16 rifle as I'd always had M1s because I had been on sea duty and before that in the brigade. So we never even had the M14 rifle. So I had-- that was new to me.

[00:08:15.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Big difference.

[00:08:16.43] ORLO STEELE: Big difference. And then we were put on a plane and flown into Da Nang. And I remember that pilot said, we're going to be landing. Everything was kind of cheerful. And we had a good meal and that sort of thing. And then about 30 minutes before we landed, they turned out the lights and said, we'll be landing in 30 minutes at Da Nang, if there is one. And we landed in the dark about two o'clock in the morning, as I think.

[00:08:50.99] And I remember people came out to me were whispering. I mean, it's almost like the World War I stories of whispering in the trenches. And I lost my mates because they were going up to the 3d Division and I was assigned to the 1st Division. And they moved us over. And they moved us over to some place, and then we moved-- eventually, we moved up to the division headquarters, which was then at a place called Hill 327 outside Da Nang. It's where Walt had originally set up his CP when they first moved in up there.

[00:09:31.38] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your first assignment?

[00:09:34.38] ORLO STEELE: I was shocked the next morning when I checked in to the G1. And I was assigned as a fresh-caught major as the CO of headquarters company, headquarters battalion of the 1st Marine Division, which was right there at 327, which in essence meant that I had about 967 troops on the rolls. And I could lay my hands on about 16 at any given time. Actually, I had a couple of organized units, the band being one of them. And that was next door.

[00:10:14.38] JOE GALLOWAY: And then all the rest of them were farmed out?

[00:10:17.68] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, G staff and everything else. And we also had a security platoon that was up on the ridgeline of about 60 Marines. And that was also assigned.

[00:10:37.86] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your quarters and your food situation?

[00:10:41.59] ORLO STEELE: It was very, very comfortable. We lived in the sea huts, and I don't remember. People would come and go. So there was probably 20 racks in the sea hut, but that's where I was in one of them. But officers coming and going would come in and out. And the mess hall was in the division mess hall. So it was pretty plush.

[00:11:07.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty good. How long were you in that assignment?

[00:11:11.35] ORLO STEELE: I was in that assignment until 1 February of '68.

[00:11:22.33] ORLO STEELE: A saving grace was that a friend of mine, a captain by the name of Ron Christmas, had service company. And the service company was the ones that had-- I remember they had the dispersing. And they had-- I mean, I had post office. They had dispersing, some of the technical people. And again, they were all farmed out, a lot of them all over.

[00:11:46.54] And Ron Christmas and I had been students together at our Mountain Warfare Training Center in the winter course in 1963. He had been a second lieutenant who had come in from Recon Company of the 2d Division. And I was a captain who had just had a rifle company, but I was being assigned to what I mentioned was the Cold Weather Training Center at Bridgeport. And I was taking over the Mountain Leadership School, where we taught cross-country skiing in the winter time and rock assault and cliff assault in the summertime.

[00:12:28.88] And by the way, I got that assignment because I had written my only letter to headquarters Marine Corps before I was there. And I said, at the conclusion of my assignment here in the 1st Marine Brigade in Hawaii, I would like to be assigned to the Mountain Warfare Training Center.

[00:12:46.14] And I said that I was raised in Grass Valley, which was only 60 miles from Squaw Valley, where they had held the 1960 Olympics and whatever you might infer from that. And then I said I'd been through the escape and evasion survival course, which was a two-week course, which was true. And I'd raised in the Sierras.

[00:13:05.55] And so when I arrived, they said, congratulations, we're going to give you the Mountain Leadership School. You're going to be the senior ski instructor and rock climber. And I'd never been on skis in my life.

[00:13:17.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Had you rock climbed?

[00:13:18.74] ORLO STEELE: I had scrambled around, but it really became my avocation. I loved it.

[00:13:25.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Loved it.

[00:13:25.62] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, and I eventually got so I could move from point A to point B on skis. But we were skiing with 65 pounds on our back and snow turns and motion. And it wasn't-- so anyway, Ron and I had gone through the course together. And we lived at 9,000 feet in a parachute shelter for three weeks.

[00:13:50.75] So we became very close. And then later, he had service company, and I had-- and then again later on, we'll be together several other places and mainly in Hawaii.

[00:14:04.56] JOE GALLOWAY: All right, so moving on from that assignment to your next one, what was that?

[00:14:10.41] ORLO STEELE: That was as the executive officer of the 2nd Battalion of 5th Marines.

[00:14:15.36] JOE GALLOWAY: So now you're into the Marine business.

[00:14:18.03] ORLO STEELE: Yes. Fortunately, while I was-- soon after I had gone into headquarters company, a very fine colonel by the name of Bob Bohn, B-O-H-N, was the G3 of the 1st Division. And he was just leaving to take over the 5th Marines.

[00:14:40.12] And the 5th Marines was really kind of the swing outfit, if you will, for the Marine Corps. We had, as you know, the 1st and the 7th. And they were kind of pinned down, keeping the rockets out of Da Nang and protecting the airfield. And the 5th Marines was kind of moving around a little bit.

[00:15:01.60] And they were the swing outfit. And they had been assigned up to Phu Bai as part of Task Force X-ray. And so Bob Bohn was taken down. He said, I'll get you up in the 5th Marines. And I had known him when I was a second lieutenant in 2d Battalion, 9th Marines at Camp Fuji. And he had been the regimental 3. We had climbed Fuji and everything together.

[00:15:25.05] And so he was a known person to me, and he kept his word. So I went up and relieved an old classmate of mine by the name of Ralph Salvati, who came down and took my job. And I went up to take his job as the XO of 2/5.

[00:15:45.88] JOE GALLOWAY: That was in the Phu Bai area.

[00:15:47.37] ORLO STEELE: They were in the Phu Bai area. But by the time that happened, they had already been committed into Hué.

[00:15:55.18] JOE GALLOWAY: The battle for Hué was underway?

[00:15:58.38] ORLO STEELE: Just started.

[00:15:59.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Just started. And you moved into that battalion and into that battle?

[00:16:04.35] ORLO STEELE: I did, but it was-- I did not get into the city until the 8th. And the first fights had started on the 29th-- I don't know if you're familiar with how that unfolded or not. But initially, they caught everybody off guard. And the 2/5 was out of Phu Bai. And they were guarding the MSR down around what they call the Troy River Bridge. And there was a rock pile where the Seabees had a rock crusher and all along that-- or Phu Loc and all through that area up to Phu Bai.

[00:16:47.24] And the first unit they committed when the battle started was Golf Company along with a company from good friend of mine Gordy Batcheller from 1/1. And both of them went into Hué. And they got caught in that ambush beyond the Phu Cam Canal. Gordy Batcheller got badly shot up.

[00:17:16.91] But Chuck Meadows, who had Golf Company of about 160 troops, was able to get into the compound where the-- I'm trying to think of what the advisory group that was there. They had a colonel there. As you know, we didn't put any troops in Hué before that. They would pass through on the way north. And we had some other facilities there. But other than that, it was just--

[00:17:44.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Just that compound holding out.

[00:17:46.14] ORLO STEELE: Exactly. Exactly. And so Chuck Meadows got the mission. And I think there was also the battalion commander from 1/1. And his name escapes me right now. I know he's deceased. But he was taking his direction from this Army colonel who ran the compound.

[00:18:11.50] And their first task was-- and it was assigned to Chuck-- was to cross the Perfume River across that main bridge and bail out a Vietnamese general whose headquarters was in the citadel. The general had already pulled his troops in. And he saw this thing coming, so

[00:18:32.82] he was kind of geared up for it. They had their defenses up. But Chuck started across the bridge and got over to the other side just on the edge of the citadel when the world opened up on him. And they were able to evacuate back across the bridge. He had a number of casualties.

[00:18:57.98] JOE GALLOWAY: I bet.

[00:18:59.32] ORLO STEELE: And got back to the compound. In the meantime, they had committed Fox Company up. So this is how we were coming up kind of piecemeal. And Fox Company was under Mike Downs, who was also a classmate of mine in AWS. And just incidentally, he was dating Chesty Puller's daughter.

[00:19:24.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Virginia.

[00:19:25.44] ORLO STEELE: Not Virginia. Virginia was Bill Dabney's wife, but this was the youngest daughter, the twin to the son. So he was dating her at this-- and they later married. So he had Fox Company. And I think by then they said, just hold the compound. And they dug in.

[00:19:51.24] And then over the next day or two, eventually, Ernie Cheatham, I think, was given authority to take Hotel Company up. And he came in with at least six of his tubes of 106s and 81s. And he had a little bit more firepower. 1/1 was still only two understrength companies at that time.

[00:20:24.99] So Ernie got in. They got through. They kind of fought their way over the Phu Cam Canal, the bridge. They got shot and got into the city. So by now, we had on that south side of the Perfume River five understrength Marine rifle companies. And everything else was cut off. There had been a tank platoon, I think it was on its way north, they were able to commandeer.

[00:20:57.87] And as Ernie told the story-- and by the way, Ernie Cheatham is just one of my heroes. And he was-- the battalion commander. And affectionately, he was known as "Dirty Ernie."

[00:21:10.02] JOE GALLOWAY: Dirty Ernie.

[00:21:12.07] ORLO STEELE: Because after he was commissioned and he went to Korea and then he came back, he played professional football for the Baltimore Colts. And that's where he got the name "Dirty Ernie." But he was about six, six, 260 pounds of muscle.

[00:21:32.00] And I had known him when I was a recruit because he was one of our series officers in the company I was in. And he did an investigation, because we had had an accident. And I remember he investigated. And we were up at the rifle range. And that's where I first saw Dirty Ernie.

[00:21:49.72] The next time I saw him was when I reported as his exec crossing the Phu Cam Canal.

[00:21:55.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Crossing the canal.

[00:21:56.35] ORLO STEELE: Yeah. Anyway, he was-- we now have that in the city. Colonel Bohn had gone on R&R. And we had a-- Lieutenant Colonel McNaughton was the XO, Navy Cross winner from Korea. And so I really reported to him when I got into Phu Bai on the 2d, I think. I flew up by helicopter.

[00:22:26.86] And just prior to that, when everything started, we had formed a provisional rifle company out of H&S of the headquarters' company. And I've always been a believer in reserves. So we were able to go up and man the lines with that provisional rifle company, which were all--

[00:22:50.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Clerks.

[00:22:51.62] ORLO STEELE: --clerks. And I used lawyers for the platoon commanders. And I got staff NCOs who had had drill instructor duty. And so we had-- and we were doing sweeps before that. So we at least were organized and had that-- and backed up our security platoon, because they did try to breach that line that night.

[00:23:15.41] So I had anyway left them and then flew up by 53 into Phu Bai. And by that time, after Ernie had gotten in, the report was that the NVA had cratered the bridge over the Phu Cam Canal. And they were in the city.

[00:23:38.64] So now you had these five rifle companies. And the command element was from the 1st Marines. And I can't remember his name. He was a fine guy. I think it was a full-blooded Indian and one of the Navy Cross-- but he set up his-- he had a small CP group near the compound.

[00:24:03.35] And so he was taking his taskings from them. And they were now assigned to clear the south of the Perfume River into the Phu Cam Canal. Have you ever been to Hué, Joe?

[00:24:19.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[00:24:20.21] ORLO STEELE: So you remember--

[00:24:21.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Early days. And I remember the city pretty well.

[00:24:24.59] ORLO STEELE: Yes, and I've got my map there that I still have that I carried. But that was-- and so they started with three rifle companies. And then 1/1 had two companies on the left, I think, near the Phu Cam. And they started up to clear that area, not knowing what they were really facing.

[00:24:51.91] And as I understand it, their first task was to clear the-- but don't chip the paint. Air attacks, for example, were not by U.S. They had to be Vietnamese. And no artillery or anything else. And they started up. And of course--

[00:25:09.91] JOE GALLOWAY: You just got to chew that.

[00:25:10.95] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, the world just turned on them. And Ernie Cheatham is the one who in my mind took that decision out of their hands, because he had his 106s.

[00:25:21.63] JOE GALLOWAY: I hope he cut loose with them.

[00:25:23.95] ORLO STEELE: Well, we had-- and in those-- at the battalion level, we had the ontos. But the battalion level, they were on a little platform. We called them a mechanical mule. And they had no protection or anything like that. And even the tanks that had gone out really got kind of shot up.

[00:25:46.08] And so they were moving up. And they were taking fire from across the streets. And of course, any time anybody stepped out, they opened up fire. And Ernie Cheatham called one of the 106 gunners up. And I wasn't present at this time, but he called one. And he says, see that machine gun that's coming down? And they said, yes, sir.

[00:26:11.65] And he said, well fir-- and we had a spotting round, a 50-caliber spotting round. He said, give me a spotting round on that. And it was a black sergeant. And he just lit-- his face lit up, because these guys have been following just usually in road blocks. They had nothing to do. So they got ping, ping, ping and got on target. And then Ernie Cheatham said, now, fire the 106. And this guy said, fire the 106. And wham. And the war was on. And--

[00:26:43.81] JOE GALLOWAY: No more tippy toeing around.

[00:26:46.48] ORLO STEELE: Right. And as I understand it, in talking to all the company-- and I didn't get in for a couple more days. But it took them-- they had come out of places like An Hoa. They had been in the bush. And it took them about 24 hours to get used to fighting in a city.

[00:27:04.51] The only man we had in the battalion who had ever fought in a built-up area was the sergeant major. He had been in Seoul. Nobody else had ever--

[00:27:14.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Nobody knew how to do it.

[00:27:15.93] ORLO STEELE: Do it. But they sure learned in a hurry. And they had a great weapon called the 3.5 rocket launcher, which had a good punch to it. Those smaller ones we had didn't even chip the paint, the small anti-tank. But these 3.5s-- and he had his full complement of that.

[00:27:36.39] So that was the ammunition that was coming up-- 3.5, 106. And the only thing they would allow into the city was to evacuate the wounded and get the ammunition in. I wanted to get in, but I couldn't.

[00:27:52.77] JOE GALLOWAY: They wouldn't let you in?

[00:27:54.04] ORLO STEELE: They wouldn't let me in because they weren't going to use anybody. They were firing-- and we had the 81s. And as I started down, they used to be firing, apparently-- and we had a great sergeant by the name of Bargaheiser, who I'd known in the 4th Marines. And they were firing charge one, they could almost watch a round go up and then drop right down again and start putting holes through the roofs and then on down. And they found that, of course, if they tried to go through the entrance ways, they were covered by fire.

[00:28:29.19] So they went-- got smart.

[00:28:31.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Blow through the side.

[00:28:31.91] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, blow through the side of the door. And once they got a Marine inside the building, they started to bail out. And slowly, they were just going back and back. And they went through these buildings. There were the treasury building. There were provincial headquarters. They were all of that that had been the French province buildings and were substantial buildings. I mean, they were turn of the century. And they were pretty well built.

[00:29:01.65] So that's what they were doing as they were going through--

[00:29:06.03] JOE GALLOWAY: And they were taking terrific casualties.

[00:29:08.07] ORLO STEELE: Taking a lot of casualties. But morale was really high. I mean, guys would come in and say, patch me up, Doc, I got to get back in the fight-- during the daytime. And at night, everything kind of shut down, both sides, whether it was exhaustion-- and that's where it was even after I got there.

[00:29:36.51] During the day, there was just this cacophony of noise and echoing-- rounds echoing off the buildings and everything else and explosions and everything else. And you had a hard time really even communicating with one another. It was loud. But at night, kind of a shutdown, both sides. And what happened was--

[00:30:03.29] JOE GALLOWAY: What's happened when you got in?

[00:30:07.07] ORLO STEELE: I had been back at Phu Bai for about four days, I think. We had our S1. We had our first sergeants back there. And we had small administrative staff who were doing most of the-- writing the letters to next of kin and that sort of thing. As things came down, we had a battalion aid station back there also.

[00:30:34.41] There had been a half a platoon from Golf Company that had been caught there. And they had been used for convoy duty and had been involved in an engagement up when they were trying to reinforce an artillery position outside of Hué and got ambushed. They had onto up there. And anyway, these guys fought their way back out of that.

[00:31:06.65] So I was trying to get myself in there. I was reporting to Colonel McNaughton. And then Task Force X-ray-- are you familiar with that at all? This was the ADC of the 1st Marine Division. And they had formed-- when the 3d Division moved up north along the DMZ and the 1st Division had come up from Chu Lai and filled in for them in Da Nang, they had to go up to Phu Bai.

[00:31:35.83] So beyond Hai Van Pass, which you might recall was the high ground, that was the demarcation. And they formed a separate command called Task Force X-ray under the ADC of the 1st Marine Division. In this case, it was a brigadier general by the name of Foster LaHue. And he had a small G staff. And that's right. And they had aviation units as well.

[00:32:02.83] So they were running the battle up into Hué. And eventually, they thought they had pretty well covered everything inside the Phu Cam Canal. And I was called up by the G3. And the G3 Alpha was a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, who had been a company commander of mine by the name of Archie Van Winkle. And he had already had a battalion. He was a great guy.

[00:32:37.28] And anyway, he was the 3. He said, Ort, we're going to give you some trucks, and you're to take up whatever you've got back there from 2/5-- and there had been a lot of people, slightly wounded, gone through the BAS.

[00:32:52.67] So I was taking them. People were coming back from R&R, this and that. And there was also a platoon of 1/1 and some other cats and dogs kind of do it. And you're to take an engineer unit up, because they've created this bridge. And you're to take a-- Bay City crane engineers. And we're going to give you a couple of dusters. If you remember those--

[00:33:19.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[00:33:19.81] ORLO STEELE: --Army dusters that had 50-caliber mounted, a lot of 50s. And--

[00:33:23.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Don't chip the paint.

[00:33:25.75] ORLO STEELE: Yup. And the distance from Phu Bai up into Hué was about nine miles, as I recall. And there was a big-- outside the city, there was a big antenna. And so we loaded everybody up. I sat all night making my five paragraph order to give out and got my freqs. And I had an artillery. I was ready for bear. And I kept my Golf Company platoon, which was right up in the lead. I was about in the third truck behind.

[00:34:01.80] And so we dispersed ourselves pretty well. And then we-- and I had also the dusters scattered in. And we started up the road. There were still Marines with the-- that stayed in the villages and that sort of thing. We would pass through those. Those were still going. They were fine.

[00:34:25.42] Lots of helicopters flying back and forth. And we got up just outside the city about where this huge antenna was, some sort of a station. I don't know why they never blew that or took that one out, but it wasn't protected particularly.

[00:34:42.82] And we were told to stop from Task Force X-ray and hold up there because they had not uncovered the bridge yet on the other side of the Phu Cam Canal. We didn't have our-- so I dispersed everybody and got everybody-- I was, needless to say, worried about ambushes and everything else. Kept everybody on their toes.

[00:35:07.86] And it got later and later and later. And just before dusk, they finally said, they're not going to have this thing around, turn around and come back. So we turned that lash up around. And by now, I was really concerned. It was getting dark, but we got back to Phu Bai.

[00:35:30.27] And I was told the next day that they're going to start moving 1/5 up, which was down south of us at Phu Loc. And by the way, 2/5 had left one of its rifle companies, Echo Company, down guarding the bridge. That was under Pete Duffy. And they were-- and I had gone down to see them.

[00:35:50.95] So we still had a 106 section, an 81 section, and a reinforced rifle company on--

[00:35:58.10] JOE GALLOWAY: On the bridge.

[00:35:59.55] ORLO STEELE: On the bridge at Troy River and guarding the MSR going up there. And south of them was 1/5, which had been down at Phu Loc, which led up to the Hai Van Pass and took that high ground that was up there. And so they said, 1/5 will be starting up tomorrow morning.

[00:36:20.54] So they didn't come, and they didn't come. And I went back to see Archie. I said, Archie, these guys are not coming. We rehearsed this thing yesterday. Why don't you sign us up again? He said, good idea. So he sent us up again. We got our lash up put back together and started on up and with our engineer with a Bay City crane behind us bouncing around.

[00:36:47.67] And we went up. And this time, we got in to the little village outside. And there was an-- there was an ARVN compound just outside. They were all stuck in there.

[00:37:02.40] And we went up to the Phu Cam Canal. And I dispersed everybody. And then I called the engineers up. And the bridge, which was a concrete bridge, was collapsed. And the abutments were there, but the bridge was just underwater.

[00:37:27.53] And I'm not an engineer. I called this engineer captain up with this Bay city crane. And I said, OK, fix it. And he looked at me. And he said, I can't fix that. He said, we were told that it was just cratered. And I've just brought materials along so that I could patch up the craters.

[00:37:46.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Fix the holes.

[00:37:47.36] ORLO STEELE: And the point, Joe, is here we are, nine miles away. And they had dropped that bridge, later we found, around six or seven days before, and nobody knew it. Nobody back at-- knew that. Isn't that--

[00:38:06.30] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you get across?

[00:38:11.01] ORLO STEELE: He said, I can maybe make a foot bridge or something like that. And I said, OK, start at it. And in the meantime, Ernie Cheatham called me on the radio. And he said, get over here.

[00:38:24.85] So I stripped down. There was a banca boat or something there. And there was a lieutenant who was coming in from 1/1. Good, tough guy. And he had a sawed off shotgun. He said, I want to go in too. And I said, fine. So the two of us just took off our clothes.

[00:38:43.19] JOE GALLOWAY: In the canal.

[00:38:45.63] ORLO STEELE: And just threw it in this banca boat and then slipped across in the canal, which-- didn't know what was going to go on. But anyway, we got over to the other side. And Chuck Meadows' outfit was over there.

[00:39:04.45] So we got dressed. And Chuck-- when they went in, Ernie Cheatham had his jeep. And I think the XO had his jeep. But nobody else had any vehicles. And they got all these vehicles from the civilians. And these were all Toyotas and all these things. And every company had one. They were all just all shot up, bullet holes and all. But they used them for evacuations. The 81s had a little flatbed. And they move around. And everybody had--

[00:39:37.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Some wheels.

[00:39:39.06] ORLO STEELE: --some wheels and gathered. And so he had his driver take me down to where the CP was. And it was down about two or three miles and driving through the city. And the driver got through. And of course, every time you hit an intersection, he was, oh. And the guy riding shotgun, he said, driving kind of slow, ain't you?

[00:39:59.82] I mean, that's-- so I checked in to Colonel Cheatham. And he welcomed me. And he said, OK, I want you to take charge of all the guys on the other side of the Phu Cam. And he gave me-- how I can communicate with his 81s. And you'll be there tonight. And then tomorrow I want you to move on up to this next bridge and come across. And I'll have Hotel Company, Ron Christmas, move up and cover you up that way.

[00:40:35.39] So we were to sweep up outside the Phu Cam Canal up to what turned out to be the north, I guess, northeast. But I understood that and got back and took off the clothes again-- I left the other lieutenant-- and got across. And just as I got on to the other side, two gunships came down. And they were just spraying right along the other side-- I don't know-- one of ours, our gunships.

[00:41:13.37] And when I got to the other side, we had our guys dispersed. But there was about ten reporters, a number of Germans from the Frankfurter Zeitung. And they were under a Marine lieutenant. And among others, there must have been the guy who wrote Dispatches.

[00:41:39.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Mike Herr.

[00:41:40.09] ORLO STEELE: Mike Herr must have been there. Because in his Dispatches, he mentions these things. And he cites this-- he talked about Marine humor and went into a bunker. And it said-- there was somebody who'd written, I think I'm falling in love with Jake, you know?

[00:41:58.08] [LAUGHTER]

[00:41:59.97] So anyway, I thought that was a great-- but he must have been there. And I had no idea. And I just had the lieutenant take care of him, get him into a hut, and keep him down for the night. And then I started to get our forces in.

[00:42:13.59] And then all of a sudden, they had not been able to turn off the valve. We had called down to Phu Bai and said, listen, we're here tonight, don't send any more troops up. But one-- Alpha Company, 1/5, started rolling in.

[00:42:30.01] So I had them to take care of also. So I had my 150 plus their 150. And then we had the Vietnamese. So we had plenty of combat power. I probably had more combat power than Ernie had across the way.

[00:42:44.50] And anyway, so we got there. The engineers had put the bridge in. And the next morning, we moved all the 1/1 guys across this little footbridge. And then we started our sweep up with 1/5 Alpha Company and the troops that I had had. And we got up to the next bridge. Ron Christmas came. And there was a nice little firefight. But anyway, I kept that open, and we went across that bridge.

[00:43:10.99] And I checked in and relieved my--

[00:43:14.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you bring your dusters?

[00:43:15.34] ORLO STEELE: No, we had-- the dusters had gone back along with the convoys.

[00:43:19.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, I thought those would have been real good.

[00:43:22.24] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, but they were only for convoy duty. So anyway, we never-- it was interesting. We never got-- but just the fact that here was that bridge that was collapsed. They ended up putting a pontoon bridge in there. And then eventually, they put that through.

[00:43:48.99] ORLO STEELE: Initially, when I was headquarters company, I had hardly any contact--

[00:43:53.01] JOE GALLOWAY: No--

[00:43:53.37] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, other than people who worked around the camps. It was pleasant. Later on in Hué, of course, there was-- and the reason the Germans were there, there was lots of people. And there was-- the university was there, that famous school where Giáp and Ho Chi Minh had gone to school was there. And all the refugees had moved, were behind the lines. But there was also a lot of looting going on behind us. We could see that, which really upset us, but--

[00:44:37.52] ORLO STEELE: Fortunately, I had known some of the officers before. We were friends. And that helped a lot. I had nothing but admiration for all of them. I have never seen such good courage. I mean, people were taking risks.

[00:44:56.86] Ernie Cheatham had to put out an order about-- there were many-- somebody would go down in the street. People would run out there and get them, and then we were losing more people. And so he just said, stop that, you can't do it until you build up combat power and firepower, and then smoke, and then do it.

[00:45:19.13] And so eventually, they figured out how to do that. But until then, they were just--

[00:45:24.24] JOE GALLOWAY: You just lose one man after another.

[00:45:26.05] ORLO STEELE: Exactly. And even sending tanks out, pick them up, and draw them to the tanks, and bring them out. And so they really began to improvise as Marines can do, and mainly through the leadership of Ron Christmas. And by the way, Ron Christmas was-- see, I got in on the 8th. And we moved our CP.

[00:45:51.16] The first thing Ernie Cheatham had me do was to go down and pick out a new CP. And that was in an apartment building that had three stories. It's still there, by the way. We went back a couple of years ago. And we put the BAS and our logistics on the first floor. And the COC was on the second floor, and a few of us. And then we kept the third floor empty because of mortars. But that became our CP. And that was right down near-- inside the Phu Cam Canal, but down across from the railroad station.

[00:46:33.34] ORLO STEELE: Well, I mean, I always had admired the fighting skills of the Marines, but I guess I've got to say that in the-- how everybody really pulled together. The corpsmen, everybody. Everybody was-- I've never seen morale that high. Before that, they had been out in the bush. And I'm told, if they got a wound, that was fine they went back, everything else.

[00:46:59.63] But now they're in a dirty knockdown street fight. And consequently, they had a chance to get at this elusive enemy firsthand. And the morale was really high. All understrength rifle companies-- I mean, they were-- companies were running at about--

[00:47:22.51] I've still got a little book there. I've got about anywhere from 130 to 140 troops. And that's with the machine gun were all attached. And so this was--

[00:47:33.90] JOE GALLOWAY: So your companies should be 250, 300?

[00:47:37.50] ORLO STEELE: In those days, under that TO, we were running about 180 in a rifle company.

[00:47:43.93] JOE GALLOWAY: At full strength?

[00:47:44.75] ORLO STEELE: At full strength and without attachments. So we were running with the attachments.

[00:47:51.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Half that.

[00:47:52.55] ORLO STEELE: Half that. When I left the battalion, I was heading back, we were by that time had been down at An Hoa across the Song Tra Bong River. And I was going back to Da Nang to catch a flight.

[00:48:08.94] And we already had gone through the first wave of Tet. And there was a second wave. And they had beaten that back. And things really-- and I went back, just my driver and myself, and drove all that MSR all the way back, no--

[00:48:26.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Back to Da Nang?

[00:48:27.69] ORLO STEELE: All the way back to Da Nang. Kids were out playing. It looked safe. And I really felt good. Another time kind of similar to that was after the Tet Offensive when we went down south towards Da Nang. They had-- the Navy Seabees were putting in a new road because they had badly damaged that old Route 1. And so on the south side of Hai Van Pass was an Army engineer unit. And on the north side was the Navy Seabees.

[00:49:05.80] And I remember sitting up in a position and just seeing all of these tractors. And we were providing the security for this. And commerce was starting back up again. And we had all of this equipment going. And I said, this is America. I mean, this is what we do best, you know?

[00:49:30.94] ORLO STEELE: Ernie Cheatham towards the end of the battle was going to make a night sweep. And he took the three rifle companies off the line. And he moved them out at night and went through the city and came up around the left flank and seized some high ground. And he left me with the 106s and the 81s holding the line at that time.

[00:50:02.04] And then I followed him the next day in trace. And it was the day when there was a lot of-- quite a bit of activity. I remember I was in a jeep. And we had somebody behind-- 81 was in a personnel carrier.

[00:50:19.75] And just the weight of that-- that vehicle got blown up. Neither the driver nor the guy on the side-- they were in shock, but they were not badly injured. It was almost like a cartoon of the Roadrunner. And they were just-- they were just back in shock because just the front had blown up and everything else.

[00:50:46.89] And I just remember the irony of that. And then later, I ran into one of my instructors that I had at Mountain Warfare. And he was the first company-- he was the first sergeant of a tank company. And we were just talking there very briefly in a truck full of Vietnamese.

[00:51:02.54] And that kind of-- I mean, there were things going off everywhere around us. And eventually, I got up to Ernie and just being with him. We were under a lot of small arms fire and everything else and eventually set up a CP where I could receive-- and I remember a young trooper coming in at night. And I was with the surgeon.

[00:51:28.89] And he said, Major, would you like a little shot of wine? He had kept this bottle of wine. And he said, it's a good wine. Not a great wine, but it's a good wine. And I just remember that was kind of one of the most memorable days--

[00:51:51.63] JOE GALLOWAY: How was the wine?

[00:51:53.19] ORLO STEELE: It was fine, you know? And it was just one of a memorable-- and all through the battle, Joe, the French still-- they have the little baguettes. They were still producing those baguettes.

[00:52:08.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Really?

[00:52:08.97] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, yeah.

[00:52:16.23] I had been made the battalion commander. Ernie Cheatham left. And the regimental commander after Bob Bohn was an officer that-- I was not his favorite major at all. And I knew that. I mean, we had had many arguments. And he was one who just got into detail. And he said, I want you to put a little fire team here in this culvert, fire team here. It was just-- and I didn't like him. Ernie Cheatham said, watch yourself.

[00:52:52.32] But anyway, he allowed me to take the battalion. Ernie Cheatham had left. And then soon after that, we got an order that we were going to move to An Hoa. We were going to go off on our next-- we were going to go off on an operation to the west of Phu Bai. And you'd be kind of interested in this, Joe, but there had been a case where a recon-- several weeks beforehand, a recon patrol had been out there.

[00:53:23.97] And there was a NVA unit coming down the unit-- down the road. And they opened fire on it and then got out of there. And when they did, they noticed there was a Caucasian up in front in an NVA uniform who said, I'm hit. And most of that patrol, when they came back, when they showed them all pictures of missing Americans, identified this one guy who had been a chaplain's assistant or something.

[00:53:58.75] JOE GALLOWAY: A Marine?

[00:53:59.96] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, I don't know if he was Marine or Army. I don't remember.

[00:54:03.77] JOE GALLOWAY: But he was American?

[00:54:05.30] ORLO STEELE: But he was American, and he was wearing an NVA uniform. So among other things, when we did this operation, we were to really look for this. That was stopped. And then we got the tasking to go down to An Hoa.

[00:54:23.00] And An Hoa had not been covered at all by any-- after 2/5 had gone out of there some time ago. And the 7th Marines, which were down at Hill 37, were putting a rifle company across the Song Tra Bong River whenever they could. And that was the Arizona Territory and Go Noi Island and all of that. There was always a firefight going on.

[00:54:47.51] And so I was told we moved two companies, Echo and Fox, by helicopter down into the old fire base. And they were-- one was to go out into the field, and the other one was to set up the old fire base. And I was to take Hotel and Golf and drive down, and H&S. We went on two different routes.

[00:55:18.52] And the H&S-- I went through the division CP on 327 with my group. And the other group went on another road. And when they bivouacked that night, they got mortared. And Bargaheiser was killed, our 81, who I'd known in the brigade. And he was just a superb guy. I've got a picture of him there.

[00:55:40.69] And then Long, who had the 106, was killed the same day almost. That was a tough day. And then the next day, we got up to-- through the 7th Marines and got up to the Song Tra Bong River. And you may have recall they had tried to put a bridge in there. And they called it Liberty Bridge.

[00:56:05.62] And initially, I think somewhere around 1967, the NVA, I think, knocked off the center of it or something. And they were working and putting it back together, and a fire started. And maybe the first was a storm. I can't remember. But whatever it was, there was no bridge. There were just two abutments.

[00:56:29.92] And they had a very crude ferry system going across where they had a ferry. And then they had six-bys on either side. And they would drive across and pull the ferry this way through, something like that. And so we had to load everything, all the convoys and everything and go across that way. And that took an inordinate amount of time.

[00:56:55.97] And I finally got on the other side of the river, and got in touch with my Echo Company commander. And he was wounded with a gunshot wound.

[00:57:08.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh.

[00:57:09.17] ORLO STEELE: And his company had gotten pinned down out there in what they called the Phu Cams. And he was wounded. And they were going through the process of evacuating him and a few others.

[00:57:24.45] So I finally got enough troops in. And then we dashed on up into An Hoa, which was about nine miles, to get through there. And got an Amtrac or two. And then we went out with Echo Company-- no, Fox Company to bail him out.

[00:57:51.21] And we finally got Echo Company after dark into our position that-- where I was, as far as I could go with the Amtracs. Anyway, they came in. We formed a perimeter. And it was one o'clock in the morning. Everybody was tired. I was tired. I didn't have the troops dig in. And damned if we didn't get mortared again. And I had to get a couple of other casualties because I didn't do my job.

[00:58:27.05] That was a tough day. And I continued to command the battalion for another week or so. And then a battalion-- a lieutenant colonel came in. And I went back to being an XO.

[00:58:42.19] ORLO STEELE: Physically, I had a five-day R&R. And that was just as I was leaving, CO Headquarters Company, Headquarters Battalion and before I went up to 2/5. And so Cathy was there. And we had-- our kids were there. And we went over to Bellows Air Force Base and had a wonderful time.

[00:59:06.23] JOE GALLOWAY: You were writing letters?

[00:59:10.97] ORLO STEELE: Yes, I've got a few, if you're interested at all. One was Ron Christmas. We had an old Edsel. And I took it to Hawaii. And that's what my wife had. So when friends would go back for R&R, I would tell Cathy. And she would turn over the Edsel to the--

[00:59:33.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Turn over the-- ?

[00:59:34.78] ORLO STEELE: Our Edsel car.

[00:59:36.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[00:59:37.03] ORLO STEELE: Sedan. And so a lot of them had had our Edsel. And among them was Ron Christmas, and Ron had gone back before I did and before he went up to 2/5. And after he had had service company, he went back in early December, I think, and was back there and had the Edsel, and got to know my wife, his wife Sherry.

[01:00:03.85] So that during the battle, on about the 13th of-- I'd been there about five days. Ron Christmas, who had taken the treasury building and was being put in for a Navy Cross, was issuing a frag order to his troops. And they got-- I can't remember if it was a rocket, I think.

[01:00:27.77] Anyway, he was wounded as was all the officers. And I think all he had at the time was a radio operator commanding the unit with-- Ernie and I were back at the CP. And they brought Ron in to the BAS. And he was smoking a cigar and kind of cheerful, you know? But he had gotten a severe wound through his legs. And I wrote-- and I've still got this letter to Cathy. I said, Ron Christmas got wounded today, but he looked good. And I think he'll be back in a couple of weeks. And it was two years before he was returned to duty.

[01:01:14.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[01:01:15.95] ORLO STEELE: And he became good friends-- he's a retired lieutenant general. And then he had 3d Marines when I commanded the brigade. And we've been friends.

[01:01:26.49] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war from home?

[01:01:31.71] ORLO STEELE: Not much. In fact, I wrote to Cathy. I said, I understand it's being carried in-- a lot of what's going on in Hué. Be sure to save the clippings when I get home.

[01:01:44.19] JOE GALLOWAY: But she didn't mail those?

[01:01:46.14] ORLO STEELE: No, she did keep that Life Magazine article.

[01:01:55.05] ORLO STEELE: I had been told that I was being assigned to MOI duty, which is Marine Officer Instructor, with the NROTC units. And I was going to Dartmouth College, which was in New England, which really pleased me. And had a full tour. And Cathy was very pleased with that.

[01:02:20.43] And so we got back to Da Nang. Matt Caulfield and I were, again, on the same plane going home.

[01:02:26.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Plane going home.

[01:02:27.19] ORLO STEELE: Going home after 13 months. And so I got off in Hawaii. And we bought a car, a little Renault that would be good in the snow, which we picked up later in Hawaii. And General Krulak had just stepped down, I think, as CG FMF Pac. And I did see a good friend of mine who was working there at the staff at headquarters, Phil-- I can't remember his last name, but he played football. And so we saw him.

[01:03:06.48] And it was good to be home. And we were there. Unwind for three or four days. And then we headed--

[01:03:12.99] JOE GALLOWAY: To the new assignment.

[01:03:13.92] ORLO STEELE: --for the new assignment, which was very interesting because they had something called the SDS.

[01:03:22.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[01:03:25.28] ORLO STEELE: And my NROTC unit was at-- Dartmouth Hall was on the-- Navy was on the third floor. Air Force and the Army was on the second floor. And the SDS was on the first floor. And I always thought how smart those guys were to put us all in the same building because they didn't blow it up, you know?

[01:03:46.02] JOE GALLOWAY: They wouldn't blow it up.

[01:03:47.21] ORLO STEELE: And I thought SDS was some sort of a marketing phrase for Procter & Gamble. I didn't know-- I didn't know what that was, but I soon found out.

[01:03:57.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, that must have been-- you went more or less almost directly from combat, the worst combat of the war in Hué to a college campus in 1968--

[01:04:13.00] ORLO STEELE: Eight, yes, in October.

[01:04:16.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Hottest part of the antiwar movement.

[01:04:19.05] ORLO STEELE: Yes, but it was particularly bad at Columbia at that time, and Wisconsin, and all those places.

[01:04:26.76] JOE GALLOWAY: But not so much at--

[01:04:28.90] ORLO STEELE: Not so much at Dartmouth. Now they were going through a debate about whether or not they should shut down ROTC as they were doing in all the Ivy League schools. And I would go to those debates. And I had a good friend who was a freshman

class officer, were still close friends. He later became an assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs. His name is Steve Duncan. And he was a Naval Academy graduate. And he had-- he was a freshman class officer.

[01:04:58.00] So we would go to those functions to--

[01:05:01.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Challenge it.

[01:05:02.74] ORLO STEELE: Well, we just listened in, but they would-- and there was a Professor Mirsky and others who were arguing against this. And when they finally made their decision-- I also became the scoutmaster in town. But they made their decision that they were going to do away with ROTC.

[01:05:24.95] It was on a Tuesday. And it was around February or March. It was cold. And the demonstrators never came to Dartmouth, except in the fall and in the late spring. So it was very cold. And they made the decision. And they said they're going to stop ROTC, but they're going to accept next year's class. And then they'll begin the attrition out.

[01:05:49.55] So we'll accept the class in '69. And then they'll go through '73 or '74. And that didn't satisfy the SDS. And they went up and took out the president of the university and the dean of men and their administration building and barricaded themselves inside the building.

[01:06:12.94] And there were lots of cameras. And there was about three or four feet of snow on the ground. This is really-- it gets to 20 below zero. And so they had a lot of cameras there initially. And then by around 11 or 12 o'clock, they all faded away.

[01:06:30.68] And about four o'clock in the morning, 40 of the biggest New Hampshire state troopers appeared outside. And they said-- of course, they had evacuated the president and all that. And they said, you have two minutes to vacate the building, or we're coming in. And they didn't. And these guys hit that door.

[01:06:52.83] And by eight o'clock in the morning, they had all of them in front of some sort of a magistrate with a haircut. And they all got 30 days in the slammer.

[01:07:05.82] JOE GALLOWAY: In the slammer.

[01:07:07.76] ORLO STEELE: Later on, when I was legislative assistant-- I was a smoker. And I was having a cigarette outside a hearing. And the senator from New Hampshire-- I'm trying to think of his name right now, but. Rudman was out there having a cigarette.

[01:07:28.73] And I said, how are things in New Hampshire, Senator? And he said, when were you there? And I said, I was there. He said, were you there when the students took the building? And I said, yeah, I remember it very well. And he said, do you remember what happened? I said, yeah. It was my thesis. I wrote that plan. He said, I was the attorney general for the state. And he had written that plan beforehand. And it worked like clockwork. He was very proud of it.

[01:07:53.81] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow Marine veterans over the years?

[01:08:00.42] ORLO STEELE: Oh, I've maintained very close relationships through a number of different avenues, probably 16 years. Because I had commanded the 2d Marine Division from '87 to '89. After I retired and came here, I went on their staff of the association and was on that association.

[01:08:23.50] So I was able to really usher out the last of the World War II guys. And there are still a few, but the ones who had landed at Tarawa and Saipan and Tinian and Guadalcanal. And was very close to that group. I'm still a member of the Marine Corps League, and our local history. And I was on the board here at the Marines Memorial for three years in the late '90s and - well, in 2001, 2002.

[01:08:56.43] So we've kept our associations. I belong to a few others. I commanded the Marine barracks at 8th and I. We have our small group. And so there's just lots of good friends.

[01:09:09.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Lots of good friends.

[01:09:10.73] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, you had dinner with one of my best-- JOE

[01:09:14.59] GALLOWAY: Matt

[01:09:15.16] Caulfield. ORLO STEELE: we go back since when we were captains.

[01:09:19.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after the war?

[01:09:24.31] ORLO STEELE: No, none.

[01:09:31.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your service in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life?

[01:09:42.99] ORLO STEELE: Professionally, I think it made me a better officer. Certainly. Particularly at training. If I had a niche within the Marine Corps for which I was-- thought I was reasonably adept, it was in the area of training and operations. I really learned a lot, particularly things like preparing for the unexpected, learning to improvise.

[01:10:19.96] Those are the things you really learn and you try to pass on to people coming along the line when you're commanding units-- and to make things realistic. Exercises had to be realistic when I was involved. We did force on force. We did causing casualties at the most inopportune time and forcing the things that happen.

[01:10:49.96] And people liked that, I think, when they did that. And when I did that as a division commander, brigade commander-- and I had lots of commands. So I was-- yeah.

[01:11:02.56] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

[01:11:09.62] ORLO STEELE: Oh, gosh, I think we had it much easier than they do. I mean, we didn't have the numbers of back-to-back tours. Matt and I were slated to go back when we were both at Camp Pendleton, the 1st Marine Division. And that would have been in 1975. They still had two billets, one for logistics and one for operations up north. And I was to take that in September. Matt was to take the logistics one in, I think, around June. And of course, it all became unraveled in April.

[01:11:51.42] JOE GALLOWAY: In April.

[01:11:51.88] ORLO STEELE: And so we ended up going to the 3d Marine Division, but we were slated to go back. And I was kind of looking forward to it again. So-- I forget what exactly your question was, but I--

[01:12:07.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from Afghanistan and Iraq?

[01:12:13.77] ORLO STEELE: Yes, yeah. We've got quite a few from-- I live in a county which has got a lot of-- they've always followed the colors, you know?

[01:12:30.79] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered here today?

[01:12:36.93] ORLO STEELE: Oh, I think there are people who have judged it and feel that it was a wrong-- have still overwhelmingly convinced most of our nation that that was a real mistake. I don't feel that way at all. I believe in-- my favorite author was Barbara Tuchman. And I think she said, you really shouldn't write a serious history until about 50 to 75 years after the event.

[01:13:15.87] And I think that's we're just coming up on those years right now. And I'm not sure as-- my wife and I went back to Vietnam with Military Historical Tours. What you see there now, we were well received. We even had our pictures taken with some retired Vietnamese NVA generals, who had come down for commemoration, I guess, of Hué with ourselves there.

[01:13:46.72] And wherever we went, we were really well received. And they still disliked the French. They don't trust the Chinese, but they really do like--

[01:13:56.35] JOE GALLOWAY: They hate the Russians.

[01:13:56.98] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, they really do like the Americans. And Giáp just died about a year and a half ago.

[01:14:02.89] JOE GALLOWAY: I know.

[01:14:03.18] ORLO STEELE: And we went by his house. But I've always been curious intellectually, by the way, about the real purpose of Tet and particularly what was his tie-in with Khe Sanh. And I even wrote a piece on it when I was in command at Staff College.

[01:14:31.40] I remember this job is supposed to have said we're going to stretch the Marines like a bowstring. And whether that was-- but they suffered very heavily. And why did they stay even after Tet then and after they had already-- Tet was a real loss for them.

[01:14:50.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[01:14:51.47] ORLO STEELE: And they admit that. And--

[01:14:53.12] JOE GALLOWAY: It wiped the Viet Cong off the map.

[01:14:55.01] ORLO STEELE: And for the next two years, they were not able to do very much. And all the writings-- so exactly, the only thing you can conclude is that whether or not they set out to do this was to really go after the American psyche and its weakness, which was the people at home and make them--

[01:15:21.99] JOE GALLOWAY: It worked.

[01:15:23.02] ORLO STEELE: If that was it, it worked. But it's still-- intellectually, how do you still fit Khe Sanh in with that. And why did they hang on there until Pegasus and take that punishment afterwards?

[01:15:45.97] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, I'm very moved by it. Jim Webb, by the way, is a good friend of mine. And I know he was very critical when they first put that in there. But I think he's even come around.

[01:15:57.30] JOE GALLOWAY: He came around.

[01:15:58.12] ORLO STEELE: And I think it's a beautiful memorial--

[01:16:02.31] JOE GALLOWAY: It really is.

[01:16:03.03] ORLO STEELE: --particularly the picture of the three--

[01:16:08.04] JOE GALLOWAY: The statue of the three.

[01:16:10.15] ORLO STEELE: Yeah, and one of-- the guy in the center, who was the Caucasian, was one of my troops when I had legislative assistant. He was a-- they got him--

[01:16:19.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Got him out there to be the model.

[01:16:21.30] ORLO STEELE: Model of that, yeah. Good, strapping guy, you know? Anyway, I think it's-- enjoy it.