

## **Thompson, Dennis US Army POW**

[00:00:19.14] JOE GALLOWAY: When and where were you born?

[00:00:21.63] DENNIS THOMPSON: Portland, Oregon, 1942, 16th of October. It was my birthday yesterday.

[00:00:27.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were your family members?

[00:00:31.26] DENNIS THOMPSON: Oh. My mom and dad and my sister. The old man was never around.

[00:00:39.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah? What did he do?

[00:00:42.90] DENNIS THOMPSON: Get drunk. DENNIS THOMPSON: I needed to get away-- situation that I was in.

[00:00:54.66] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you?

[00:00:55.83] DENNIS THOMPSON: 17.

[00:00:56.52] JOE GALLOWAY: 17.

[00:00:57.69] DENNIS THOMPSON: I got my sainted mother to sign my papers. And at 17 years and 8 hours, I was--

[00:01:06.81] JOE GALLOWAY: On your way.

[00:01:14.42] DENNIS THOMPSON: Fort Ord, California.

[00:01:15.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Fort Ord. And this was what year?

[00:01:20.45] DENNIS THOMPSON: 1959, '60.

[00:01:22.91] JOE GALLOWAY: '59. Where did you do advanced training, and what was your MOS?

[00:01:29.30] DENNIS THOMPSON: Well, I started out as a radio repairman. I went to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey. Course was 28 weeks. And then from there, I went to Germany. And while I was in Germany, I went to the Seventh Army Noncommissioned Officers Academy. And that was at Bad Tolz, Germany, and that's where the 10th Special Forces Group headquarters was. And I was really impressed with these guys. I said, I want to join up. They kind of talked to me like a little kid wanting to be a fireman.

[00:02:07.43] But they gave me a bunch of prerequisites. Had to be 22 and a six-year enlistment. Had one of the MOSs that they wanted up front. So I went to work and got them all done.

[00:02:23.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Got them all done.

[00:02:24.65] DENNIS THOMPSON: I came back to the States in '64 and went to Training Group. And then from Training Group, I went to the 3rd Special Forces Group, and then to the 5th Special Forces Group. That was in-- let me see-- '65.

[00:02:48.64] JOE GALLOWAY: The 5th was in Vietnam, right? So you got your orders to Vietnam.

[00:02:53.80] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. I volunteered for it. If you're a commo man, you can go anywhere, anytime.

[00:02:58.06] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:02:59.59] DENNIS THOMPSON: Everybody needs you. DENNIS THOMPSON: I think we took off from Oakland and landed in Saigon-- civilian airplane. Nha Trang and then to the C Detachment. I was in II Corps. So I went from Nha Trang to the C2 to B2, and then A-A-- what the hell was the name of that Detachment? A-222.

[00:03:35.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Which was located where? Pleiku or--

[00:03:38.76] DENNIS THOMPSON: In the Central Highlands across from Tuy Hoa. Tuy Hoa is on the coast-- kind of bottlenecks there.

[00:03:47.79] JOE GALLOWAY: You went to an A team or-- yeah.

[00:03:50.70] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yep.

[00:03:51.81] JOE GALLOWAY: What was the camp called?

[00:03:53.64] DENNIS THOMPSON: Dong Tre-- D-O-N-G T-R-E.

[00:03:56.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Dong Tre.

[00:03:57.96] DENNIS THOMPSON: Means field of much bamboo.

[00:03:59.61] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS] Lots of bamboo, huh? That's hard to fight in.

[00:04:04.40] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. Everything's hard to fight in over there. I remember when I hit Saigon the way it smelled. Wasn't so much bad, it was just so different.

[00:04:14.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Different, yeah.

[00:04:15.79] DENNIS THOMPSON: And I said, damn. And I fell in love with the country just immediately. And I did well with the Vietnamese. I've never had any trouble in any country I've

ever been in because I have a legitimate interest in their language and culture. And when you express that to people, they just go crazy. They'll give you all kinds of information.

[00:04:48.79] DENNIS THOMPSON: Junior radio operator, generator mechanic, electrician-- I did the-- rewired the camp. I scored this huge reel of 50-amp cable like you use for an RV or a boat, and I buried it all and had it all tricked out. And I was watching my load level indicators going up.

[00:05:14.26] Well, the Vietnamese were taking pins and blasting cap leg wire, and they poked down through that insulation till they--

[00:05:22.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Got a hot wire.

[00:05:24.91] DENNIS THOMPSON: So I could-- tried to figure out how to deal with that. So I talked to these Filipino generator mechanics, and they showed me how to phase those generators together and produce 440 volts.

[00:05:39.13] JOE GALLOWAY: You don't want to stick a pin in that.

[00:05:41.26] DENNIS THOMPSON: I went around it-- disconnected everything that was supposed to be on there.

[00:05:45.40] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS] Bang.

[00:05:46.75] DENNIS THOMPSON: And you hear this concerted groan go up throughout the camp. Oooh.

[00:05:51.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Oooh. [LAUGHS]

[00:05:54.31] DENNIS THOMPSON: We had one platoon that we made up from refugees. They used as a carrying party, and they dumped them out there. And my mentor Aldred-- Alden Bertram Willey. We made a recon platoon out of these guys.

[00:06:15.57] JOE GALLOWAY: The Montagnards.

[00:06:17.76] DENNIS THOMPSON: WE got in big trouble, too. Oh. Oh, we got a recon platoon now. Well, they wouldn't go out with anybody except us.

[00:06:26.07] I forgot to tell you about coming into Lang Vei. I come in to Vietnam on my second tour. And I'm over at the CD TAS. And I said, where's the MIKE Force. Oh, over there.

[00:06:40.02] And Sergeant First Class Han said, what's your MOS? I said, well, I got several. And I screwed up and told them commo. Yeah, you're going to go out to Sa Huynh. You're going to be the commo chief out there.

[00:06:55.61] And I said, no, I've being assigned to A-113 Mobile Strike Force. Snatch. He snatches the orders out of my-- I'm the one who tells you where you're going, jerk-off. So I said, oh, shit. I better talk to somebody about this.

[00:07:13.37] Well, Colonel Schungel wasn't there. He was some other place. And before you talk to him, you have to talk to Sergeant Major Hodge-- Harmon D. "Preacher" Hodge. You ever heard of him?

[00:07:22.88] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:07:24.77] DENNIS THOMPSON: The trifecta of assholedom. He was big and mean, and he was a bully, and he was a born again reformed alcoholic.

[00:07:35.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, dear.

[00:07:36.65] DENNIS THOMPSON: Kaboom. And he didn't like me worth a shit. And he had his own little Devil's Island, which was Lang Vei. Johnson, Ashley, and me were sitting out watching the goddamn Japanese all-girl rock and roll band, getting drunk and raising hell. And we blew up his PT formation the next morning. And we were all back out to Lang Vei in no time flat.

[00:08:02.30] JOE GALLOWAY: You were gone to Lang Vei again.

[00:08:04.58] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yep. So I went out-- it was just me on this ship. And they're going around. And every possible place you could sit a Huey down was registered. Boom, boom, boom.

[00:08:20.36] So these kids turned it around, and they come slaloming down Highway 9. An I watched the team house go by like a shot. This kid's got me by the nape of the neck. And he says, when we hit the ground, you get off this fucking helicopter as fast as you can. And it went-- [CLAP]. And I hit the ground. [KNOCKING] And my upper body was moving way faster than my feet.

[00:08:45.74] JOE GALLOWAY: That's not good.

[00:08:47.06] DENNIS THOMPSON: And I got up into the camp, and there was Frankie Dooms. We'd been together since '63-- country boy from Virginia-- Shenandoah Valley. And he saw me. He said, hot damn, Big Time. What you doing in here? I said, it looked like a good place to die, Frankie, so I had them drop me off.

[00:09:05.90] He said, you got that shit right. We're surrounded. And I said, we're always surrounded. Not like this, we ain't. Not since Bastogne anyway. And he shows me the SID map. I'm going, OK. I ain't afraid.

[00:09:18.32] [LAUGHTER]

[00:09:21.47] Oh, my. Oh, my. Oh, my.

[00:09:30.26] DENNIS THOMPSON: For the most part they were good men, believed in what they were doing. They were real savvy and well-trained. And I was the youngest guy in the detachment. They call me "the kid." Some dummy said, well, let's start replacing people individually.

[00:09:57.47] OK, so you got people popping in and out of there all the time, and you didn't know who the hell was in your detachment from one day to the next. Then, the officers spent six months in the field and six months of staff time-- the double ticket punch. I had three detachment commanders in a year.

[00:10:18.98] JOE GALLOWAY: That's not too good.

[00:10:20.15] DENNIS THOMPSON: No. And they don't have time to do anything. So the enlisted men pretty much--

[00:10:29.06] JOE GALLOWAY: Took care of everything. The officers came and went.

[00:10:32.93] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. Pretty interesting year, that first year.

[00:10:43.44] JOE GALLOWAY: So the Vietnamese, their history and their culture, they impressed you?

[00:10:48.86] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah, very much so. Very, very intelligent people. And very capable. We found that out.

[00:11:08.26] DENNIS THOMPSON: I didn't like being in an A camp. Uncle Sam spent a lot of money teaching me to be an individual, capable of fighting as an individual, never being in the same place longer than umpty-ump hours. We got there, we were burning crap and filling sandbags and stringing barbed wire and that.

[00:11:32.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Doing that stuff.

[00:11:33.40] DENNIS THOMPSON: It was a chain gang. Just-- anyway, when I went back on my second tour I got into the Mobile Strike Force-- good outfit. You were in the rear area, enjoying that kind of life, or you were in the crap about that deep.

[00:11:55.72] JOE GALLOWAY: About that deep.

[00:11:56.62] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. [LAUGHS]

[00:11:58.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, how was the MIKE Force organized? As a company or-

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[00:12:02.08] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. They had companies and junior-- company grade officers as company commanders, and NCOs as platoon leaders.

[00:12:15.89] JOE GALLOWAY: And your forces were Vietnamese or Nung, or who were they?

[00:12:22.72] DENNIS THOMPSON: Wherever you happened to be. Most of them were-- the ones that we dealt with were Rhade. And you get out there-- we were going out to recruit for the MIKE Force. And you had little kids come up to you, and they-- fascinated by the hair on your arms and in your nose. They're just checking you out, you know?

[00:12:49.12] So we said, OK, we need some people to man this force, and we'll give you so much money a month, and so much rice, and so much money for every weapon that you capture. Now, most of the VC and NVA, of course, were Vietnamese. And this old guy said, you want to pay us money to kill Vietnamese? That's right. Sign us up.

[00:13:15.92] JOE GALLOWAY: I'm in.

[00:13:16.60] [LAUGHTER]

[00:13:18.41] DENNIS THOMPSON: Oh, my. Yeah, it-- I just liked working with the people. I met some people over there. The ones I liked were the ones that were serious about their job. I don't need somebody around me that isn't taking this thing as seriously as I am. Shoot your ass up front, and I don't have to worry about you anymore.

[00:13:46.78] [LAUGHTER]

[00:13:48.37] Then one time I remember I got to town. First thing you do is get the mail, and put it on the aircraft going back to the camp. Then you're supposed to go scrounging and getting drunk and raising hell. And let me see. Oh, yeah-- uniforms.

[00:14:08.97] I go over to the S-4. And there's this goddamn leg in there with low quarter shoes on, goggle-eyed glasses. He had a candy bar. Green Beret-- if you're not qualified Green Beret, you used to get a little bar, and they'd call it a candy bar.

[00:14:31.41] I don't have anything that fits you. Because the REMFs, the rear area guys-- oh, look, Joey, these short, medium fatigues fit just like they're tailored. So you can't find squat. And I got duct tape on for boots.

[00:14:47.79] And I'm laying up on a Jeep in front of the mail room waiting for it to open. And Sergeant Major Pioletti came by, grabbed me by the foot, jerked me off there in the sand. What are you, some kind of goddamn comedian? Get over there-- because the crotch was ripped out, and I had it stapled together with a stapler. Go over there and get you something to wear. And I said, Sergeant Major, they don't have anything over there. Yes, sir.

[00:15:15.93] So I went over to this guy again, and he gives me the size 92 goddamn uniform. I got my sling rope, Li'l Abnered these pants, and this big old shirt. And I was in the Playboy Club, and here come Pioletti again. So he went over there and fired this guy up, and I got some clothes, but no boots.

[00:15:40.17] So I'm sitting out in front of the Playboy Club thoroughly dangerous, to the point that I really don't give a shit anymore. I feel entitled to whatever the hell is around here. Hey, slick? What size boots you wear? What's it to you? No, seriously. Nine. Give them to me.

[00:16:04.17] [LAUGHTER]

[00:16:05.88] I'll blow your fucking head off. And Frankie Dooms is there going, just give him the boots, man. There's something wrong with him.

[00:16:10.83]

[00:16:11.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Just give him the goddamn boots.

[00:16:13.22] [LAUGHTER]

[00:16:16.05] DENNIS THOMPSON: They were nice and shiny, too.

[00:16:17.49] [LAUGHTER]

[00:16:20.40] Got in a fight in the Playboy Club. Depending upon who was back out of the field, holy shit, it was like Dodge City in there.

[00:16:31.33] [LAUGHTER]

[00:16:34.60] I'm talking to this guy. And this other asshole is upset about it. I guess I interrupted him or something. So I bought a round of drinks. And I'm reaching in there for one, this guy slaps my hand. Immediate reaction? Put my elbow right on his nose. Bang. He's over there, oh, geez.

[00:16:51.28] And his friend jumped up. And I hit that son of a bitch about as hard as I ever hit anything in my goddamn life. Spank. And it took him about five minutes to fall down. He made the whole tour.

[00:17:05.92] Guys would be fighting in there, and you'd get a new guy-- say aren't you going to break that up? Be my guest. I'm just holding my drink up so it don't get knocked over.

[00:17:15.64] [LAUGHTER]

[00:17:22.73] DENNIS THOMPSON: Army had so many regulations and stuff burdening the Caribou pilots that-- classifying our strip as unserviceable. Well, it was always the same, always unserviceable. So the SF started using the Wallabies, the Australians, Caribou pilots.

[00:17:49.35] JOE GALLOWAY: They go anywhere.

[00:17:50.21] DENNIS THOMPSON: What a goddamn bunch they were. Silver stick two two, this is Wallaby zero three. We're inbound your location. Can you hear us? No, not yet. OK. You are-- vector coming in here. It's umpity-ump degrees. And you can pick them out.

[00:18:17.79] Can you give us a mark? You take an illumination round, pull that tube straight back up, and fire it straight up at the air. Now, we've got it. And he's flying around this thing.

[00:18:30.36] And he comes in downwind. And I'm screaming, zero three, you're coming in downwind. You're coming in downwind, and you're about 50 feet off the runway. He says, relax, Yank. Whoom. Drops the tip, wing tip down. I ain't shitting you. He's about 10 or 12 feet off the ground, slid that thing over.

[00:18:50.82] And they landed downwind, and they're bouncing down this mudhole, pockmarked runway, firewalling those engines in reverse. And there's mud and rocks and shit hitting that prop flying around-- bom, boom, bam. And they get to the end of the runway, lock up one brake, and firewall that engine.

[00:19:13.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Spin that sucker around.

[00:19:14.79] DENNIS THOMPSON: And come rolling back into the wind, kicking the cargo out as they went. There you are, lads. I said, you fuckers are crazy. You know that, don't you? We hear that a lot.

[00:19:25.65] [LAUGHTER]

[00:19:27.54] You have a nice day. Oh, yeah. They used to help us. We went down to Qui Nhon, down at the LST beach. And they got these tubs up on the sand, the ramps. And there's a bunch of 151 Jeeps on this thing.

[00:19:47.44] So we go get a sterile uniform. And there's this kid there, a guard. And I sad, can you get us 5 gallons of gas? Gassed it up for us, and we drove it off over to Caribou ramp, down- - zip. And you could hear them cinching up the A7A straps as we were taxiing out onto the runway.

[00:20:08.55] JOE GALLOWAY: You were stealing Jeeps.

[00:20:11.64] DENNIS THOMPSON: Anything. We'd steal anything. I'm not kidding you. We got hooked up with the supply depot at Qui Nhon. And the Vietnamese used to take a razor knife, and there'd be a cardboard container, and they'd cut a hole in it to see what was in it.

[00:20:31.52] Well, in that case, the people in the warehouse had to inventory that thing in piece by piece. So they'd just throw it outside. I said, do you mind if we go up and down the line here. And so we massaged them, and let them drink with us and stuff. And we were hauling things out of there like-- .



[00:20:55.94] There was a PSP strip, graves registration, and a bakery. And then the Dust Off, the medevac thing. So we'd keep some Vietnamese near death at the camp all the time. So we could call in a legitimate medevac if we needed it.

[00:21:18.25] So we go scrounge this up. We go from the bakery, running down that ramp over to graves registration. There was a guy there we called Digger-- looked like Red Buttons. Real sweetheart of a guy. Took his job really seriously. Don't touch that man like that. You leave marks on him.

[00:21:42.49] So when you went in there, he'd pull the thing open. There's a pair of feet. And he'd pull out a plastic canteen of Jack Daniels, and you'd have to have a drink with him. And he used to let us store our meat in there.

[00:21:56.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, my God.

[00:21:57.06] DENNIS THOMPSON: So we call in a medevac. And we'd come running down that PSP like the the Juice, grabbing our bread, grabbing our--

[00:22:09.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Frozen meat.

[00:22:10.18] DENNIS THOMPSON: --our meat, and we were out of there. Come back to the camp-- it's like a cartoon. Yay, Speedy-- Speedy comes back-- all these sick mice near death.

[00:22:20.97] [LAUGHTER]

[00:22:28.72] DENNIS THOMPSON: Oh, got to be on the second tour, that battle at Lang Vei-- 12 and 1/2 hours. I was the last man standing.

[00:22:36.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, man.

[00:22:37.57] DENNIS THOMPSON: I missed the last pickup. These Laotians, they had driven them out of Laos, the NVA. They had driven them out of Laos and pushed them right up on our wire. We're talking about livestock, pots, pans, wives, kids, the whole--

[00:22:53.01] JOE GALLOWAY: These are villagers.

[00:22:54.76] DENNIS THOMPSON: They were Laotians. They--

[00:22:55.96] JOE GALLOWAY: They used them for human shields.

[00:22:59.80] DENNIS THOMPSON: Well, the CIA had this monster that they created called the Elephant Battalion, and that's who these guys were. They broke and ran immediately-- packed everything up and headed for Lang Vei. So they brought in a number of people to-- medics to deal with them. But they weren't worth a damn.

[00:23:26.71] And we kept reporting that we had tanks, track vehicles, working in our area. I saw the tracks.

[00:23:35.80] JOE GALLOWAY: And they didn't believe you.

[00:23:36.70] DENNIS THOMPSON: I saw their underwater bridges. Several of us did. And oh, we believed it, but Khe Sanh didn't. We told them we were under attack by Soviet tanks. Dead silence. Describe the vehicles.

[00:23:58.99] Frankie Dooms just could not-- "#!\*^%! All you need to know, asshole, is fire mission, troops in the open-- shoot it. That's all you need to know. You don't need to know how this got there. What do you want, the vehicle number off of it?

[00:24:14.69] JOE GALLOWAY: This is-- you're under attack by an armored force of North Vietnamese, and they want you to describe the tanks?

[00:24:22.93] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. They didn't believe us. They were-- had their hands full, too. At 0001 on the 7th of February--

[00:24:36.03] JOE GALLOWAY: 1968? Yeah.

[00:24:39.43] DENNIS THOMPSON: We got some 152 artillery and 82 mortars. There were pretty close to 900-plus infantrymen there, and 11 PT-76 tanks, 152 artillery, 82 mortars, and 40-millimeter rockets. Oh, yeah. They came to play.

[00:25:02.92] JOE GALLOWAY: They came to play.

[00:25:04.39] DENNIS THOMPSON: So we're looking down this road, and here comes five of them in a row. And the lead tank had a spotlight shining out there. And their sappers came up, and they were cutting the wire.

[00:25:18.55] The medic, James Holt, jumped on that 106. And within four rounds, he stopped three of those tanks. And then we were out of gas. We had four rounds of 106 ammunition. That's it.

[00:25:36.67] JOE GALLOWAY: And that's all you had.

[00:25:37.93] DENNIS THOMPSON: We had some 57 millimeter recoilless rifles that would have eaten those tanks up. But the team sergeant gave them to the Laotians over at the other camp. So we were dead. The LAW rockets that we had wouldn't even fire-- half of them wouldn't go off. The ones that did were all over the place.

[00:26:01.30] I got credited for one tank. What happened there was that, first of all, our rocket didn't do squat. And I'd seen a number of the other incidents just like that. So I concentrated on the drive sprocket-- kept hitting it until it broke. Now, all they do is run around in circles.

[00:26:22.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Run in circles.

[00:26:23.23] DENNIS THOMPSON: And I was just ahead of that co-axial machine gun going around and around. And if anybody tried to get out of that tank, I'd hit them with a M79, the canister round. Puts 22 double-aught buck pellets--

[00:26:39.82] JOE GALLOWAY: That's right. That'll slow them down.

[00:26:43.09] DENNIS THOMPSON: Oh my. At 20 meters, it's real good for three men in a group. So anyway, the two tracks came around in front of us, and another couple came up Highway 9, and another couple came up from the other side, for a total of 11.

[00:27:03.63] JOE GALLOWAY: 11 tanks.

[00:27:05.42] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yep. And we didn't have anything that we could stop them with.

[00:27:14.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Stop them with.

[00:27:16.86] DENNIS THOMPSON: So I-- throwing grenades up underneath the thing. And cupola opens up. It had a .51 caliber external machine gun, like our Ma Deuce gun. And-- but you had to get out of the track to use it.

[00:27:33.32] JOE GALLOWAY: To use it.

[00:27:34.94] DENNIS THOMPSON: And every son of a bitch that popped his head out there, I shot him. And all the leadership was underground.

[00:27:45.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Your leadership.

[00:27:47.07] DENNIS THOMPSON: I got trapped in that bunker-- in the TOC bunker. There was the detachment-- the resident detachment commander, and MIKE Force company commander, and Colonel Schungel, the C Detachment commander.

[00:28:05.79] JOE GALLOWAY: And they're all in a hole in the ground.

[00:28:07.87] DENNIS THOMPSON: So we had no quarterbacks. We were just running around there hot-dogging.

[00:28:11.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Doing it yourself.

[00:28:13.39] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. We did all right.

[00:28:14.70] JOE GALLOWAY: How long did the camp last before it fell?

[00:28:21.63] DENNIS THOMPSON: OK. The old camp at Lang Vei was overrun nine months before the second camp fell.

[00:28:28.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Before this.

[00:28:30.03] DENNIS THOMPSON: We had two guys there that were there for both of them. [LAUGHS] Lindewald and McMurray. But that was 12 and 1/2 hours. And when it was over, I'd been awake for about three days. A goddamn dinosaur could have walked by, and I wouldn't have raised an eyebrow.

[00:28:50.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you guys E&E our of there?

[00:28:52.14] DENNIS THOMPSON: Well, what it came down to was I was pretty sure that we were history. So there were two firefights. One's in this part, up by the team house, and the other one was at the entrance to the TOC. And they fired a round into the entrance of that TOC-- blew it shut, and knocked Schungel and Lieutenant Wilkins down and buried McMurray. So they limped and dragged themselves down and hid underneath the dispensary till daylight.

[00:29:37.56] And God. Everything we went for turned to crap. The Marines had given us 250 gallons of gasoline in 55-gallon drums. And it was contaminated with something. Shut down all of our vehicles and generators. We had to clean it all up. So there's 250 gallons of gas piled up in the middle of the inner perimeter.

[00:30:05.24] Brooks and Tiroch ran over on top of the team house and took this .50 cal off of there and a bunch of ammunition. They got to-- back to the four-deuce pit, and they didn't have a tripod. And one of my vivid memories was-- you ever seen men under illumination? JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. DENNIS THOMPSON: Artillery illum-- there's this blackish-gray, brownish hue to everything. There's three guys trying to hold this Ma Deuce down and shoot it.

[00:30:40.30] JOE GALLOWAY: They're holding the tube and shooting it.

[00:30:42.13] DENNIS THOMPSON: Everybody is trying to hold this goddamn gun down. And this armor-piercing .50 cal stuff is flying all over the place. [LAUGHS] Holy shit. It hit those drums, and went kaboom. And it was daylight. And it was hot, right in the middle of the inner perimeter.

[00:31:05.06] Couldn't get to the demo bunker. Couldn't get to the medical bunker. Couldn't run across that open, lit-up area. So finally, Schungel and Wilkins were hiding out under the dispensary. Lieutenant Todd was in the supply bunker number one. And there was a cluster of us there-- Frank Doom, Wilkins, Tiroch, Burke, and me. And like I said, I was pretty sure we were had. I thought to myself, if this is it, I'm going to try to make it look like something.

[00:31:52.27] So I had this 81 ammo-- 81 mortar ammunition box full of M79 rounds, assorted. And I had an M79. And I took all those rounds and put them in my field jacket. And I'd be out there dealing, and I'd pick them up and run against my face to see what they were.

[00:32:17.04] Anyway, we were shooting around there. And so Team Sergeant, Sergeant Craig, and Tiroch, and Burke, and probably Phillips-- he's the only one that's still missing-- made a break for it out of the northern side of the camp. And Tiroch and Burke are the only ones that made it out of there. Burke was shot-- killed right next to the road.

[00:32:45.24] So the other group ran over and-- to get into the command bunker. And I'm out there dragging my little box around. And I-- [LAUGHS] it was like kittens playing. Come up and-- bam.

[00:33:08.98] So I got hit from a-- that M-- that PT-76. It was on the side of the hill, a small sandbag wall that made up a generator position. They hit that and sent me flying-- peed in my pants, everything. I was laying out there-- uhh. [LAUGHS] So the guards grabbed me up, and we went out through the wire.

[00:33:44.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Took off.

[00:33:45.66] DENNIS THOMPSON: And it was a nightmare-- bodies everywhere, people dying, grabbing at your pant legs as you go by. That was bad, bad, bad. So we didn't have to worry about climbing over the wire. That was just piled high with bodies. You just run across--

[00:34:06.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Just run right across them.

[00:34:08.22] DENNIS THOMPSON: Run right across. So we're up there, and it's getting to be daylight. And these NVA kill teams were out there firing up the wounded. And for some reason, that just enraged me. And we were all crippled up, and no way we were going to stay ahead of these guys.

[00:34:25.05] So we set up a hasty ambush. And I'm yelling, het, het. It means I give up. I quit. Let me go back a sec. They would be firing up these wounded CIDG going het, het. And there'd be a couple of bursts of automatic weapons fire, a few single shots, and be quiet. Then they'd move on to the next group.

[00:34:48.74] So I'm over there yelling, het, het, het. Grass is about this high. I never will forget the look on that son of a bitch's face when he came up on us. Boom. So we whacked two of those teams.

[00:35:04.17] And then it was late in the afternoon when the CH-46s came in from Khe Sanh with Major Quamo and a bunch of SOG volunteers, and grabbed pretty much everybody that was still alive. But the Laotians grabbed me, like drowning men. And I couldn't get to the ship. They figured, I guess, that they had a hold of me.

[00:35:38.96] The 46s were so overloaded they couldn't get off the ground cushion. So they were bobbing around out there in the brush scraping people off, throwing them off. The NVA is shooting them off. And they were spiraling skyward, and it was raining human beings.

[00:35:56.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Jesus God.

[00:35:57.74] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. Human body does not bounce.

[00:36:00.17] JOE GALLOWAY: They don't bounce?

[00:36:01.19] DENNIS THOMPSON: Like a beanbag.

[00:36:02.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Blap.

[00:36:02.96] DENNIS THOMPSON: Splits the seams out of their trousers and the laces out of their boots. And all I wanted at that point-- I knew I was going to die. All I wanted was a cigarette.

[00:36:16.03] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:36:17.78] DENNIS THOMPSON: Every time one of those bodies hit the ground, I'd be out there patting them down.

[00:36:20.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Checking for a pack of smokes.

[00:36:22.37] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. And then when them 46s were there, and I tried to get on them, that hurricane force wind under there blew my bush hat away. It was the best goddamn hat I ever had. I looked for that hat for years, and it was gone.

[00:36:40.13] JOE GALLOWAY: And it was gone.

[00:36:40.97] DENNIS THOMPSON: So you see this poor, pathetic figure out there rifling through dead people's pockets, trying their hats on.

[00:36:51.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you ever find a smoke?

[00:36:53.30] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. There was a pack of Ruby Queens. It's a terrible Vietnamese cigarette. But the paper was compromised here and there. And if you saw that movie Blazing Saddles, when Mongo stuck his face in the campfire to light that cigar? We had a little fire going from a 20 millimeter tracer. And I was up there [SMACKING] No good. Yeah, it was an awful deal.

[00:37:24.45] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you finally get out of there?

[00:37:28.16] DENNIS THOMPSON: I didn't.

[00:37:29.57] JOE GALLOWAY: You're still--

[00:37:30.05] DENNIS THOMPSON: I got captured there.

[00:37:30.75] JOE GALLOWAY: Huh?

[00:37:31.12] DENNIS THOMPSON: I got captured there.

[00:37:32.30] JOE GALLOWAY: You were captured.

[00:37:34.49] DENNIS THOMPSON: We were right on the edge of this bank that went down to Highway 9. And I'm on the radio screaming. There was only a handful of NVA there when those ships came in. And they were-- a lot of ambush positions along the way from Khe Sanh down to Lang Vei. And there's no way anybody was coming down that road-- no way.

[00:38:02.27] And I bet you the local commander there broke down those ambush positions and sent them over to that landing zone to secure it. And there was at least a dozen of them that showed up. And I had four hand grenades, a cigarette that wouldn't stay lit, a radio with a bullet hole in it, an M79 with no stock-- a quirky thing you put around and close it, it would go off.

[00:38:32.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Ayee.

[00:38:33.07] [LAUGHTER]

[00:38:35.04] DENNIS THOMPSON: Oh, my. So the only thing I could think of doing was rolling these grenades down that bank onto the road. And when they went off, we'd try to make a run for it. Kaboom. They went off, and we slid down the hill in front of all the NVA in I Corps it seemed like.

[00:38:57.27] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS] They're all standing--

[00:38:59.44] DENNIS THOMPSON: And they killed everybody that slid down that bank, and then he saw I was an American. And they grabbed me and dragged me down the road.

[00:39:11.63] DENNIS THOMPSON: And I was sitting in a bomb crater, or whatever the hell it was. And it just hit me. I jumped up and took off running. No plan, just sleep deprived, exhausted, like the end of the world.

[00:39:33.36] But the guys in the bunker, that's where the real drama was going on. They had blown this bunker entrance up. And that TOC-- I was over there twice digging for our people. And that thing was so small. It was probably about the size of this room. And it had eight Americans, and another dozen-and-a-half of CIDG in there.

[00:40:07.58] So here comes Thermite, and then a bunch of grenades, and then the gas-- CS gas.

[00:40:16.96] JOE GALLOWAY: This is the NVA throwing this stuff in.

[00:40:20.11] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. The CIDG couldn't handle the gas, and they went outside. When the last one got out, they fired them all up. So eight Americans in this bunker. And the guys weren't giving up. It's that simple. We had a Greek kid there-- Nicholas Fragos was a medic. And Nick was a tough customer.

[00:40:52.88] Hear this voice comes down and it says, hello. Is your captain there? And Fragos says, yeah, he's here. Do you have a weapon? Said, yeah, I got a weapon. Do you have ammunition? And Nick said, yeah, motherfucker, and it's all for you. And he rolls out and fires a burst up. And there comes another 150 hand grenades down in there. Pockmarked walls and floors-- I don't know how they survived in there.

[00:41:23.06] Well, my best guesstimation is they had not planned to have to take that command bunker the way they did. They couldn't get to it. Now, if you've ever been in a-- like Ranger School. I can just hear them. You didn't get into the command bunker? No. They didn't capture the flag-- that operation.

[00:41:52.81] Anyway, they were coming at us with these different things because I don't think they had anything dedicated for that thing there. So they throw a little of this and a little of that. Put a flamethrower down there.

[00:42:08.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Not working.

[00:42:10.54] DENNIS THOMPSON: So they dug a hole alongside of the bunker. The guys could hear them-- clink, clink, clink. And they filled it with TNT, and they reached the bunker from the side. And that's where Moreland got hit in the head with a chunk of concrete. And so--

[00:42:29.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Did anybody come out of that bunker alive?

[00:42:32.77] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. Seven--

[00:42:33.79] JOE GALLOWAY: As prisoners? No.

[00:42:35.61] DENNIS THOMPSON: Seven of them made it out of there.

[00:42:36.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Made it out.

[00:42:42.27] DENNIS THOMPSON: It was mid-afternoon, I guess, when the Marines finally were ordered by Westmoreland to fly those rescue missions in there. The whole-- all of SOG people were ready to go. We had a company of MIKE Force in Quang Tri City just ready to go right down the stack. And the Marines wouldn't fly any of them. So we were down there trying to deal with it.

[00:43:11.49] And just when it was almost over and everybody was almost doomed, they blew the hole in the side of the bunker. But before they could exploit that breach, two Skyraiders from the Coral Sea showed up on a 200-- a 300-foot overcast pulling high-G turns in the treetops, so low those Mark 81 bombs wouldn't go off.

[00:43:40.91] I remember I was up on the high ground watching. And somebody pickled a Mark 81. It just went splat, splat, splat. So they were coming in, pulling back on the stick, and lofting those rounds. Hard telling where the hell they were going, but they were-- but they hosed them NVA right off that bunker. And they hung around and got everybody out of there.



[00:44:11.02] Now, the Coral Sea has got a victory battle banner hanging up there. But they wanted to court martial old Zip Rausa, who was the flight leader there.

[00:44:27.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Why?

[00:44:28.99] DENNIS THOMPSON: Violating-- whatever they told him. He can't go any lower than this or that or the other thing.

[00:44:35.92] JOE GALLOWAY: You do what you got to do.

[00:44:37.75] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. Well, they got really reamed for that. And Rausa told them, I'd do the same thing again.

[00:44:46.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:44:47.65] DENNIS THOMPSON: So they made a run for it. They got down to the old camp. And then the 46s came in and picked them up.

[00:44:57.31] JOE GALLOWAY: What happened to you after you fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese?

[00:45:02.44] DENNIS THOMPSON: Oh. They had my elbows tied behind my back, and I was halfway blindfolded. And they were kicking me along, until I got into what I call the pipeline. And what they'll do is they'll have a group of people detailed to move these prisoners to this point.

[00:45:30.28] And it was interesting as hell. All armies are the same. We'll take the American, but we ain't taking the Laotians. You've got to take the whole goddamn bunch of them. It's a package deal. And those-- back and forth, back and forth.

[00:45:46.01] So this-- I'm pretty sure he was a field grade officer because he walked around at parade rest all the time with sunglasses on at 11 o'clock at night, and he's going to interrogate me. And he's got this interpreter that spoke no known language that i can think of.

[00:46:10.26] So he-- I'm trying to embarrass this guy because I was pissed off. I deserved better than this clown. So this officer got tired of screwing with me, and he gave me an open-hand slap in the face. And we were standing on some slimy clay. And he did that thing like Charlie Chaplin at the roller rink. And I laughed. Ha, ha, ha, ha. Bad thing to do.

[00:46:39.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Bad thing to do.

[00:46:40.66] DENNIS THOMPSON: Bad thing to do. So finally, he got his people over there. There were, I think, four infantrymen and him. And blah, blah, blah, blah. And we were all standing up there. And they came up from here to that wall with SKS carbines. And there was me and four Laotians there. And four headshots went off right next to me. I remember the splatter.

[00:47:15.33] JOE GALLOWAY: They shot the four Laotians.

[00:47:17.46] DENNIS THOMPSON: They put us up against a bomb crater. But I remember the bone fragments and stuff. But it's like a fir branch you snap, and it hits you in the face, kind of like that. And the guy yelled out there to somebody who spoke English, he said, do you understand the interpreter now? [LAUGHS]

[00:47:45.02] All I remember was turning my head up, feel the rain in my face. Come on. I hope it's a head shot. I don't want to lay around here.

[00:47:58.37] JOE GALLOWAY: I don't want to lay around and suffer.

[00:48:00.95] DENNIS THOMPSON: But they-- I was captured at Lang Vei Special Forces camp four times-- three times at the new camp and once at the old camp. And on the third and fourth time, the same guy was in that camp in there. He was about equivalent to me in ranking-- staff sergeant-like. And he's just got a half a dozen soldiers out there that are just sitting on this place.

[00:48:31.31] And the second time, he greeted me with a smile like I was an old friend. Why do you keep coming back to here? And I said, it's the only place I know. He said, why don't you go to Ta Con? Then I said, Ta Con? I don't know from Ta Con. Khe Sanh, Khe Sanh. I said, oh.

[00:48:53.58] That first interrogation I went through for a real deal, these were troops in the field engaged with an enemy interrogating me, and they didn't have a lot of time. And I'm thinking, oh, Christ, I've got to keep my mouth shut for at least 24 hours. And then-- I said, but it ain't happening. [LAUGHS] They goddamn near beat me to death. And they wanted to know about Ta Con. I didn't know what they were talking about. Ta Con plateau-- that's where Khe Sanh Combat--

[00:49:35.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Khe Sanh is, yeah.

[00:49:36.46] DENNIS THOMPSON: I don't know from Ta Con. And they beat my ass unmercifully standing on my feet. I was kneeling down. And you ain't lived till you've been hit in the head while you're blindfolded, or you got a sandbag over your head. Bad bananas.

[00:49:57.04] Anyway, the troops made them stop. Come on. Come on. Because they'd had me down there, whaling on me. And some staff weenie would run by there-- well, he ain't talking. I'll make that son of a bitch talk.

[00:50:12.34] So I went through about three orders of that. And the troops said, come on. Come on. So one of them gave me a cigarette. It's like lighting up after really great-- you know. I was on top of the world.

[00:50:31.19] But that last time I was captured at Lang Vei-- oh, let me see. Goddang it. I wish I could-- I'm having a senior moment. Oh, he gives me to these two teenagers, probably 16, 17. And they're taking this thing really seriously.

[00:51:01.25] One of them's got a rope around my neck going forward and another one going back. That's how they kept track of me. And it was dark. I mean, dark, dark, even before you got under the canopy. And these guys are navigating by field phone wire. These B-52 strikes and other artillery, what have you, they cut this wire. So that's where they stopped.

[00:51:33.98] JOE GALLOWAY: They got lost.

[00:51:35.48] DENNIS THOMPSON: And I'm sitting there with these ropes around my neck. And there was no way that I was--

[00:51:43.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Are they moving you away from the camp?

[00:51:45.73] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. They're taking me from where they-- from Lang Vei to wherever.

[00:51:52.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Wherever.

[00:51:53.33] DENNIS THOMPSON: And they had my elbows tied. And there's no way I could get to those ropes. Well, my field jacket that I had on was unbuttoned. So I started working on the sleeves. And I pulled one sleeve off and the ropes came with it.

[00:52:15.17] And I tied those mutts together and just sat back off that trail about 8 or 10 feet until they took off. I'd have given anything to see their faces when they figured out all they had was two pieces of rope.

[00:52:31.01] JOE GALLOWAY: This is the fourth time you've been captured?

[00:52:34.88] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. I don't count them unless they're longer than 48 hours. They look another way or sneeze, and--

[00:52:45.56] JOE GALLOWAY: You're gone.

[00:52:45.98] DENNIS THOMPSON: --and there would be a shaking ass in their face, boy-- zing. No problem.

[00:52:51.34] SPEAKER: That's unbelievable.

[00:52:54.05] DENNIS THOMPSON: I just--

[00:52:56.15] JOE GALLOWAY: The last--

[00:52:56.72] DENNIS THOMPSON: It depends on where you want to die.

[00:52:57.65] JOE GALLOWAY: The last time you got away clean, or did they catch you again?

[00:53:03.02] DENNIS THOMPSON: This time?

[00:53:03.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, this time.

[00:53:05.18] DENNIS THOMPSON: I went back to the camp, and that's when I met that guy.

[00:53:07.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Ah, yeah.

[00:53:08.12] DENNIS THOMPSON: He's-- so when they were moving me along north, I was watching the illumination-- the Marines' illumination. And I said, OK. That's 861, and that's 881 North. It's south over here. So I said, I'm sick. I'm hurt. I'm hungry. So just stay with these mutts until we get up across from that illumination, then I took off.

[00:53:40.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Again.

[00:53:41.51] DENNIS THOMPSON: Got to 881 South, and the Marines fired me up. I remember hearing the voice up there. That son of a bitch speaks English. I got-- waving, screaming my call sign, everything. But they weren't having any of it.

[00:53:57.63] JOE GALLOWAY: They shot you up?

[00:53:59.48] DENNIS THOMPSON: They opened fire on me, yeah. I got down behind this little hump in the ground. And this one jarhead was up there just chipping that thing away with an M14 with a scope on it.

[00:54:09.98] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:54:11.72] DENNIS THOMPSON: You know what saved me was an NVA-- dug a little ditch right up to me, pulled me in the ditch and--

[00:54:18.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Drug you off again.

[00:54:21.41] DENNIS THOMPSON: Then the first collection point that I came to was after that interrogation in the field. They goddamn near beat me to death. And there's Brandy-- Sergeant First Class Harvey Gordon Brand. And he's leaning on a stick.

[00:54:45.48] And this guy has got 50-some holes in him-- lower body from shrapnel. Got a bullet through the right hand, another other one in his lung, and he's leaning on the stick. And I was so screwed up he didn't even recognize me. We were both platoon leaders in the MIKE Force-- same company.

[00:55:09.51] And he goes, is that you, Tom? And I said, I think so. Are you going to be ready to make it when I give you the word? And I said, you don't look like you're going anywhere. He said, it's an act.

[00:55:25.41] So I said, you got to give me a couple of days here. It ain't like in the movies where the hero gets his ass tromped by six guys, and then runs off--

[00:55:36.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Then he's ready to run.

[00:55:36.81] DENNIS THOMPSON: --runs off with the heroine and-- but there was no latrine at this place. You just went out in the woods. And they were taking the CIDG out back into Lang Vei to loot that camp, to take anything out of it that was worthwhile. And when all of them were taken out of the camp, there was just two or three guards left. Then I go, I got to take him out to do his business.

[00:56:12.31] So I found our boots, and I stuffed them in the pockets of my field jacket. I had it on inside out. And I carried him out. Nobody was yelling-- just kept going and kept going and kept going.

[00:56:27.91] And then Brandy hit the ground, and he took off running. It really surprised me. And after about half an hour, we hear three shots. And Brandy said, we're gone. [LAUGHS] We're out of here. And then we went all the way back to Lang Vei.

[00:56:46.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Again.

[00:56:49.42] DENNIS THOMPSON: This was-- we never got into the camp there. We were captured just outside the camp.

[00:56:55.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Again.

[00:56:57.28] DENNIS THOMPSON: And I had to carry Brandy a good bit. We were gone seven days-- no food, very little water, B-52 strikes, one after another after another after another-- around Co Roc Mountain across the border. And we got captured by two-- I'm pretty sure it was two, maybe three, NVA. We were stripped down-- traveling light and fast. And they just came up on the back of us. They didn't-- they didn't know we were there.

[00:57:29.17] So they're going-- try to figure out what to do with us. So I'm listening. And the deal was that this guy can't walk. They were going to pop his ass right there. And I understood that. And I don't know where we got the strength, but I got him back up on his feet-- chung ta di di-- and away we go. So we hobbled down to a place where they would take us, and these guys went on about their business. Mmm, mmm, mmm. Yeah, Brandy was in terrible shape.

[00:58:08.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Did they did they take you to a camp, or did they take you north?

[00:58:13.19] DENNIS THOMPSON: To some-- it was some kind of a--

[00:58:17.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Collection point?

[00:58:19.26] DENNIS THOMPSON: No, like a headquarters-- field headquarters kind of a thing. And they just went in there and dumped us off. Well, at that point now I was freed up. I talked to Brandy about it. I said-- because when they came up on us, he told me to take off. But I knew if I did, they'd just kill him. So I was pretty confident in myself that I could deal with whatever.

[00:58:48.69] So I put him back in the pipeline. He was getting medical attention now that I couldn't give him. So in a couple of days I told him I'm gonna take off. And made one of my trips back to Lang Vei. Holy shit.

[00:59:10.46] JOE GALLOWAY: But how does this story end?

[00:59:13.70] DENNIS THOMPSON: We were at a camp called Bao Cao or Portholes. It has two names. It's right at the trunk-- the terminal to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. So Randy and I met up with Bill McMurray. He was from Lang Vei. And John Young was captured about a week earlier. I don't got too much good to say about that guy. And another Marine named Ronnie Ridgeway.

[00:59:48.42] And my legend had grown to the point that any time we were handed off to another group-- this son of a bitch has escaped 79 times. Killed five guys with a fountain pen. Well, he's not getting away from me. So here comes about 25 feet of rope. I mean, I was-- it was like a cartoon. From my wrists up to my neck, I was wrapped up in rope.

[01:00:11.52] [LAUGHTER]

[01:00:15.30] And I made observations like the lice will scurry at different times of the day. You can feel them moving around. And Ridgeway used to loosen those ropes up at night so I could get some circulation. Yeah.

[01:00:29.58] Ridgeway was with that 22-man patrol that came out of Khe Sanh. Lieutenant Jacques-- a second lieutenant, and they were all wiped out. But not Ronnie. He was in a mass internment in St. Louis. He sent me pictures of his funeral and everything. [LAUGHS] That was pretty good. Anyway, we-- moving along.

[01:00:55.29] JOE GALLOWAY: On the trail.

[01:00:58.32] DENNIS THOMPSON: It was-- line of sight distance was 175 miles. But if you're on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and there's B-52s working on that thing every day, you can add another 50, 75 miles to it.

[01:01:12.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Add some more to it.

[01:01:15.84] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. Two months.

[01:01:19.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Two months on the trail.

[01:01:21.39] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yep. And--

[01:01:22.26] JOE GALLOWAY: You ended up in Hanoi? No.

[01:01:28.44] DENNIS THOMPSON: Place called-- we called it Portholes because they cut round holes in the-- it was a 16-man barracks, and the doors opened to the inside. And the cells were 2 and 1/2 feet wide by about 5 feet tall by about 6 feet deep with wooden stocks that at the end. So that's where we--

[01:01:51.23] JOE GALLOWAY: And this is where? Somewhere up around Vinh or--

[01:01:55.09] DENNIS THOMPSON: This is up in North Vietnam.

[01:01:56.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:01:57.78] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. Vinh sounds familiar. It's on the coast, and it's the first stop for everybody. Yeah.

[01:02:05.32] JOE GALLOWAY: First stop.

[01:02:05.61] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. And then they moved us again to a place called Farnsworth. We called it Farnsworth. It was the goddamned death camp. I did 913 days of solitary there-- continuous-- in a room that was painted black inside.

[01:02:30.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Good God.

[01:02:31.51] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. And to jump back, we were at Portholes, and this senior Vietnamese Army officer-- probably a senior field grade-- gave us a lecture on US involvement in Vietnam since whenever. And he gets done.

[01:02:55.24] And he said, now we will have a test. And he gave everybody a piece of paper and a pen. Write your name and rank and service number and unit at time of capture across the top.

[01:03:07.39] Don't number your answers. Don't leave any spaces in between them, and sign your name at the bottom. And remember, your treatment depends upon your goodwill attitude, as demonstrated by your practical acts. So there was this veiled threat.

[01:03:22.45] And I'm back there, and I said, hey, you do this and you're violating the code of conduct. You can be brought up on charges for that. And I was out of that barracks in about an hour and a half. And the guy had me sitting down there. And he said, politics being what it is I cannot have you killed. But I can let you die.

[01:03:49.40] So my medical attention for 1,851 days were six aspirin and a couple of battle dressings when I was down in the field, and that was it. To jump ahead, that six aspirin was to get my fever down so I could attend this bullshit set piece Merry Christmas party. They're

bringing me out there, and over the camp radio, this loudspeaker system, they note that some of the prisoners were allowed out of their cells to visit with other prisoners from other cells.

[01:04:33.51] And when I was coming up into that compound, I could hear them talking. And then went into this room, and there was a row of tables along the wall. So you had to start at one end or the other to get around it. And I was in the middle.

[01:04:56.27] And this guy says, camp commander allow you to toast the occasion. Well, these other solitary turds, they didn't have anything to say. They're sort of sitting there.

[01:05:12.20] And I said-- I made a toast to the commander-in-chief. That's what you do at a formal military dining. They didn't think that was funny worth a shit. And they yell out the Vietnamese equivalent of "seize him."

[01:05:28.22] Now, in front of me there's half a bottle of Vietnamese beer, a shot of apricot brandy, a piece of cake about an inch and a half cube, some lemon drops, and some peanuts. And they're coming down the way, and I slammed that brandy and guzzled that beer and shoved that piece of cake in my mouth and grabbed my peanuts and lemon drops and--

[01:05:54.90] JOE GALLOWAY: Put them in your pocket.

[01:05:55.41] DENNIS THOMPSON: --I'm out the door.

[01:05:56.28] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[01:05:57.84] DENNIS THOMPSON: So it's raining. And they're poking and prodding me along. And I got up to where I heard those voices, and I just stopped. Di, di, di. And they're doing all this shit. And I got to tell you like it like it was.

[01:06:15.66] I hear voices over there. What the hell's going on over there? I think that's Thompson. No, he's dead. No, he's right over there.

[01:06:23.80] And to get their attention before they said anything, I said, how many you brave motherfuckers does it take to whip a sick man's ass on Christmas Eve? Kaboom. They had to go get extra help to put these guys back in that barracks. Feel pretty good until daylight.

[01:06:46.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Till daylight.

[01:06:48.12] DENNIS THOMPSON: Here comes the gang.

[01:06:49.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Here comes the boys.

[01:06:50.46] DENNIS THOMPSON: You can hear them-- chains and bars rattling. It's just-- I forget the word. But it was bad bananas. They had me in a situation-- if you look at the pictures of Farnsworth, you'll see there's a trail that goes back out, and there's three little buildings, and they're about 8 by 10, and that's where I lived. We called it death row. [LAUGHS]



[01:07:25.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Death row.

[01:07:27.35] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. So--

[01:07:28.19] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were there until the release in '73?

[01:07:32.15] DENNIS THOMPSON: No. Until the Son Tay raid. That panicked their asses. I mean, they just-- I'm very in tune with this camp because that's all I do is sit there.

[01:07:48.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. And that freaked them out.

[01:07:53.50] DENNIS THOMPSON: The next day we were on a bus, and we went down to the Plantation downtown. And--

[01:08:02.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Life got a lot better?

[01:08:04.19] DENNIS THOMPSON: They started beating us up. Yeah

[01:08:05.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:08:10.53] DENNIS THOMPSON: What else was going on at-- oh, Thompson, come out. They wanted me to go carry this guy, wounded American, and put him where he was supposed to be because the guy couldn't walk. And there's this Dachau survivor looking guy.

[01:08:31.52] I picked it up. And he says, they're torturing us. And I said, it'll be OK, man. What's your name? It's me, Brandy. I said, Jesus Christ.

[01:08:46.68] JOE GALLOWAY: And it was him.

[01:08:47.81] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. It was old Brandy. And we were-- we bumped into Colonel Thompson-- prisoner of war of nine years. He'd been living up under a house someplace-- guy couldn't even talk to us.

[01:09:06.39] Yeah, he was ladling out baskets of rice for these different barracks and fell over like a tree. Bam. And he had his jungle boots on all rolled up, little stick legs going down into this thing. I said, that's what I'm going to look if I don't get my ass out of here. So yeah.

[01:09:32.24] Then our next move was to Farnsworth. I could smell that place. I knew it was a bad place. I was in a cell with six or seven officers for about 15 minutes. And here comes this little turd we called the Cheese. He was the political officer. He ran the camp-- this little fiefdom of his.

[01:09:58.67] And he came in with the biggest Vietnamese I'd ever seen in my life trying to scare everybody. He's standing up like this looking at us. And Farnsworth says, which one of you is Thompson? Take all things. Go with the guard.

[01:10:22.39] Now, was it 913 days later, the Son Tay raid went down. That provided me with one of my greatest victories. Later on-- we never knew what happened. We got a couple of new prisoners in and made contact with them. And we're going, oh, I see.

[01:10:47.68] And I used to get called in every three months. It's some perfunctory paperwork thing. I was interviewed to see if I was humble and contrite enough to go back into general population. Well, it was like one of Manson's--

[01:11:09.12] JOE GALLOWAY: You failed that test, too, huh?

[01:11:10.61] DENNIS THOMPSON: It was like when a Manson's parole hearings. He ain't getting out of prison, and I ain't getting out of solitary. And it was always the same thing. Come in and sit down. What about your health today? What have you been thinking? What have you been feeling? What have you learned? You know why I called you come here today.

[01:11:27.64] And every once while I'd come up with-- I want you to remember this point here because I jump all over the place. I had nothing. I'm in this room, and it's dark. And it's dark all day long, and it's dark all night long. And it's full of roaches and rats and all kinds of nasty things. And that was where I lived.

[01:11:51.67] So I'm listening, and I-- I'm picking up little bits and pieces, and I throw them in a bag. Hey, I know that guy's name is An. Because in Vietnam, if you're at a higher station than somebody, this guy might have to call you six or seven times before you answer. So I knew his name was An. And he was one of these guys that made my life even more miserable than it was.

[01:12:16.95] And so I'm learning the rules. Rule number one-- the guards do not talk to the prisoners for any reason. You start yelling in that thing, and he'll go get an interpreter. And he'll come back and find out what's going on. And then your turnkey will open the door if it needs to be opened.

[01:12:37.88] The turnkey is probably a senior NCO who has been injured to the point that he can't function in the field anymore. The only responsible person in the whole camp is the guys with the keys.

[01:12:52.07] And I picked this one guy out, An. And this other kid comes out, and he's got a multiband radio. And he's up and down the dial. I speak fluent German, enough French to get me in trouble, some Vietnamese. And I learned that we landed men on the moon.

[01:13:19.47] Come in. What about-- what have you learned? Oh, I learned that we landed men on the moon. That's a pretty good deal. And he's going, how do you know that? I said, my friend told me. His name's An. Yeah, An.

[01:13:33.99] [LAUGHTER]

[01:13:35.59] An was gone.

[01:13:37.26] JOE GALLOWAY: He was gone, eh.

[01:13:38.24] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. And I came out of there.

[01:13:39.92] [LAUGHTER]

[01:13:41.79] And so the next guy-- the next guy used to put his weapon up against the side of that building right next to my only porthole to the world-- a little slot about like a brick, and it angled down into the ground. And there's that AK. And I'm looking at it. And I memorized the rifle number.

[01:14:11.25] And said, oh, it's not too bad. My friend comes around, and we got into an argument. He did not believe that I was trained in his weapons as well as my own. So I demonstrated for him that I could break this thing down into its three major groups without looking at it.

[01:14:34.98] He allow you to touch his weapon? Well, yeah. What's his name? I said, I don't know, but I know his rifle number. Dead bang. That's it. There's no way of talking your ass out of that. And he went.

[01:14:49.72] And then the third guy came up with this aluminum knife made from downed US airplane. Afraid of it? Hmm? Hmm? There's a hole in the door-- it's about a foot square. And I just took a step back.

[01:15:06.13] This dumbass has got his arm all the way into a dark hole with a known hostile combatant on the other side. And I got ahold of that son of a bitch for all I was worth, and finally, got the knife away. Thompson, you give me knife. Nope. I smoked up all his cigarettes. Made him go get some more.

[01:15:26.68] [LAUGHTER]

[01:15:29.86] And in the morning, come hip-swinging out of that room. And right in front of the turnkey, I handed him his knife.

[01:15:37.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Gave his knife back. Oh, my God.

[01:15:40.36] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. I did lots and lots of research when I was in there. They had a 16-line camp regulations. Basically said, don't do anything.

[01:15:54.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Don't do anything.

[01:15:55.03] DENNIS THOMPSON: Don't do anything. So they stuck it on the wall with flour paste. And the roaches came in and ate that.

[01:16:04.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Ate the flour paste.

[01:16:05.67] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. And I said, this has merit. I take some of this gunk they call food, and I daub out a word here and a word there. I edited the whole thing. And they had a cluster of them in there looking at that, and they'd look at me. They couldn't prove it.

[01:16:24.14] JOE GALLOWAY: The roaches did it.

[01:16:26.06] DENNIS THOMPSON: They knew. So they kicked my ass anyway. Yeah, that-- before I forget. Somebody asked me, what training did you have that best prepared you for your ordeal as a prisoner of war? And I said, Catholic school. And they laughed. I said, I'm not bullshitting you.

[01:16:45.39] [LAUGHTER]

[01:16:47.33] Getting your ass kicked, being force-fed a doctrine you don't particularly believe in or give a shit about, the humiliation and physical punishment.

[01:16:57.69] JOE GALLOWAY: And physical punishment. Yeah.

[01:17:00.24] DENNIS THOMPSON: Shit. I said, the Catholic Church has inoculated me against religion forever and ever and ever. But I was sick. I had dysentery-- about three bouts of that. If it hadn't been for that Son Tay raid, the next one would have killed me.

[01:17:22.00] So I had a piece of bread in there. And the rats came in and ate it. You could feel them running around on your mosquito net and stuff. And things kind of quieted down when they put that piece of bread in there for some reason. So I'm studying the situation.

[01:17:44.46] And what it was, there was a couple of days worth of that bread in there. And the head rat said-- marked all the entrances to that thing, and he came in and took his tribute and left, and I didn't have to worry about the rats anymore. The king rat-- I got him.

[01:18:06.34] And what the hell was that other thing? Oh, I used to eat geckos. I could call them to me.

[01:18:16.03] JOE GALLOWAY: And eat them.

[01:18:18.97] DENNIS THOMPSON: They'd answer me. And they'd be moving around, and I'd just push my hand straight up against the wall and I'd catch one of them. I learned that you can't eat them right away because they have a decentralized nervous system. And--

[01:18:34.87] JOE GALLOWAY: They are walking around.

[01:18:36.15] DENNIS THOMPSON: That shit would be going on for two or three minutes after eating.

[01:18:38.67] [LAUGHTER]

[01:18:40.36] Not much fun. So I'd squeeze their little heads until they quit moving. And I'd lay them on my stomach and--

[01:18:49.33] Funny stuff-- there's a logistical cycle has to do with flashlights. The Vietnamese aren't stupid by any means, but they're underexposed. I want to play with his flashlight.

[01:19:02.11] So something was going on, and people were being shifted around. And they stuck me in this six-man room for two nights. And this guy would try to sneak up on me.

[01:19:14.83] Well, you can see little pinholes of light here and there. And they'll occult as somebody walks by there. You can tell right where they are. And he jerked that little hatch open in the door, and he'd stick that flashlight in there.

[01:19:37.60] So after about the third time, I got up and I moved a couple of beds down. So it became a game to see if he could get me on the first try. So I'm sitting in there and got tired of playing with this clown. So I flipped my eyelids up. You ever seen anybody do that?

[01:19:58.02] Did up my dreadlocks. Got me this little roach. It had about three stringy little strands of tobacco inside this piece of paper. And I got right up to that door. And he went, ahhh. And he jumped back and fell down and hurt his elbow. I know he hurt his elbow because when the butt plate of that SKS carbine hit the ground, I bet if there was a round in that magazine it would have--

[01:20:23.19] JOE GALLOWAY: It would have gone off.

[01:20:24.87] DENNIS THOMPSON: So he's out there [MOANING] for about a half an hour before somebody by and found him. And the Cheese, this guy, this little runt I was telling you about, he says, why you frighten the guard? And I started laughing. I said, how is a goddamn sick, emaciated prisoner of war going to frighten a brave soldier of the liberation. Another huddle, and then they come in there and kick my ass anyway.

[01:20:56.88] This one kid-- it's along toward the end of the logistic cycle. And this flashlight looks like a lit cigar. That's about as much light as it's putting out. And he goes like that in that room. And I went, ahh. And he goes. Ha, ha, ha. Why you laugh? It's funny. You're all funny.

[01:21:25.64] Again-- probably to jump ahead again, after that Son Tay raid, I found out about it. Come in. Sit down. Blah, blah, blah, blah.

[01:21:36.86] I said, I learned that some of my Special Forces brethren flew up 20 kilometers outside of the beloved capital city in helicopters, landed, grabbed the prison camp, no prisoners in it, so they killed everybody that was there. And when they ran out of people to kill, they got back on their helicopters and flew out of there without taking a casualty.

[01:22:04.10] And he goes, hmm. It was pyrotechnic trick of Nixon to bolster his sagging popularity. And I said, you call it whatever the fuck you want, I said, but you better hope they

don't come back. I said, because I will die in this shithole before I leave without you. And he was legitimately frightened for a few minutes. And as far as I was concerned, I'd won the war.

[01:22:29.90] [LAUGHTER]

[01:22:33.11] Yeah. That--

[01:22:39.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you ever run across my old buddy, Dr. Hal Kushner. He was a 9th Cav battalion surgeon.

[01:22:50.54] DENNIS THOMPSON: They came up from around Cambodia somewhere. They came in on the trail.

[01:22:55.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. He came up the trail.

[01:22:56.78] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. We were all sniveling about our ordeal walking up there until we saw these guys.

[01:23:02.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, he had spent a year in a VC bamboo camp and watched 10 Americans starve to death.

[01:23:08.63] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. They had some German civilians from the Knights of Malta.

[01:23:13.82] SPEAKER: Yeah, nurses.

[01:23:14.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, the missionaries.

[01:23:16.73] DENNIS THOMPSON: Well, most of them died. I think four of them were-- But there was one kid there named Bones-- helicopter pilot. He was about that goddamn big around. And his side was screwed up. I'm going, holy shit. Well, we stopped complaining after that. These guys just trumped the shit out of us.

[01:23:34.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, man.

[01:23:35.27] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. It was grim. It was grim. DENNIS THOMPSON: We developed methods of communication-- the tap code.

[01:23:49.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Tap code.

[01:23:50.59] DENNIS THOMPSON: I'm a communicator. I said, you got to junk that tap code. I said, I don't give a shit if they can't understand it. It's this incessant tapping on the goddamn wall is going to tip somebody off.

[01:24:06.55] [LAUGHTER]

[01:24:06.88]

[01:24:07.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Tap, tap, tap, tap, tap, tap.

[01:24:09.34] DENNIS THOMPSON: So one night I was there, and I heard a voice from the other room just clear as a bell. And I kept moving around toward it. And I got my ear up to the wall, and I could hear him talking in there. So we rolled up a blanket into a horseshoe. And you put that up against the wall, press your face in there and talk.

[01:24:30.13] And the people on the transmit side would all be talking and raising hell. And then the receive side would be quiet. So we could communicate between rooms, but we couldn't communicate between the buildings. But as an insult, they made the non-commissioned officers empty the toilet buckets.

[01:24:50.59] So Deering, this tall Marine from Tennessee, some place, he was going around picking the buckets up. And he's telling people-- he said, you want to pass a message, stick it up in the lid of your toilet bucket-- with a little piece of reed, you know, like they put insulation up under a house sometimes?

[01:25:14.58] So we go out there and slopping these buckets and switching lids around. We risked everything for that. You know what they wanted to know? The formula for cube root, or what was the year the cyclone GT comet 454 came out? Oh, Jesus.

[01:25:34.22] [LAUGHTER]

[01:25:37.56] We called it the shit bucket express.

[01:25:39.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Shit bucket express.

[01:25:42.18] DENNIS THOMPSON: And it worked. It worked for us pretty well. We could let each other know what's going on. I knew I'd get through it.

[01:25:53.71] JOE GALLOWAY: You won the war.

[01:25:57.27] DENNIS THOMPSON: We had these one size fits all uniforms. It was a laugh a minute. Captain Leonard's pant leg stopped right about there, and mine were out dragging around. And I had the sleeves rolled up and the shoulders-- it was a-- it didn't--

[01:26:18.40] But they had a number on them. TU means criminal. 240161-- and I said, I'm trying to figure that number out. The guys that I was captured in the same area, same time-- none of it made any sense.

[01:26:36.97] And then one day I was out there washing my clothes. And I had standing water on this concrete slab around this well. And it made like a mirror. 16-10-42 is my birthday backwards. And I went in there-- I figured it out. They goddamn near killed me over that.

[01:27:02.95] But I would-- I'd be screwing with them all the time-- every chance I got. I found an AK. When we were doing the shit bucket express, somebody forgot their weapon in the benjo.

[01:27:14.71] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS] Threw it in the shitter.

[01:27:18.52] DENNIS THOMPSON: And left. I never told anybody about that. Hanoi was kind of funny, too. At the Plantation, there's a wall that goes around this compound. And then there's an elevated railway that goes up. And these steam trains would come through there, and they lay on that whistle, and it-- just horrible. Fights would break out. God, it was just awful.

[01:27:49.97] So Nixon-- ROLLING THUNDER, I think they called it-- is up there blowing the shit out of North Vietnam, and they hit that rail yard. And they had those boilers stoked to make smoke. And they were bleeding the pressure off with the whistles and whatnot. And it was so goddamn funny. Boom, boom, boom. [WHISTLES] Yeah, we're all cheering.

[01:28:18.84] They raised geese between these two walls. And it would take them sons of bitches about two or three hours to shut up after they got riled like that. So there was this old guy pushing a hurdy-gurdy selling pho. Pho, pho. Air raid, boom-ba-da-da-da-da-boom. About 10 minutes later, pho. I said, I want to meet that guy. I really want to meet that guy.

[01:28:51.11] On the trail south for the NVA going down the Ho Chi Minh Trail, there'd be a unit coming by, x people, and we'd have to get off the trail so they could go by. And every one of them had a walking stick, and every one of them would give you a shot.

[01:29:12.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Give you a shot.

[01:29:13.52] DENNIS THOMPSON: Mm-hmm. Not in the front of you. They'd wait-- they'd pass by and hit you from behind. Yeah. Every day.

[01:29:26.10] Leeches-- I got to studying them and they-- the back end of them is like a slug. And then they-- and they'll be on the leaves reaching out for you when you go by. You'll see them moving. And you can't quite-- something's haywire with this. I'm getting a bad vibe about this. I said, geez, look at that-- leeches.

[01:29:55.32] This Vietnamese kid had a terrible wound, and he was picking the maggots out of the wound. I'm going, oh, man, that looks bad. And he goes-- [POP], pulled one out off the top of my head.

[01:30:08.62] And I remember seeing this special on this water buffalo got a-- something in its ear. It's drilling into its brain, and it can't stand up anymore. I said, oh, Jesus, man.

[01:30:19.58] [LAUGHTER]

[01:30:23.25] I was reckless but it was always a calculated recklessness. I knew I could make it from here to there. I just knew that. Then everybody would be going-- holy shit.



[01:30:37.47] One time it didn't work for me. That's when I got blown up in this mortar pit made with 81 mortar. It has these little packets that go under a spring. And there's this perforated piece of tubing and a shotgun shell in it. So if you want the round to go farther, you put more increments on it. If you want to bring it in close, you pull them off.

[01:31:01.56] We're firing at charge zero and it's in the rain. I'm stripping these packets off. Kaboom, kaboom, kaboom. And somebody says, charge four. So I picked up four of these increments that were on the floor of the mortar pit, and they were-- had water on them. The thing goes pa-poom-- splat.

[01:31:26.09] And there's these increments-- unburned increments came down and set fire to the other increments on the floor of the mortar pit. And I'm down there. Get out of there. Get out. I said, I think I can control it. Boom.

[01:31:42.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Boom.

[01:31:43.97] DENNIS THOMPSON: A round went off just outside the mortar pit and buried my ass alive. So the medics could-- they had to wait like 15 minutes for shit to quit blowing up out there before they could come down. And he got me by the ankle, and he was taking my pulse.

[01:32:01.79] And you know what PSP is, right? I'm looking up through this hole in this PSP. Can't hear shit. And I could see his lips moving. He's alive. That's amazing. So I became the Amazing Dennis.

[01:32:16.58] [LAUGHTER]

[01:32:19.73] Amazing Dennis.

[01:32:21.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Mmm, mmm, mmm.

[01:32:29.79] DENNIS THOMPSON: You're going. You're not going. You're going. You're not going. This went on a couple of weeks out. Then they moved us to the Hanoi Hilton where the varsity stayed. The varsity are airmen coming out of the sky. There's only 70 grunts that came out of that son of a bitch. And a few A-1 pilots. They called them the people who were not captured in North Vietnam-- that was us.

[01:32:56.45] So anyway, we were there. And Brandy was the barber. I was the tailor. We went to work making us look as stylish as possible. And they loaded us onto a bus. And I refused to get excited about any of that shit. I said, when this son of a bitch lands and we're under US control then I'll believe it.

[01:33:25.96] So they loaded us on this plane, and we were out of there. It wasn't as exciting and happy a time as I figured it would be. We landed in the Philippines at Clark and went to the hospital.

[01:33:45.94] And there was this absolutely beautiful Chinese-American Air Force captain that ran this dining facility. And she said, what would you like? And I said, I want a can of Coca-Cola-- not a bottle, a can at 33 degrees. So they're all-- [SCRATCHES HEAD].

[01:34:07.72] They took some Coke cans out behind the kitchen and zapped them with a CO2 fire extinguisher.

[01:34:14.91] JOE GALLOWAY: CO2 fire extinguisher.

[01:34:16.84] DENNIS THOMPSON: And she gave me that can, and it was frosted. Boy, what a burn.

[01:34:22.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Was that good?

[01:34:24.13] DENNIS THOMPSON: Oh, it made me cry.

[01:34:25.42] [LAUGHTER]

[01:34:27.61] And then I took about five or six rape showers a day-- just standing there in that water. Oh, man. And then we left--

[01:34:38.30] JOE GALLOWAY: How long did it take you in the hospital before you were fattened back up?

[01:34:45.48] DENNIS THOMPSON: I think we were at Clark less than a week. And nobody knew how to deal with us. So they sent everybody to the military hospital as close to their home of record as they could get-- big mistake. They separated us. Took our reality from us.

[01:35:09.02] And I'd like to think I had something to do with the way they treated those Iranian hostages. They took them to a retreat, kept them all together-- families, counselors, psychiatrists, doctors-- and took care of them all right there.

[01:35:24.50] We were just pretty much on our own. And I got into a lot of trouble at Letterman Army Hospital. They assigned this psychiatrist to me-- Major Herbert Perliss, most incompetent son of a bitch I ever met in my life. And, again, I got angry. I thought, I deserve better than this.

[01:35:49.05] And he talked like them. He asked the same questions, and the same phraseology, and the same goddamn watertight doors started slamming. And I'm back there--

[01:36:00.97] [LAUGHTER]

[01:36:02.87] --say it again, son of a bitch, and see what happens. So I came in 10 days before McMurray and Brandy. And I said, I got to be there to greet these guys when they come in. I said, I'll be there. Well-- and I said, I'm going to be there. I just would like you to help me. And so--

[01:36:30.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Or not.

[01:36:31.74] DENNIS THOMPSON: And so they said, OK, OK. So I went out there to greet these guys and came back. And this had stepped all over Perliss's appointment with me, and he was upset. He's up and down the hall, his Clint Eastwood cheroot, puffing on this thing.

[01:36:51.46] And the guy was an insult to me. He was wearing this raggedy green uniform, officer braid on the pant was curled up-- come loose. He's got a knit necktie on with his poplin shirt with a terminal case of ring around the collar. And I just couldn't handle his ass.

[01:37:22.05] Before I went to pick these guys up, there's a place called the Seventh Army Noncommissioned Officers Academy. It's in Germany. And it's a hard school. It's the Ranger school of the NCOES system. And I had my uniform to those standards and better, and little bitty taps on the heels of my boots.

[01:37:47.28] And they went out and found your ace buddy in the whole world to be your guide. And I had Tommy Baldwin. I wound up taking care of him. They-- I come out of my room-- tick, tick, tick, tick. And all these leg medics and stuff are up there. And they're looking at me. And Baldwin says, what's the matter? You ain't never seen a Soldier before?

[01:38:08.99] [LAUGHTER]

[01:38:10.56] So I come back. And Perliss is having a fit. And he's in there reaming my ass. And I'm taking my uniform off, and I hung it up real nice, and put my PJs on, got in bed. And he's sitting against the wall in the back. And I just raised the feet up to where I could see him anymore, and kept turning the volume on the TV set up louder and louder louder.

[01:38:37.98] And then he lost it. And he jumped up and jerked the plug out of the wall. And that triggered me. And I jumped out of bed, and where I landed I was between him and the door. You should have seen his face.

[01:38:51.54] And I said, you let me tell you something you crummy, rot-stepping, leg motherfucker. You're in a Soldier's room now. And you come in here with that rag on again, and I'll tear it right up your fucking back for you.

[01:39:04.74] [LAUGHTER]

[01:39:05.97] And so he-- he's trying to get out of there.

[01:39:09.20] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS] And you're in between.

[01:39:11.25] DENNIS THOMPSON: So he goes past me. And I just had this seizure and snagged him by the back of his collar, pulled him on his ass, drug him back into the room. He's screaming and kicking. Plug that fucking TV set back in.

[01:39:25.52] [LAUGHTER]

[01:39:28.38] Then I escaped from the hospital. Said, I want to go downtown. Rousack and Stavast came in and tricked us all out with some clothes. And like I said, I'm watching how this group works.

[01:39:46.00] So down at the end of the hall there's a little field table with a little PFC MP there to keep people from-- so I put my duds on, rolled the pant legs up, put on my robe inside out, and I had my shoes in there. Where are you going, Dennis? I'm going down to sit in the Jacuzzi for a while. OK.

[01:40:10.48] I went in there, and did my Clark Kent, came out on the other side, looked at that MP, said, how you doing, son? Fine, sir. And then I went downtown and found out why they didn't want me down there. When I came back I was drunk on my ass, crying.

[01:40:27.10] And this-- not that I give a shit-- this homosexual chap-- red-haired first lieutenant in the Medical Corps or something. There he is. Get him. Well, come and get me, fucker. Step up.

[01:40:49.18] So they're all-- I said-- they said, all you just want is attention. I said, I'll show you how to get some attention. And I busted the fire alarm. [DING DING DING DING] And I said, doc, how long is it going to take all these sick sons of bitches out of this hospital.

[01:41:05.52] And then I took off running down the hallway, and I jumped into the elevator, which makes an automatic stop at the lobby level. I got up there and crossed over, and I punched all the buttons before I got off. So they're running up the stairwell. And I turned back around, and it's just me and this redheaded kid in there. Oh, he was screaming bloody murder.

[01:41:27.24] [LAUGHTER]

[01:41:31.67] And then I had one evaluation was stable under fire. Will shoot to kill. Barely controlled.

[01:41:44.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Barely controlled.

[01:41:45.11] [LAUGHTER]

[01:41:45.79] SPEAKER: And won the war single-handedly.

[01:41:48.59] DENNIS THOMPSON: Oh, you feel like a dog. You run out there and do things that you're not supposed to do. When we were prisoners, I observed that they were accountable for us.

[01:42:05.67] Because when they were, I mean, beating me to death, this probably older NCO, E7, speed, told them flat-out, you kill him, you'll answer for it. You fuck him up, you'll carry him. Well, a couple parting shots, and then--

[01:42:27.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Off they went.

[01:42:28.71] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah.

[01:42:29.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:42:31.38] DENNIS THOMPSON: There's an-- on that table down at the hospitality suite over there you'll see a little Chinese entrenching tool. I got hit square in the face with that, and another shot on top of the head. They marveled at the fact that I survived that shit. But I just treated it like an extension of the battlefield.

[01:42:58.43] And I bumped into an Army captain, A-1 pilot. Some inconsiderate clown blew the wing off his aircraft in Laos. And he taught me to pick my battles. You can't just lose it and go out there and get your ass stomped. Save it.

[01:43:21.28] So all I did was lay there and think and think and think. And I had this one recurring dream. Goddamn it. It was a heartbreaker-- so real.

[01:43:33.57] I had escaped somehow, and I got home. And I was partying to beat hell. I was barely able to keep my eyes open. And my mom said, why don't you go sleep for a while, Dennis. I'll wake you up, and you continue. I said, no, Mom. If I go to sleep, I'm going to wake up back in that place. And there it was.

[01:44:00.41] JOE GALLOWAY: And there you was.

[01:44:01.70] DENNIS THOMPSON: Laying there, staring up at that mosquito net, listening to myself breathe, day after day, after week, after month, after year, after year.

[01:44:11.64] One other thing-- I call it getting spun up. Picture this. You're in a Huey flown by a couple of 20-year-olds, and they're flying that son of a bitch like it was a skateboard. And every alarm or light, anything that emitted a tone--

[01:44:33.50] JOE GALLOWAY: They're all going off.

[01:44:34.61] DENNIS THOMPSON: --was going off on that goddamn dash. And we're in an orbit around this landing zone watching the fast movers. And the A-1s just incinerate this patch of ground, OK? And the door gunners racking those M-60s. We're going down. And then they start blasting, and the brass is going down your neck. It's puddling up in your lap. [IMITATING ENGINE NOISE] Hit the ground. And you know that when you do get off that aircraft that men are going to die.

[01:45:10.76] How do you come back to a 55 mile an hour world? I had eight motorcycles. I watched these kids when I'm driving up to Fort Lewis-- 80, 90-- [IMITATING ENGINE NOISE]. And I said, that boy is getting his fix. He's getting his fix. That really gets you going. You know what I mean? And you start to thrive on it. You really start thriving on it. And it becomes a part of your life.

[01:45:41.36] Well, the rules are different here than they were over there. And I had a lot of cops explain that to me. Fortunately, a lot of veterans went to be cops. Plus I had a Get Out of Jail Free letter in my pocket. This kid is probably insane, so--

[01:46:08.15] [LAUGHTER]

[01:46:11.13] I've been writing on and off. I've got 74,000 words written on childhood, early days in the Army, and Lang Vei. Lang Vei was tricky because it's all research. I wanted it absolutely correct. And the After Action Report for Lang Vei showed there was only about three people who wrote anything. Team sergeant didn't write anything-- none of them.

[01:46:38.04] I got everybody to come to one of these SA-- SOAR reunions. Everybody that was still alive was there. I said, come on in here, guys. And I got them in a boardroom and locked the door. And we spent six hours in there debriefing and making an After Action Report. Yeah, shit, that--

[01:47:01.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Incredible.

[01:47:02.93] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. So I got that straightened out. I've been back to Vietnam twice. We buried Lindenwald and Hanna after 32 years. We buried Moreland after 43 years. And we buried Holt after 47 years.

[01:47:16.68] JOE GALLOWAY: You went back and found them.

[01:47:18.30] DENNIS THOMPSON: Well, I helped.

[01:47:19.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Helped.

[01:47:19.90] DENNIS THOMPSON: Helped identify what they'd found. I said, did you happen to-- were there a bunch of beer cans around here? Yeah. I said, Lindenwald.

[01:47:33.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. [LAUGHS] He'll be close by.

[01:47:35.46] DENNIS THOMPSON: Lindenwald. And--

[01:47:38.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[01:47:39.72] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah. That was a pretty intense day. But when we brought-- Holt's brother, George Homer, these guys are from Hope, Arkansas. And that's just down home.

[01:48:00.92] He told me, he said, you know, Dennis, I had a dream to where I seen Jim inside like a bunch of logs, and he bled to death in there. I said-- [SNAP]

[01:48:12.37] JOE GALLOWAY: And what?

[01:48:12.97] DENNIS THOMPSON: He bled to death in there-- his dream. And I said, that's the medic bunker. It was a timber bunker. And that's the last place that I saw him was right there. And that's where they found him.

[01:48:31.68] But yeah, when Holt came home, his brother George escorted his casket from Hawaii back to Arkansas. And there was a sheriff's convention going on while we were there. And we were at this gate watching, talking about it.

[01:48:59.29] And there's this sheriff's honor guard and pipe and drum thingy, and they went out there and played for him. It just--

[01:49:10.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Doesn't get any better than that.

[01:49:14.48] DENNIS THOMPSON: I just about lost it over that. And then another one was in Alabama-- was James Moreland, our MIKE Force medic. And they buried him right between his folks.

[01:49:31.50] But we were going out to the cemetery in this little bitty town. Probably got 5,000 people in it. And I bet you every one of them was on that road. And there is this little raggedy old fire department out there. They got all their-- they're ready for war and waving this huge flag. Those kinds of things really take my legs out from under me.

[01:49:58.79] Yeah, shit. I put on my Irish when I talk about that. I say, yeah, we lost, but it was a really good fight.

[01:50:09.95] [LAUGHTER]

[01:50:17.26] JOE GALLOWAY: God Almighty.

[01:50:19.53] DENNIS THOMPSON: You know how to get a good After Action Report? Get them drunk, and they'll tell you all kind of shit that they would normally not tell you. Yeah.

[01:50:31.64] Yeah. There were 24 Americans there. Seven were killed, three were captured, and the rest of them managed to make it out, or are still missing. And it was quite a deal. Anything that could possibly go wrong--

[01:50:55.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Went wrong.

[01:50:55.83] DENNIS THOMPSON: --went wrong. It was just so adverse. I said, Jesus, what is this, Ranger school or something? Here's something impossible for you, asshole. Go straighten it out. And he went over there beating his head against it forever and ever till he got it figured out.

[01:51:14.93] But now they moved-- the monument used to be a PT-76 sitting right up where the team house used to be. Then they moved over and made this little museum and thing with the PT-76 over there.

[01:51:34.09] JOE GALLOWAY: This is the North Vietnamese.

[01:51:35.46] DENNIS THOMPSON: Mm-hmm. And they straightened that road out and took it right through the middle of that camp. Because I would-- I said, watch this shit. I'm going to go up there.

[01:51:46.12] Holt, Moreland, Lindenwald, Hannah-- there wasn't anything left, you know. It's-- a lot of what you call overburden. It was about four or five feet deep there at Lang Vei.

[01:52:01.54] And Dr. Robert Mann, who had all this electronic bullshit-- I call him Electric Bob-- he's out there setting these waypoints. And we get back to the hotel, and none of them work worth a shit. So I got a 100-foot measuring tape, some paper and a pencil, a lensatic compass, and a map. And I went out there and laid that goddamn camp out.

[01:52:29.93] But Dr. Bob-- we got into-- not an argument, but disagreement over what this one position was. I said, that's supply bunker number two. I know it well. I used to live in it. I said, I lived on sardines in there. Matter of fact, I opened a can up just before the shit hit the fan. I said, you keep digging down there, and see if you don't find any--

[01:52:52.22] JOE GALLOWAY: Sardine cans.

[01:52:52.55] DENNIS THOMPSON: --sardine cans. And this was on CNN, this one. They found my can with the plastic spoon sticking out of it.

[01:53:03.13] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[01:53:03.59] [LAUGHTER]

[01:53:06.59] DENNIS THOMPSON: I'll tell you one thing that came out of this. A lot of people wonder how they would react to situations and how they would deal with them. Well, I know. I don't need to wear shiny clothes and shit, you know?

[01:53:26.06] I asked these kids, I said, how long you been-- this is up at Fort Lewis-- how long you been in Special Ops? Oh, empty-ump years. I said, shit, I got crap in my refrigerator older than that. I got boots older than that.

[01:53:41.59] I said, I was in Special Forces when it was still special. We didn't even have guns-- just pointy sticks and a garbage can lid. Heavy weapons had a brick inside of a sandbag.

[01:53:51.66] [LAUGHTER]

[01:53:56.44] Good luck, boys.

[01:53:58.00] SPEAKER: That is just beautiful.

[01:53:59.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Incredible.



[01:54:01.04] DENNIS THOMPSON: And that 2nd Ranger Battalion was the finest unit I was ever in. We built that in the image of the MIKE Force. Any situation you want. But I like that-- felt that boom. Here we are. [LAUGHS] Rat-a-tat-tat. We're not here to advise you or screw around like that.

[01:54:22.33] Goddamn company commander-- they don't want to fight. This is a way of making a living. Jesus, I had a mentor, Alden Willey. And the first mission they had me do-- send the kid out there. I got a 3/4 ton truck. I'm supposed to go out along the road-- we had these little observation posts-- and meet up with Sergeant Willey. He's from Vermont or New Hampshire someplace. I'm supposed to pick up some wounded CIDG.

[01:54:54.14] He just appears in the road from out of nowhere. And I stop, and they drag these six bodies down there. And they're all rigor and bubbly shit coming out of their nose and wet pants. Here you go, kid, and he's gone.

[01:55:12.50] So I'm standing up there at 22 years old trying to put these bodies into this vehicle with some kind of dignity. And when I got back to the camp, the word was out. And there's all these people screaming and wailing. And I said, I've got a whole different outlook on that. I said, holy shit. This is war time, boy.

[01:55:40.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, sir.

[01:55:41.42] DENNIS THOMPSON: Yeah.