

Sullivan, Gordon Army

[00:00:19.22] GORDON SULLIVAN: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts, and as soon as my mother was released from the hospital, she and I went back to our home in Quincy, Massachusetts, where I was raised. My mother's name is Penuel Elizabeth Sullivan. Her maiden name was Gordon, Penuel Gordon, thus my first name, Gordon.

[00:00:48.83] My father's name is Russell Edgar Sullivan, thus my middle name, Russell. So I have both Scotch-Irish blood, and I'm proud of it. I lived in Quincy my whole life, really until I went to Norwich University. I signed up, or I was admitted, to Norwich in the summer of 1955, took my oath as a cadet in '55, and wore the uniform of the United States of America until 1995. Anyway.

[00:01:36.88] JOE GALLOWAY: That's that. Quincy is your hometown?

[00:01:38.88] GORDON SULLIVAN: Quincy is my hometown.

[00:01:40.36] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a very pro-military--

[00:01:41.08] GORDON SULLIVAN: Home of the Adamses.

[00:01:42.40] JOE GALLOWAY: --town.

[00:01:42.97] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yes, it is. It's the home of the second president of the United States and his son-- John Adams, John Quincy Adams-- John Hancock. It's also where Abigail Adams watched, with her children, the fires in Charleston in the Battle of Bunker Hill.

[00:02:04.78] And there was a little cairn there, which is the Scottish word for a pile of rocks. And that's one of the first memories, by the way, I have of my childhood-- going there with my mother so that she could show that to me and point over, 'cause you can see Charleston from that height, to the Bunker Hill monument.

[00:02:35.35] JOE GALLOWAY: What led you to go to Norwich and to ROTC?

[00:02:39.85] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, like most young people, some early decisions are made on evidence which, at best, would be suspect, I'm sure. I went to Thayer Academy, Sylvanus Thayer's legacy, Braintree, Massachusetts. And I had heard about Norwich from a couple of my buddies who I had played football with-- went to Norwich to play football-- and they suggested that one of my classmates and I go up and spend a weekend with them and take a look at Norwich. They thought we might like it.

[00:03:21.43] So he and I drove up and spent a weekend at Norwich and fell in love with it. I think we probably fell in love more with the guys and the whole atmosphere, and it seemed to fit the kind of people we were. And we were both quite happy with ROTC, since we were-- either be commissioned, or we would be drafted. So it seemed to us, even then--

[00:03:50.56] JOE GALLOWAY: A good thing.

[00:03:51.16] GORDON SULLIVAN: --that that was probably a pretty good thing. So that's what we did. We signed up. And unfortunately, the friend that I went up there with passed away about 10 years ago. I was the eulogist at his funeral. And he and a number of my other buddies there were my lifelong friends. And no matter what I did or where I was, they were always with me.

[00:04:23.92] And it didn't make any difference how other parts of America felt about anything. I was their guy, and I always knew it. And none of them, really, none of my close friends, stayed in the Army. They were all in the Army, but I was the only one who stayed.

[00:04:41.68] JOE GALLOWAY: You're the only one of them who went to Vietnam?

[00:04:45.46] GORDON SULLIVAN: I am, although, actually, one of my classmates, Bill Streeter, who later commanded the 1st Cav and was the Military District of Washington commander-- he was a classmate of mine, and he was the first person I saw when I came out of-- I was operated on for wounds I received in Vietnam. He was the first one that was there.

[00:05:17.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Bill Streeter's a good man.

[00:05:18.92] GORDON SULLIVAN: Bill Streeter. He's a good man. Yes, he is.

[00:05:26.97] GORDON SULLIVAN: I was an early volunteer to Vietnam. I was in Korea. I served in Korea 14 months, 1961 to '62-- June '61 to August of '62. And at about March or April of '62, we received a message from the Department of the Army asking for volunteers. Seemed like a good idea to me. I wasn't married. I figured that's what people did who were Soldiers, so I volunteered to go to Vietnam.

[00:06:06.24] In August, I rotated back to Fort Bragg, and I was in one of the original-- it was called MATA, M-A-T-A, Military Advisers Training and Assistance course, MATA Five. That was a six-week, or something-- I can't remember-- but a six- or eight-week course of no particular note. It was assemble, disassemble some of the weapons that we would be using, 'cause we were all advisers.

[00:06:43.83] And by the way, we went under diplomatic passports in those days, so we were all issued red passports. So we learned about the weapons that the Vietnamese-- the indigenous, the VNAF, the Viet Nam Armed Forces-- would be using, and some cultural stuff, nothing particularly sophisticated.

[00:07:12.68] And probably the most interesting thing about that course is the senior officer in charge of this band of merry folks was Colonel Ben Vandervoort, who many people remember from Normandy. He was a regimental commander and broke his ankle upon landing at Sainte Mere-Église and he was pushed around in a wheelbarrow.

[00:07:40.92] JOE GALLOWAY: (LAUGHING) Right.

[00:07:44.61] GORDON SULLIVAN: Relatively famous characters in this class, all the way from people like me, who were first lieutenants. We had first lieutenants, no second lieutenants. Most of us were first lieutenants, or a lot of us were.

[00:07:59.55] Anyway, so I went through that, and then I went to the West Coast to Monterey and learned to speak a little bit of Vietnamese, some of which I can still speak. I can count, sort of. But anyway, in true 25-year-old fashion, most of us were ready to go. We were ready to go. It was a great adventure, and so off we went.

[00:08:29.66] And I arrived in January of 1963. Looking back on it, I think, and I have felt, and it's something I took away from it, that when I arrived, and looking back on it, I really was not very well prepared for what-- advisory duty is not easy. And these people that I was with were combat veterans. They'd spent all their lives getting shot at on one side or the other.

[00:09:19.77] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on landing in Vietnam?

[00:09:24.41] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, you remember I told you I was in Korea. So first of all, I liked Asia anyway, so I was very simpatico with the whole culture, so forth and so on. Now, Korea, at that time, was devastated, absolutely flattened. I landed there 53 years ago this month at Gimpo.

[00:10:00.35] We landed at night. And when I landed at Gimpo, we had flown over from Tokyo. It took us 33 hours of flying to get to Tokyo, Tachikawa. That's island-hopping. About 11 hours to Honolulu, 11 hours to Wake, or some place.

[00:10:21.02] JOE GALLOWAY: What were you flying? DC-3, CH-46?

[00:10:24.02] GORDON SULLIVAN: No, we were flying in Connies. I think they were Super Connies. But it was long. It was long--

[00:10:32.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Slow.

[00:10:32.19] GORDON SULLIVAN: --and slow. God, it was terrible.

[00:10:37.04] Anyway, so boom, boom, boom. So we spent a night or two in Tokyo getting our head screwed on, and then we went into Korea. So the airfield is-- first of all, the reception building is bombed out, and there were bare light bulbs hanging down, and you could see it from the plane as the sun was setting. It was just this black, burned-out building.

[00:11:13.61] We were taken off the plane, put on buses. I went to the 1st Cav. I was to be a platoon leader up in the 1st Cavalry Division, in a tank battalion. And we were moved from Ascom City-- that's the Army Supply Command Korea-- from that place up to the 1st Cav Division and promptly placed in quarantine. Each of the caserns, the compounds where we lived-- we were isolated because of the coup. There had been a coup at that time, and nobody knew what was gonna happen, so we were essentially confined to a barracks.

[00:12:00.80] So anyway, that's that story. So I get to Vietnam and land at Tan Son Nhut, it looked like New York City to me. Saigon was, well not New York City, but it was a lovely French colonial place, no bomb screens, none of what later became of Saigon.

[00:12:33.98] JOE GALLOWAY: The Pearl of the Orient.

[00:12:35.54] GORDON SULLIVAN: Oh, it was just-- it was like paradise. Tropical. I can remember the city was, at night, just trees and music from all the cafes on Le Lois Street and Tu Do. I can just feel it all, and the rickshaws, and it was kind of exotic. It was great.

[00:13:03.68] So after a few something-or-others-- a few days, or a week, or something-- that I spent there at a place called the Five Oceans, which was down in Cholon, which was the Chinese part of the city, I was given orders to go to the 23rd ARVN Division as an adviser, and off I went. I went down, first to Can Tho. Can Tho is right in the middle of the Mekong River. And I had some kind of an orientation at IV Corps.

[00:13:47.72] And then I went down to a place called Bac Lieu. Bac Lieu is way, way down in the Ca Mau Peninsula. And when I landed at Bac Lieu, there was a tower, a wooden tower, and across the base of it, it said, two feet above water, dry season; two feet below, wet season. And that was about the truth.

[00:14:13.58] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:14:15.74] GORDON SULLIVAN: That was erected by a bunch of GIs, that kind of stuff. I don't know if anybody ever went up the tower, but they had a tower. So anyway, I went out to this place and was told that I would be an adviser to the Civil Guard SDC, which at that time was-- that's what it was called, Civil Guard SDC. It later became-- there's another word for it.

[00:14:46.60] JOE GALLOWAY: RF? or PF?

[00:14:48.76] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, RFPF or something, or maybe it was--

[00:14:50.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, Ruff-Puffs--

[00:14:51.89] GORDON SULLIVAN: --backwards.

[00:14:52.13] JOE GALLOWAY: --we called them.

[00:14:52.77] GORDON SULLIVAN: Whatever. These were the locals who--

[00:14:55.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Local militia.

[00:14:56.29] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah. So anyway, I then got on another plane or helicopter and flew up to a place called Rach Gia, which is in Kien Giang Province, right up next to the Cambodian border. And it was the seaport from which all of the boats back and forth to

Phu Quoc-- and Phu Quoc is the Nuoc Mam capital of Vietnam. And there would be no doubt in your mind--

[00:15:31.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Where you were.

[00:15:31.71] GORDON SULLIVAN: --if the wind was blowing, where you were. So of course, that smell is what reminded me of that. But by the way, compared to Korea--

[00:15:45.94] JOE GALLOWAY: The smells weren't bad.

[00:15:48.19] GORDON SULLIVAN: In Vietnam, they were not even close, because of course, Korea had just been so devastated that there were no-- open sewers and so forth and so on. And by the way, just so you know, it's not lost on me that last week I rode a train from Seoul down towards the Nakdong River and went at 200 kilometers an hour. And they built the locomotive. They built all of that, including the train, the tracks, and the so forth and so on, and I can't come from Boston to Washington on the US's best train at that speed.

[00:16:32.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. No, no.

[00:16:33.61] GORDON SULLIVAN: So things really changed.

[00:16:35.68] OK. So anyway, I arrived in Rach Gia. There was a guy in a jeep, and I was the only one. They said, OK, Sullivan, here it is. And I get out with my stuff. And this was a major, and he was sitting in his jeep. And he said, you Sullivan? I said, yes, I am. And I saw he was a major and so on, so forth.

[00:17:03.55] He said, OK, I'm so-and-so, and what do you eat? What do you like to eat? It was his first question. I said, I don't know. I can eat anything. What do we eat here? Rice, or what?

[00:17:20.86] He said, no, the boss like-- he said, do you like cocktail onions and Vienna sausage?

[00:17:27.58] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:17:28.93] GORDON SULLIVAN: And I said, cocktail onions? He said, yeah, the kind you get in a martini. And I said, well, I guess. I never thought of it, but yeah, OK. So he said, well, he likes them, and we get a shipment, whether we need it or not, every two weeks, of cocktail onions and Vienna sausages. And I said, oh, yeah?

[00:17:55.57] So we get over to this house, and this stuff is stacked up. Well, we also had a Vietnamese cook who showed up every once in a while, and he chopped the chicken. We also had a boa constrictor and a turkey in the yard, and--

[00:18:20.23] JOE GALLOWAY: How did they get along?

[00:18:22.54] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, the boa constrictor sat on the couch, laid on the couch, on the back of the couch. I didn't even know he was there, and I sat down on this wicker couch, the rattan couch. God knows it was probably there since the French were. And I felt this, and I couldn't imagine what it was. Somebody said, oh, well, that's the snake. He's our pet.

[00:18:47.56] So anyway, I went to bed that night, and we all slept in a big room upstairs. And so I didn't know where I was. It was like the end of the world. We actually had a lot of action there, and just shortly before I arrived, there was an ambush, and like an IED now, an IED then-- it was a mine-- blew up a couple of trucks, VNAV, Vietnam regular forces.

[00:19:30.00] JOE GALLOWAY: ARVNs.

[00:19:30.66] GORDON SULLIVAN: ARVNs. Anyway, a lot of casualties, no US. So we knew there was action. I knew there was action all around there.

[00:19:44.86] So this is sounds, OK? Sounds. So your first night is tricky 'cause you're trying to get situational awareness. What's going on? What am I hearing here? And I woke up, and I heard this clicking sound, like pencils. Well, actually, they were chopsticks, and what it was was the soup lady, and the soup lady was coming around.

[00:20:15.87] And I actually didn't sleep very long. It was about 10 o'clock, so it wasn't really that late, but she was clicking chopsticks, either on a bowl, or clicking them together to let people know that she was there-- she wasn't singing or anything-- in case they needed a bowl of soup.

[00:20:34.24] JOE GALLOWAY: But that was her sound.

[00:20:35.39] GORDON SULLIVAN: That was her sound. And I didn't know whether that was - what was I hearing? Was I hearing somebody signal VC? 'Cause these were all VC. These were not NVA. This was all VC country, and that's where the conflict was, down in that part of Vietnam.

[00:20:56.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Total focus at that time.

[00:20:58.15] GORDON SULLIVAN: Total focus at that time. There was some, maybe, up in the highlands, but not much. It seemed to be all down there.

[00:21:05.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, that's the Rice Bowl, and that was the target of the VC.

[00:21:09.01] GORDON SULLIVAN: That was the target, and it was very remote from Saigon. This was really I feel now, in retrospect, most of what I saw was VC flags. It was different. I'm not sure they even knew there was such a thing as the government of Vietnam down there, 'cause it all seemed to be under control of the Viet Cong-- Viet Minh, Viet Cong.

[00:21:43.67] So anyway, I was the adviser to these guys. Very rudimentary stuff-- weapons, marksmanship, such as it was. A lot of visits out with MEDCAPs. And some of the stuff we did was like-- I'm saying to myself, I can't believe we did it.

[00:22:08.21] My boss said, OK, here's this guy. He came over from someplace, a Spec 5 with a box of medicine. Go with him, and you're gonna go down to these villages along this canal. So we got on these boats, big dugout canoes with little motors, Briggs & Stratton. And we would go out and visit people and give them medicine, whatever. He was the doc. He was a Spec 5. And this is sort of hearts and minds kind of stuff.

[00:22:42.32] So anyway, that went on for a couple of months. Then we went on a big operation with these regular forces and some ARVNs, regular ARVNs, and a Ranger battalion-- 33rd Ranger Battalion, I think-- and some air and some boats, riverine boats-- very, very rudimentary riverine boats, LCVP kind of things.

[00:23:26.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Not the modern stuff.

[00:23:27.72] GORDON SULLIVAN: Not the big stuff. It wasn't the big stuff that the 9th Infantry Division had. It had no big weapons. It was mainly to transport them down the canals.

[00:23:39.85] So we were out for about three or four days, just moving, clearing. It was hammer-and-anvil kind of stuff, just driving the VC, or what VC we bumped into, towards a base, towards the anvil. And we had light contact, that kind of stuff. And that was mainly what went on, plus responding with some kind of air at night if one of the strategic hamlets got hit.

[00:24:25.65] GORDON SULLIVAN: Now, my world changed at the end of March of '63. We were on one of these operations, and we were in the middle of a pineapple plantation. So we were eating lunch, and lunch was pineapples, interestingly enough, 'cause you get a lot of water out of pineapples. You've got a lot of liquid and-- pineapples-- a lot of sugar.

[00:25:04.74] JOE GALLOWAY: A lot of sugar.

[00:25:05.40] GORDON SULLIVAN: A lot of sugar. It was really good. Sticky as hell, but it was good. Anyway, somebody called me up and said, pop smoke. We're getting some helicopters in here. Somebody wants to come out and look at this thing.

[00:25:20.54] We had been under contact all day from the tree lines. We'd get into a row, into this stuff, and there'd be tree lines-- nothing that anybody who's been in Vietnam wouldn't identify. You'd just come up to a tree line, and then there'd be a ditch with irrigation, with water in it, and that's where they were. So anyway, we'd keep pushing, and they'd leave, and then we'd get sniped at again-- nothing very serious. I don't think anybody got hit at all.

[00:25:53.93] So anyway, we're having lunch, and this guy says-- so I got the smoke, and got out and popped smoke, and these two Hueys came in. The first one flares out. Nobody knows who's in them. I didn't know who was in the helicopters. They didn't tell me. They just said, it's two Hueys.

[00:26:12.38] I'd never really seen a Huey before, 'cause we were using H-21s. I knew there were Hueys there, but I hadn't been in one, or I hadn't seen one. When he flared out, a guy popped up out of a spider hole under a pineapple plant. They had come in and put spider holes in the pineapples, which is perfect because the pineapple bush is big enough so that you can get down there, and he had a fighting position.

[00:26:53.96] But he popped up, and he cut down on the helicopter. Well, the people in the back dove out, and the pilot disappeared. So that caused a reaction, and we got attacked from down where I was, in that part of the battlefield, and a real firefight developed. They essentially ambushed us.

[00:27:26.39] And pretty well set, but we actually had a good-sized force, and at the end of the day, it was a pretty successful firefight.

[00:27:39.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Who was on the chopper?

[00:27:41.63] GORDON SULLIVAN: I'm gonna tell you in a minute. It was the commanding general of the Military Advisory Group, Vietnam. His name was Timmes. General Timmes, as a young officer, was at the Merderet bridge with his parachute infantry battalion. And the other general was General Stilwell, Brigadier General Joe Stilwell, Vinegar Joe Stilwell.

[00:28:15.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Vinegar Joe.

[00:28:16.13] GORDON SULLIVAN: Vinegar Joe Stilwell. No, Cider Joe. Cider Joe, his son. And then there was an Air Force brigadier general. Rowland was his name. And I think he was the J-2 or G-2, or whatever, of something.

[00:28:34.65] So those three gents are out, and the helicopters are gone, and we're getting probed. So in the process of this fight, yours truly got wounded. And so anyway, the thing went on. And I don't know that I need to fill you in on the details. If you want 'em, I'll give 'em to you.

[00:29:05.12] But anyway, I worked my way back to the CP. There were a number of dead and wounded there. Somebody said to me, do not-- do not-- take any shots for anything. So they put me on a helicopter, which was a Vietnamese Air Force helicopter, which came in. It was an H-34, which was very unusual, and they were all quite surprised. I'm not sure why he was there, but he was around, and he responded and came in.

[00:29:44.24] So they loaded all of us on the helicopter. I was the only US. The rest were Vietnamese, most of whom, by the way, died on the way down to Ca Mau. So they flew me down to Ca Mau. And they laid the dead in the grass at the edge of the runway. They put me there with them and left. So there I was.

[00:30:18.11] JOE GALLOWAY: If I remember right, you were gut-shot.

[00:30:20.05] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yes, but I had pretty much convinced myself I was OK. Now, I could explain how that all went, but I'm not sure the record needs to know that. But I convinced myself because I had to pass water, and I did.

[00:30:41.54] And I said, if I'm not bleeding, if I don't show it, I'm OK. Now, doctors later told me that that's great, because I didn't go into shock, but it really didn't mean anything, OK? 'cause I could have died within about five or six hours. But I convinced myself I was OK.

[00:31:09.37] So anyway, I get down to this airfield. Nobody's around. And finally, this jeep comes roaring up, and it's a chaplain, Special Forces Army chaplain with a Special Forces outfit. And he says, hey, what are you doing here? I said, well, they just dropped me off here. And he had a sergeant in the back seat, and the sergeant jumps out. He's a Special Forces sergeant. He said, what can we do for you?

[00:31:40.75] I said, well, get me the hell out of here. I think I need to go somewhere. So they saw an Otter down the way, and it was the same Otter that the generals had brought down from Saigon. So they went over and talked to the pilot and said, take this guy to Saigon. So they put me on the Otter. It may have been a Beaver-- Beaver or an Otter.

[00:32:05.98] They put a litter in the back, and the chaplain told the sergeant, he said, you go with him. So they flew me up to Tan Son Nhut. There happened to be an Army vet in the back of the plane. He was just sitting there. They must have brought him down for an outing that day, and he was pale. He thought I was gonna die or something. I don't know what. He never spoke. He was completely petrified about the whole thing.

[00:32:37.76] So anyway, the sergeant and I flew up, got off the helicopter, and they operated on me and so forth. Everything was fine, but--

[00:32:45.88] JOE GALLOWAY: You went to the American hospital?

[00:32:48.85] GORDON SULLIVAN: No, it was at Tan Son Nhut. They threw me in an ambulance, drove me across Tan Son Nhut. It was a Jamesway. It was an Air Force dispensary, two captains. They had never operated on a wounded guy before, and they told me later that they had to get the book out.

[00:33:06.28] The sergeant said, well, what happened? They said, how many holes you got? I said, well, I think I've got one more than I started with, but there may be two. And then I remember saying to him, how many do I have to have to get into this place? He said, don't worry about it. We got you.

[00:33:33.40] So anyway, I was there for whatever, a while. And it just so happens-- this is how screwy things were then. The Ranch Hand aircraft-- when I woke up and I could get up, the nurse, a guy, said, OK, look, the latrine's down the way. Don't get off the duckboards. Don't step in the water. So I said, OK.

[00:34:07.48] Well, I later find out the water is actually Agent Orange. These planes, these C-123s, had irrigation pipes hanging under the wings, and that's what they were using to dispense Agent Orange, and they were loading the plane from 55-gallon drums. Now, I don't have anything that-- I'm not telling anybody this 'cause I'm claiming anything. I'm not claiming anything. It's just what happened.

[00:34:47.32] JOE GALLOWAY: There was Agent Orange--

[00:34:48.65] GORDON SULLIVAN: There it was.

[00:34:49.03] JOE GALLOWAY: --running under your dispensary.

[00:34:50.86] GORDON SULLIVAN: You got it. So anyway, I stayed there, and then they released me. I went back down to duty.

[00:34:56.65] JOE GALLOWAY: How long were you there?

[00:35:00.10] GORDON SULLIVAN: Down there?

[00:35:01.18] JOE GALLOWAY: No. How long were you in that dispensary?

[00:35:03.49] GORDON SULLIVAN: I don't know.

[00:35:04.45] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't send you out of country?

[00:35:06.16] GORDON SULLIVAN: No. No, no. No, as it turned out, they did a resection, and they-- I'm not even sure they stitched me up. Well, they stitched my intestine up 'cause my intestine had been perforated. That's how I could have died. See, I was doing the blood. I was into the organs. I thought if my kidney-- that's my diagnosis.

[00:35:39.71] But actually, all things considered--

[00:35:43.19] JOE GALLOWAY: You're very lucky.

[00:35:44.18] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, I am, that I didn't go into shock.

[00:35:48.20] JOE GALLOWAY: And die.

[00:35:48.89] GORDON SULLIVAN: It would've killed me, 'cause I think some of the people who died on the helicopter that day died of shock.

[00:35:55.19] JOE GALLOWAY: And you went back to duty.

[00:35:56.78] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, I went back down there, and I stayed there for about two months, and then I was brought back up to MAAG, but it later became MACV. And I was the-- I guess you'd call it an administrative officer. I kept things sorted out in the front office

of the J-2. And I was actually there in November, on the 1st of November, when Diem was-- when the coup took place.

[00:36:39.77] And I have a letter around somewhere that I wrote to my mother, and she kept a lot of them. And I'm not sure I even know where it is now, but it's around somewhere, where I commented at the time that I think a lot of us were very uneasy about what happened to Diem that day, and things changed after that, remarkably.

[00:37:14.05] By that time, I think I was a captain, maybe. I'm not sure what I was, captain or a first lieutenant. But I had this job, and I would get sent out on little missions, and one of them related to-- OK, Diem is gone, and we have a government, and then there was another government. I'd have to go into the history to figure out who it was.

[00:37:46.85] JOE GALLOWAY: There was a coup a month.

[00:37:47.93] GORDON SULLIVAN: There was a coup a month. And the second coup, I think, was Big Minh. And Big Minh had a handler from the agency, and they couldn't find him. So one of my bosses said to me, OK, go find this guy. And I said, well, Saigon's a big city. Do you have any idea where I might look?

[00:38:18.56] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:38:19.76] GORDON SULLIVAN: And he said, yeah, either go get a cab or a rickshaw, and try in this part of the town. So I went out there. What the hell did I know? It was, OK, so off I went. And I did find the guy, actually. And I don't want to give any particular details about who it was, or anything like that, but at any rate, that's the kind of stuff I was doing, and then I came home from that tour. So that was that tour.

[00:39:02.66] JOE GALLOWAY: There was almost no understanding or interest in Vietnam back home then, 1963?

[00:39:11.96] GORDON SULLIVAN: No. No, no. '63, when I said I was going to Vietnam-- I went to school in '62. I told people I was going to Vietnam. The only people who knew anything about Vietnam thought it was-- well, they called it Indochina, and it was Dien Bien Phu. That's what they knew, was Dien Bien Phu.

[00:39:38.28] Any contact with home was in letters. There were no phone calls. And I wrote my mother a letter and said, hey, I'm OK. It's no big deal.

[00:39:51.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Mail kind of sporadic?

[00:39:53.30] GORDON SULLIVAN: But she knew. She had the letter, the telegram. It was an actual telegram with tape-- this is a long time ago-- and they slipped it under the door. She worked. My mother and father were divorced, and the reason they couldn't find my father is because he didn't live in Quincy. He lived, by that time, in Atlanta.

[00:40:19.05] OK. So at any rate, I came back and went to the armor school, to the career course, and there were 12 of us who had been in Vietnam. Bill Carpenter, the Lonesome End, was one of my classmates. Andy O'Meara, the son of General Andy O'Meara. Andy O'Meara was class of '59, I think, from West Point. Carpenter was '60, I think.

[00:40:46.26] Anyway, all those guys-- they're Cold War guys. They had been in Germany and so forth, and they looked at us like we were some sort of-- who the hell are these guys? And there was not much interest in Vietnam. Now, every one of those guys went, by the way, and I'm sure some of them were killed, but I can't remember.

[00:41:10.54] JOE GALLOWAY: And the rest of them, then, were interested in Vietnam after that.

[00:41:14.14] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, yeah, but even in the armor school, there were no classes. Nobody taught anything. It was like that was something going on, and nobody was interested in it. And both of those things I mentioned, both the course at Fort Bragg and this armor course, were big influences on me later in my life, when it came time for me to do what I was doing when I was the chief of staff of the Army.

[00:41:47.65] And it later was played out even more when I went back for my second tour. I went back after Leavenworth, and we received virtually-- this is after Tet of '68. I went back in '69.

[00:42:07.25] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your rank by then?

[00:42:08.66] GORDON SULLIVAN: Major.

[00:42:09.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Major.

[00:42:10.43] GORDON SULLIVAN: I had been in Germany. I went to Germany because I had commanded a company in Germany, a tank company, and did some other things in a battalion, I think I was the S-4. I had, by that time, 18 months in Vietnam, 14 months in Korea, so I had a lot of time overseas in short tours. So they left me in Germany to manage the company-grade drawdown. They put me in the personnel business.

[00:42:53.71] And they were stripping Europe, everybody. I'd get calls at night, and we would write down the names of all the people that they wanted sent various places in the United States. The clerk and myself did it over the phone and we would issue the orders next morning, verbal order-- G.R. Sullivan, report to such-and-such a location. The orders would be typed, and they'd move out.

[00:43:25.19] So Europe, the Cold War-- we actually destroyed the European Army. The battalion I went into when I went there had two majors and a lieutenant colonel and all captains. I had to wait to get a company.

[00:43:42.05] JOE GALLOWAY: This is '67?

[00:43:44.33] GORDON SULLIVAN: No. I left the armor school in 1965, and I went to Germany '65, '67, '68. And then I came back to Leavenworth and went to Leavenworth for a year, and then went back to Vietnam in '69 to '70.

[00:44:07.47] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your assignment?

[00:44:09.15] GORDON SULLIVAN: I was going to the 9th Infantry Division, which was down south of Saigon, in the same part of the world that I had been in before, which was OK. That was a fit, and I was pleased to do that. I had left my wife in Hawaii because, at that time, when we left Leavenworth, the Army said, wherever you're going, if you're going to Vietnam, you can put your wives where you want to. And oh, by the way, if you want them to go to Hawaii, we'll send you to Hawaii.

[00:44:43.55] So we did. So we had one child. Got her a place up on the North Shore in Haleiwa, right on the beach. She was pregnant with my second boy, and she had one. Then I went.

[00:45:06.96] But shortly-- about the day before I left, I received a call, and somebody said-- whoever it was. Either it was Washington, or some place called and said, look, the 9th Division's being inactivated, so just report to Long Binh, to the replacement, whatever detachment, and they'll give you an assignment, because a lot of stuff was being moved out in the summer of '69.

[00:45:37.57] And I wound up up in 1st Field Forces in Nha Trang and essentially stayed there. They put me back in the personnel business, so it was a nondescript tour. Anyway, that's my story.

[00:45:58.73] GORDON SULLIVAN: I'm supposed to be honest with you. I suppose it's probably what you would-- it may not be what you would think. I was quite taken with the country. Even with everything that happened, this little personal episode, that was a different time in this whole Vietnam. It was the early stages of it. There was a certain rhythm to it, and it seemed like good things were happening and so forth, and it wasn't quite the extreme violence that it later became.

[00:46:43.75] Now, whether we were successful or not-- vivid memory is, OK--

[00:46:49.06] JOE GALLOWAY: I would have thought your most vivid memory was seeing four generals leaping out of that Huey.

[00:46:54.70] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, that's that whole personal thing. That clearly is my most vivid memory, that day, that whole day. By the way, it was reported in The New York Times. That whole thing was. At the end of the day, we had killed about 80-some VC.

[00:47:15.22] JOE GALLOWAY: Big battle.

[00:47:16.03] GORDON SULLIVAN: That was not amateur sport night.

[00:47:17.83] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:47:23.30] GORDON SULLIVAN: The best day I had was when my boss told me that I had a new child, my son. My son Mark was born in January of 1970. And when I found out my wife was OK and he was OK-- and he is OK today. I talked with him last night. He's a radio executive in Kansas City, Kansas, has two children.

[00:47:58.60] And my son John is a retired Navy chief petty officer. And those two young boys lived with their mother in Hawaii while I was gone, and they have a sister, also, who was born when I was here. But the best day in Vietnam was the day I was told that I had him, and he was OK.

[00:48:32.09] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, I make it sound OK after 50-odd years, actually 51 years, but that wasn't great. It's not great to get shot. I didn't give a shit, but I didn't think I was gonna die.

[00:48:55.57] JOE GALLOWAY: It's a good thing you didn't know how serious it was.

[00:48:59.29] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, mean but I say I didn't care, but I did, 'cause there was only one adviser, and it was me.

[00:49:15.43] JOE GALLOWAY: It's a good thing that chaplain and that sergeant came along.

[00:49:18.49] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, chaplains are always good when you feel like that, when you're in the grass at Ca Mau.

[00:49:23.04] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:49:25.81] GORDON SULLIVAN: Anyway, yeah, that was obviously a big moment in my life. But in here, there's a question about how did we sort all of that out, that kind of stuff out? I was a regular Army officer. I wanted to be an officer. I wanted to be in the US Army, and I was with people, then, all of whom were regular Army people and noncommissioned officers. Many, tragically, were later killed. This was the beginning of something none of us understood at the time.

[00:50:06.58] But when we came home, we helped each other, because we came home, and especially the gents who were the ones who had been in Vietnam, in the armor school-- we banded together, and we helped each other. You might have too much to drink, and your buddies would listen to your stories, and then you'd listen to theirs, and we'd take care of each other, and I think we just sorted it all out.

[00:50:44.46] But I don't think, frankly, Joe, that what we experienced-- in fact, I know it-- was not anything like what it later became. It just wasn't the same. Well, it's not like what you experienced, where you have lots of casualties.

[00:51:10.38] I went around in II Corps. We were up in II Corps with 1st Field Forces, and I remember one day, up towards Pleiku, I came in in a helicopter to do something up there. God, there must have been 30 body bags waiting for evacuation.

[00:51:32.03] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, that always gets you.

[00:51:34.72] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, sure it does. See, that's different. That became much different, and it was always there. So anyway, that's my story about Vietnam.

[00:52:00.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me about your impressions of the Vietnamese people from the time you arrived till you left.

[00:52:07.67] GORDON SULLIVAN: I was quite taken with the Vietnamese people. In Saigon, in those days, you could meet people who were very gracious. It was a gracious culture. You didn't-- at least I didn't feel any negativity, even out in the-- now, let's be clear. In the countryside-- I'm not talking about the countryside down where we were fighting, I'm talking about the countryside out of that zone-- they were perfectly happy to see us, and they were very gracious. They didn't have much.

[00:52:56.72] JOE GALLOWAY: That was maybe a time you could drive from Saigon to Can Tho or My Tho and--

[00:53:02.36] GORDON SULLIVAN: Maybe, maybe, maybe. There were two guys down in Bac Lieu who were known for doing that kind of stuff, getting on the bus. I'm not kidding you. That was a little tricky.

[00:53:24.52] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a little tricky.

[00:53:25.45] GORDON SULLIVAN: That was a little tricky. I don't think many people did it, but you could do it. But that didn't last. So anyway, it was much different when I went back the second time. You could get the looks on the street. You could feel it.

[00:53:47.56] JOE GALLOWAY: It had changed.

[00:53:49.27] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, there was ambivalence. People-- '69, '70, especially in '70, things--

[00:54:02.04] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you communicate with your wife and family?

[00:54:07.14] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, by that time, when she was in Hawaii, you could use MARS periodically, get to MARS. And they had a MARS station in Hawaii, So you did this radio wire integration.

[00:54:21.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Radio talk.

[00:54:24.22] GORDON SULLIVAN: They'd call.

[00:54:24.79] JOE GALLOWAY: "I love you, over."

[00:54:25.80] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, "I love you, over." Yeah, right. Right.

[00:54:30.36] And I went back. I didn't go back right away. I went back and saw Mark. That was probably the best day, by the way.

[00:54:50.10] JOE GALLOWAY: On R&R.

[00:54:51.03] GORDON SULLIVAN: The best day. We landed, and we were taken over to Fort DeRussy. You know where the East-West Center is?

[00:55:02.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:55:02.56] GORDON SULLIVAN: There were wooden buildings there, and I remember walking down through this hallway, and she was there with the baby, with his red hair, and with John, who was standing by her side. And frankly, it still gets to me. It was great. So to me, that--

[00:55:36.61] JOE GALLOWAY: That's as good as it gets.

[00:55:37.71] GORDON SULLIVAN: That's as good as it gets. And the worst that it gets, by the way, is when you say goodbye to them to go back to a place like that. And that's why I still make a point-- and I talked in Korea to the Army birthday. That's why I was over there last week.

[00:56:04.54] We owe an enormous debt to the spouses and the children of these men and women who have gone off to war repeatedly, 'cause if they lose faith, then the whole thing starts falling like a deck of cards. And we are very fortunate that the children and the spouses who cared for them, or the families who cared for them, did not lose faith in us and our Soldiers, 'cause it would have collapsed. And frankly, sometimes, I doubt that the people who caused us to go to these wars-- I have real doubts about that.

[00:56:55.66] JOE GALLOWAY: I got those same doubts.

[00:56:57.72] GORDON SULLIVAN: I don't think some of them thought one minute about the implications. I understand what my job is. I understand what our job is. I got it. All I ask, then and today, is, do you really understand the implications of what you're-- and sometimes I wonder.

[00:57:31.06] GORDON SULLIVAN: We ask too much of too few. If anybody tells you they served in Vietnam more than twice, I can tell you, they're damaged.

[00:57:39.07] JOE GALLOWAY: They're damaged.

[00:57:39.86] GORDON SULLIVAN: They're damaged. You can't do it.

[00:57:41.41] JOE GALLOWAY: I did four.

[00:57:42.64] GORDON SULLIVAN: You can't do it. I don't think you can do it.

[00:57:49.18] JOE GALLOWAY: You do it, but your dreams are different forever.

[00:57:54.22] GORDON SULLIVAN: I did an interview with Martha Raddatz when I retired from the Army. And I may have said it to her, but if I didn't, I probably should have. The older I got, the more experienced I got, the more apparent it became that the implications of what was going on and what we were asking people to do-- when I was the chief, we lost 44 killed in action. They all happened to be men.

[00:58:32.11] That's only by happenstance, by luck, I guess. It could have been men and women, 'cause it involved Somalia and some other fracas that we were in. Some of them actually were not fracas. We had a couple of people killed in Haiti. But anyway, the older you get, the more you reflect on it.

[00:59:00.91] And OK, so I was influenced by what I told you I was influenced by. How well prepared was I to do what I was asked to do as an adviser? And that is hard duty. Being an adviser is hard duty, and I'm not sure we have figured out yet how to prepare people to do it, other than expose them to it and keep--

[00:59:28.33] JOE GALLOWAY: On-the-job training.

[00:59:29.60] GORDON SULLIVAN: --on-the-job training. But that requires mentors. It requires people who are experienced to be with them, and these are awful burdens. And yes, you can send them to school, but do they listen? What are they listening about? What are they thinking about? I don't know what people are thinking when they're sitting in a classroom, and it's hot, and whatever, and they're 20-odd years old, thinking about going off to war. What kind of images do they have in their brain?

[01:00:06.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your service in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and has had a lasting influence on your life?

[01:00:15.22] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, everything I've been talking about has stuck with me. It's like yesterday. It's like yesterday. And when I was the chief of staff in the Army, I said to those around me that I would not do-- I would try not to do-- and I was General Vuono-- as you know, I was his G-3 and then his vice chief of staff when we were setting the plan in motion to take the Army down-- that we would treat-- I would do my best to treat everybody with dignity and respect, those who we were releasing, some involuntarily, and those who were staying, because I knew that those who were staying felt that those who were leaving were their buddies. And they had fought alongside of them, and they didn't like it when they were treated like--

[01:01:10.75] [BLOWS AIR]

[01:01:12.90] Right?

[01:01:13.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:01:13.95] GORDON SULLIVAN: Now, remember, that was a different kind of a thing, now. Most of them were draftees, and a lot of them were draftees who became officers, and they

were very anxious to get out of the US Army in those days, 'cause things weren't great. But I didn't want to have some big exodus of people.

[01:01:33.75] So anyway, we put-- a lot of things, and then I tried to do my best. Now, whether I succeeded or not, I don't know. But in training people for what was called military operations other than war, and getting ready for peacekeeping and peacemaking, which not everybody agreed with, but it's the nature of what we became, is an Army which does other things.

[01:02:03.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[01:02:11.97] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yes, yes. I think it made me a better officer. I think it made me appreciate what my Soldiers and their families did. And I think, at the end, Joe, when I look back on it, I had to take about 300,000 Soldiers off of active duty and about 200-some-thousand guardsmen and reservists-- Soldiers-- and disrupt a lot of lives, and that's a profound experience.

[01:02:53.89] But what's more profound to me was to understand and to try and impress upon them that the most important thing about an Army is not stuff. It's the essential nature of the Army, as represented by the battle streamers on the flag and as represented by the proud history of the Big Red One, the first team of the 1st Armored Division, of the 2nd Infantry Division, the 3rd Infantry Division.

[01:03:29.25] When I say those names, I conjure up the visions of people-- North Africa, Italy, Sicily, Southern France, Normandy, Central Europe, OK? It's not the stuff. It's people. And that's what I think is-- I think it's the challenge today. How do you keep the thing pulled together?

[01:03:58.92] JOE GALLOWAY: I see those old sergeant majors.

[01:04:02.52] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah, well, I can see them all. You see the old sergeant majors. Look, the president of Norwich University, when I was a cadet, was Ernie Harmon. Ernie Harmon fought in World War I as a mounted cavalryman, mounted calvaryman with the 2nd Regiment of Cavalry. He later went on to fight in North Africa, Anzio, and Central Europe, a great Soldier. Created the Constabulary.

[01:04:32.91] Do you think I wanted to let him down? No way. Do you think I wanted to let people who raised me-- Command Sergeant Major Robert Horn, Blackhorse Regiment; later General Starry. He was my sergeant major in Europe. He was the sergeant major of the battalion I went to in Europe, the 3rd Battalion, 32nd Armor, Friedberg. Elvis Presley was there, not in my battalion, in the 1st Battalion. Presley had gone by the time I got there.

[01:05:07.32] But anyway, the Army has a proud history, but it's a history written by people, not by stuff. And that's lesson number one. It's people who do this stuff.

[01:05:28.10] JOE GALLOWAY: In the end, what does the Vietnam War mean to you and your generation?

[01:05:34.46] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, that's really a much bigger subject. Quite honestly, I never felt as if I was disrespected. Nobody spit on me. I'm not sure that everybody who says they were spit on was spit on, either.

[01:05:54.35] But at any rate, that's another subject. But what it means to me is, number one, I was proud to serve. I was proud to go. I was proud to do. I never felt any sense of guilt with what I did, and most of the people I was with were straightforward and honest about what they did, and didn't feel guilty about it. So I think we were doing what we were asked to do the best way we could.

[01:06:26.12] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans.

[01:06:34.94] GORDON SULLIVAN: Number one, do not forget that the troops who are fighting the war were the last ones who started it. They didn't start it. They're serving the country. They signed up to serve the country. And I think the American people figured that out after long, hard days with the Vietnam experience. And you have to be careful that you don't put the burden on those who are carrying the rucksacks, the heavy rucksacks day in, day out, hot, cold, at altitude, beating their head against the wall, doing complicated tasks.

[01:07:17.21] Don't put another burden on their shoulders that they were the ones who started the war. They're the ones who are prosecuting it and paying with their lives and lots of blood.

[01:07:35.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you heard about the 50th Anniversary of the War Commemoration project?

[01:07:41.53] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, yeah, because I am the president of the Association of the United States Army. Most of my chapters are part of it, so we're big supporters of it. It's a part of our program.

[01:07:55.42] JOE GALLOWAY: You feel it's a good thing?

[01:07:56.87] GORDON SULLIVAN: I think it's a great thing. Heck yeah, it's a great thing.

[01:08:02.11] It's funny, Joe. I was asked last night, over on Capitol Hill. There was a kick-off event for the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the First World War. And I was interviewed, and somebody said, how did I feel about World War I being called The Forgotten War? And I said, that doesn't even register with me.

[01:08:36.55] JOE GALLOWAY: I've never heard that.

[01:08:37.72] GORDON SULLIVAN: I'd never heard it in my life.

[01:08:41.65] JOE GALLOWAY: That was Korea.

[01:08:42.94] GORDON SULLIVAN: Yeah. I said, I thought that was the Korean War. It certainly wasn't World War I. I said, look, for a guy like me, World War I has been a part of my life probably ever since I became a cadet. It's part of the Army. It's a part of the Army history. It's such a significant part of the Army history. The people who fought World War I as lieutenants and majors became the generals who led the Army in World War II, and some of them even wound up in Vietnam. It's a part of our very being.

[01:09:23.39] JOE GALLOWAY: That sounds like a bullshit TV question.

[01:09:26.15] GORDON SULLIVAN: Well, it certainly didn't resonate with me. So anyway, I think it is a very good thing that we are commemorating the war, and I think the more, the better. The more, the better. And everybody who went has a story, and everyone who went was not so significantly damaged that they couldn't go on to live a productive life.

[01:09:59.83] And I think many people lose sight of the fact that there's a lot of very, very accomplished people who fought in that war, either as draftees or enlistees-- that is, people who volunteered to serve, and officers, warrant officers-- who went on to live productive lives, American citizens who just did their job. And they and those who were killed and wounded severely, and wounded in ways we can't see-- they deserve the full respect of the American people. And I think that this is appropriate, what we're doing.

[01:10:47.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, sir.

[01:10:47.80] GORDON SULLIVAN: OK, thanks. Thanks a lot.

[01:10:49.52] JOE GALLOWAY: You did a good job.