

Woodrell, Dave US Navy

[00:00:14.91] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:00:18.72] DAVE WOODRELL: 24

[00:00:19.80] JOE GALLOWAY: 24? Old guy.

[00:00:21.63] DAVE WOODRELL: Yeah, ripe old age. Well, I was single at the time, I was one of two brothers of a mother and father who were from families that came from the Dust Bowl era. They traveled out to California, which is where I was born and raised.

[00:00:45.32] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your hometown?

[00:00:47.08] DAVE WOODRELL: I was actually born in a place called Paso Robles, California, which is down on the Central Coast. But my dad worked for the telephone company and we were transferred around a bit as I was growing up, kind of like a military brat almost, and I actually went to high school in Carmichael, California near Sacramento.

[00:01:06.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, how did you come into the military?

[00:01:12.24] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, I saw some recruiters on the campus of California Polytechnic in San Luis Obispo, which is where I went to school, and they were looking for people to take a test in the hopes of recruiting them to-- into the aviation program as a program called AVROC, which stands for Aviation Reserve Officer Candidate, so it was an alternative to the Newport recruitment. Anyway the idea was you went down to Pensacola for two of your summers when you're in college, went through officer training, and then when that was completed and you graduated, you were commissioned and went on active duty, which is what I did in 1969. January.

[00:01:56.31] JOE GALLOWAY: '69?

[00:01:57.69] DAVE WOODRELL: January '69 yeah. Well, I immediately began flight training in the end of January of 1969 and I went through the jet pipeline which took about 17 months I guess. I finished and got my wings on the 12th of May of 1970, and I got orders to fly A-6s, the Intruder, and I was going to be assigned to NAS Whidbey Island, Washington just north of here.

[00:02:36.86] So I went up there and went through about six months of training in that aircraft, weapons systems, the airplane itself, all that-- carrier qualifications. And then in March of 1971, they had a need for a crew and a squadron that was already deployed so myself and a fellow I wound up flying with pretty much most of the time, we were both sent over to join them.

[00:03:09.12] Well, we flew over on a MAC flight. It was actually a commercial flight flying for the military airlift command, and we flew to Yokota, Japan, and then down to I think we went into Manila, and then we were flown over to Subic Bay, which is the big naval base there. And then the ship was already on station off Vietnam. So we flew in a carrier on board delivery

airplane over to Da Nang where we refueled, my-- for the first time had a chance to put my feet on the ground in Vietnam. And then once we were refueled they flew us right out to the ship, and that was our first trap aboard.

[00:03:52.47] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your impressions on landing in Vietnam?

[00:03:57.21] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, I was kind of glad I wasn't going to be staying there very long. I was ready to go to the ship. But it was kind of a rude awakening when we landed aboard, trapped aboard, I got off with all my gear. And here this big officer fellow came walking towards me, and it turns out his name was Mike Cockrell and he was in my squadron, Attack Squadron 52. And I had actually known him during the training command. And he had this big, deep virile voice and a deep laugh. And he says, welcome aboard boys, we just got back from a flight over North Vietnam. And I was kind of taken aback because I was kind of under the impression that the war was almost over.

[00:04:39.45] [LAUGHTER]

[00:04:42.65] The smells, and the humidity, and all that sort of thing. That was my first exposure to that over there.

[00:04:49.56] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were very briefly on the ground there?

[00:04:52.07] DAVE WOODRELL: Yeah-- yeah just very briefly. Well, it's a city unto its own. I was on the USS Kitty Hawk, which was one of the super carriers, about 1,100 feet long. And it had its own cadre of I think about 5,000 people operating the ship, and then the air wing was embarked with additional people. So we pretty much lived within our own squadron and did our flying, and the jobs we were assigned, which-- naval officers are not only pilots, but they're also in charge of different jobs to make the squadron run. So we were pretty busy most of the time. There wasn't a whole lot of time sitting around doing nothing.

[00:05:45.38] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your initial duties? What was your routine?

[00:05:50.94] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, as I recall when I first got to the squadron I was assigned to the maintenance division department, and I was given a job as a quality control officer or something like that. And basically I learned very quickly that there were career senior enlisted people who really knew what they were doing in those jobs, and I was--

[00:06:16.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Your job was to stay out of their way.

[00:06:18.63] DAVE WOODRELL: Exactly. Exactly. I was there to watch, observe, and occasionally put input, but it was really the chief petty officers that were running the organization. It was a great learning experience.

[00:06:32.45] JOE GALLOWAY: So what did your normal day look like?

[00:06:36.50] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, it would depend upon whether we were flying or not, which was usually every day. The squadron air wing didn't necessarily run on the same schedule that the ship itself did. The ship was run where they pretty much came to the same schedule for their crew members meaning they'd have breakfast in the morning, and lunch, and dinner, and they run the ship, but the air wing would fly different schedules.

[00:07:06.14] We would start out for instance flying for a couple of days just in the daytime, dawn to dusk. Then we would switch over to a schedule where we were flying from noon until midnight, which meant half the time we were flying in the daylight, and then the second half, we were transitioning to nighttime flying. And in about the last 2/3 of our line period, or the period we would be deployed in combat operations, we would be midnight to noon. So that took a while for your body to adjust to that, usually about 20 days when you came off the line period. Then you were completely screwed up again.

[00:07:52.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Completely. [LAUGHS]

[00:07:53.18] DAVE WOODRELL: My major overriding memory of that is it seemed like they were always serving breakfast on the ship--

[00:08:00.38] [LAUGHTER]

[00:08:01.19] --even though it was like lunchtime for us.

[00:08:03.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Like flying to Sydney.

[00:08:05.69] DAVE WOODRELL: Right.

[00:08:09.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Right. What were your quarters like?

[00:08:13.01] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, we were officers, and we were assigned staterooms which were probably-- well it varied depending upon your rank, but I was a mid junior officer so I was in a stateroom that was probably well eight feet wide by 15 feet long, and I shared it with another officer. And-- very rudimentary. I think it's a standard Navy design. You could go on any ship and it would look the same, bunk, some storage space. And we had a little refrigerator we could keep cold drinks and stuff in. It was Spartan, but it was comfortable.

[00:08:54.02] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe a typical flight mission.

[00:08:59.15] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, we had several different missions, and they varied on what we did. The A-6 was a very versatile aircraft. It carried a very heavy load of ordnance, so it was very good as a bomber. But we also had some of them that were configured as aerial refueling tankers. And then we also had three or four other airplanes that were configured to fire anti-radiation missiles.

[00:09:28.37] JOE GALLOWAY: To go after the SAMs?

[00:09:29.36] DAVE WOODRELL: To suppress the SAM sites when we were on-- when we had missions in those areas. But a typical bombing mission, we would brief an hour ahead of time before our launch. Actually, in most cases we briefed a lot more than that, research down in the intelligence areas for our target areas. But then we would man up. And since the A-6 had the best legs as far as fuel was concerned, we were usually the last ones to launch off, and the last ones to come aboard at the end because the other aircraft were thirsty, so they need to be on deck. So anyway we would catapult off. And depending upon whether it was a night low level single aircraft mission or if it was going to be a mass attack with several other squadrons, we would rendezvous and proceed out to our target.

[00:10:26.79] And the ship operated in about a two and 1/2 hour cycle as I recall, they would be launching aircraft and as soon as all the aircraft were launched they'd be recovering from the previous launch. So we would have-- we would come back and wait until it was our turn to land. So usually-- for the A-6 it was usually about two and 1/2 hours.

[00:10:46.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, was the ship on Yankee Station? Were you off North Vietnam?

[00:10:50.73] DAVE WOODRELL: Yes. The big decks most of the time were up on Yankee Station. They had some smaller carriers operated down on Dixie Station, which was basically in support of South Vietnam.

[00:11:00.89] JOE GALLOWAY: And your missions were mostly in the north?

[00:11:04.77] DAVE WOODRELL: On my second cruise, yes. The first cruise we did a little bit, but not much. It was mainly down in the DMZ area and Laos. But the second cruise we went over there a month early, and we operated the first line period down in that area. And then the North Vietnamese in the Easter offensive came across the DMZ and we operated up north for the rest of the time, for the next eight months.

[00:11:34.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Typical bombing, run in North Vietnam, what were your targets?

[00:11:40.62] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, they varied every day. But when we started going back up there, they had not-- there had been a long bombing halt in North Vietnam for like four years. And they had a lot of time to re-establish their anti-aircraft systems and some of their facilities and towns. So when we started up there, it was really heavily defended. And I can vividly remember one of my first flights over I think Vinh or someplace like that, and looking out as we are circling above before we're going to roll in, and it really reminded me of pictures I had seen in World War II, and the flak that they threw up there. And I mean it was--

[00:12:24.68] [LAUGHS]

[00:12:25.23] --it wasn't what I bargained for when I signed up.

[00:12:27.39] [LAUGHS]

[00:12:28.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Now you said when you first were sent over that you thought the war was over and--

[00:12:38.37] DAVE WOODRELL: Pretty much, it had been winding down and we weren't bombing North Vietnam. That was the first cruise. And we-- but when it came time to go back, like I said we were sent over a month early and we were beginning to suspect that it may be not quite as over as we had been informed. And then when they invaded and we started working up north, all those targets up there, it was-- it was not over. It was-- it was nasty business.

[00:13:10.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Your squadron lose many shoot downs?

[00:13:14.28] DAVE WOODRELL: We lost one crew. The air wing lost a number. But we lost one crew in-- August 17th of '72.

[00:13:22.74] JOE GALLOWAY: POW or KIA?

[00:13:25.32] DAVE WOODRELL: No, they didn't-- neither one of them came back. It was a pretty typical A-6 type of loss where they were on a single airplane mission that was designed to go up into the Red River Valley. And back then we didn't have the quite the monitoring capabilities. It was-- they were-- they were really on their own and--

[00:13:48.87] JOE GALLOWAY: They just disappeared.

[00:13:49.96] DAVE WOODRELL: --they just disappeared. Right. There was a sidelight to that though. There's been-- over the years there has been a recovery operation that the US has-- DoD has performed, in cooperation with the Vietnamese I might add, and they actually found their crash site and--

[00:14:09.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Recovered remains?

[00:14:10.62] DAVE WOODRELL: They recovered the remains of the bombardier navigator, They didn't get any remains of the pilot, but they know that they were both in the airplane because they had evidence of the pilot's torso harness and the seats were both there and so they didn't-- JOE GALLOWAY: they didn't eject. DAVE WOODRELL: --they probably just flew into the ground or they were shot down.

[00:14:38.18] Well, I think that-- I don't know how the Navy did it, but somehow they came up with a pretty good-- in my opinion anyway-- a pretty good method of selecting the people that they put in the program, put through the program because to this day some of my closest friends are the ones I served with. And under the circumstances that we were over there with, it was good that it was that way because you wouldn't want to have a group of guys who didn't get along together or warrant the respect of their fellow aviators. So they were all really wonderful guys. And we've had a-- periodically had a reunion of the group and it's always good to see them.

[00:15:28.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial or social backgrounds during your time that you might not have had in civilian life?

[00:15:41.05] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, they-- we didn't really have-- our squadron basically was--

[00:15:45.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Wasn't that much diversity?

[00:15:46.80] DAVE WOODRELL: It wasn't that much diversity. Mostly Caucasian members they were-- I did meet them in the training command other people from other races and that sort of thing. But we were all just doing the same job and you didn't even think in those terms.

[00:16:06.12] JOE GALLOWAY: I don't think you had a lot of time for this, but what did you do for recreation off duty activities?

[00:16:11.95] [LAUGHTER]

[00:16:13.44] DAVE WOODRELL: Slept a lot.

[00:16:14.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Slept a lot.

[00:16:17.13] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, the ship would come into a port after a period of time on the line and it was usually for a week or so. So, oh one time I went to Bangkok on an R&R flight. And most of the time we were in Subic Bay so it got to be kind of a routine there. But when we were on the ship, our downtime was infrequent. Maybe we'd have one day during a line period where they'd stand down from flight operations, but most of the time, we were-- we were flying every day, sometimes more than once. It was pretty intense. So you literally flew your missions and then came back and attended to your squadron job and then went to bed.

[00:17:00.96] [LAUGHS]

[00:17:07.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Can you describe significant actions or combat operations in which you participated?

[00:17:16.69] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, there was a lot of them. The A-6 flew a lot of night low level missions because that was what the airplane was basically designed for. We-- we called them sneaky Pete's for want of a better name but-- and they were in the very high risk areas in North Vietnam. So I was actually working as the schedules officer and I tried to spread the fun around as well as I could so that nobody was more exposed than they had to be.

[00:17:54.67] So those were missions that were really-- got your attention. And we used to always-- naval aviators kind of gallows humor I guess, but we used to joke about well, you go do your mission and have the-- all I have to deal with all this antiaircraft fire ducking, and SAMs, and all that. And then when you're done, you get to come back and land aboard the ship.

[00:18:23.08] [LAUGHTER]

[00:18:23.86] At night.

[00:18:24.94] JOE GALLOWAY: At night.

[00:18:25.32] [LAUGHTER]

[00:18:32.46] DAVE WOODRELL: The first is when we lost our crew August 17th. They were a very highly regarded, well-liked crew. And I in fact-- I had gone through the training syllabus with the pilot. And he had a stateroom right next to me. And that was a big shock. So that was a downside of the-- I guess the most euphoric time I can think of is November 4th when-- which was the last day of our operations there and we knew we were coming home.

[00:19:04.82] [LAUGHS]

[00:19:06.10] So that was a pretty happy time.

[00:19:09.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe for me the best day you had during your tour?

[00:19:14.11] DAVE WOODRELL: November 4th.

[00:19:15.04] JOE GALLOWAY: November 4th.

[00:19:15.84] [LAUGHTER]

[00:19:16.51] End of it. And you've already told us what the worst day was.

[00:19:22.03] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, we had had-- as I mentioned we were called out a month early, and then normally the way the operations went over there the carrier decks would be replaced periodically when they had finished their assignment, and another-- well you couldn't leave until your replacement carrier reported in.

[00:19:44.31] Well, ours had some mechanical problems. We were going to be replaced by Ranger. And apparently there was a young Seaman who didn't want to go on cruise and he took it upon himself to check a large wrench down into the reduction gear of the ship, and it delayed it for a couple of months, which meant we got delayed leaving twice. So we were ready to go home on 4th of November.

[00:20:22.19] Purely by mail. I don't recall ever talking to them on the phone or anything. You wouldn't have been able to do that on ship anyway because we had no email or--

[00:20:31.73] [LAUGHS]

[00:20:32.96] --Twitter or any of that stuff back then. So mail was usually the method. I guess you could have made phone calls from in port periods. But I don't recall doing that.

[00:20:47.24] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war from home if any?

[00:20:52.49] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, we had access to the Stars and Stripes newspaper, and you got information there. We'd get letters from friends from back home. And they-- I know we were-- we were aware of the antiwar movement back there, but didn't dwell on it-- me anyway, very much. Well, I got to-- I was a fairly junior officer so I got to ride the ship back all the way. There were some aircraft that got to be flown ahead by some of the squadron mates, but I rode it all the way back to San Diego and-- well just off San Diego. Then we launched and flew in for after that.

[00:21:43.15] So I had two weeks to enjoy the ship, another extra two weeks, which was a really--
- JOE GALLOWAY: Decompress. DAVE WOODRELL: Yeah. And actually it was very-- it was a big difference because we weren't doing any operations or anything, so you actually could-- it was kind of boring most of the time. We got to fly maybe one time en route for maintenance flights.

[00:22:08.04] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your reception like coming home from your family and friends?

[00:22:13.83] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, when I actually got home, which was in the first part of December when I-- my parents had organized a big surprise party for me and a lot of my college friends and relatives. So that was pretty exciting. But I didn't-- I don't ever recall having people spit on me or things like that, some of the terrible things that apparently happened to other people who returned. I don't think that I went around waving a flag saying that I was a-- just returned from Vietnam. But I don't recall having really any bad experiences.

[00:22:54.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you stay in the Navy much longer?

[00:22:57.67] DAVE WOODRELL: I took another cruise or another tour right after my squadron tour because at the time the airlines weren't hiring. It was 1973, and the oil embargo hit, so I took an additional tour down to Naval Missile Center down at Point Mugu, California. And I got out in September of '75.

[00:23:19.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Went to work for the airlines?

[00:23:21.88] DAVE WOODRELL: Yeah, a few months later I went to work for them. Yeah.

[00:23:26.63] JOE GALLOWAY: Any difficulty readjusting to life after combat?

[00:23:31.50] DAVE WOODRELL: No, not at all. I-- it was-- a lot of it was scary at the time. But I felt I had gotten a lot of really good life experience participating in it. And I really only have good things to say about my naval experience. Lifelong friends. That's an important thing.

[00:23:52.38] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with your fellow veterans over the years, the guys you flew with?

[00:23:59.61] DAVE WOODRELL: Actually, I've stayed in contact with a good number of them. And I mentioned, we've had some squadroom reunions. But several of them live in the

local area, and once a month we have a group of us get together for breakfast. We call it the Intruder breakfast. And then two or three of them I'm very, very close with. We play golf all the time and do things like that.

[00:24:31.17] Well, the entire second cruise was such a big surprise that that's had a lasting impression on me. It wasn't what I was expecting. And I do remember one thing that I've never experienced since. And that is when we would go what they call feet dry on a mission, meaning we were going over bad guy country from the ocean, I just remember my senses being so acute-- acutely aware of what was going on. And I've-- it was like-- probably it was the adrenaline that was pumping, but I do not ever remember being that aware of my surroundings during that period of time where I was over there over the coast.

[00:25:22.42] JOE GALLOWAY: You better have been. [LAUGHTER]

[00:25:22.81] DAVE WOODRELL: Yeah. And it was a big-- always a big relief when we went-- feet-- wet, which is a term for coming back out over the ocean after our mission.

[00:25:34.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

[00:25:44.33] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, I'm always extremely happy when I see them come back and proud of them for what they're doing. They're volunteering for this. They don't get drafted. And that goes not only for flight crews, but for the entire military. Nobody makes them do this. So I'm really in awe of the way they step up and do their duty.

[00:26:14.11] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today or is it?

[00:26:22.37] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, I think for the vast majority of our society they don't even remember it, except occasionally reading about it, unless you were a participant. I know the younger generation have-- they often don't even know a thing about it.

[00:26:37.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Grandpa's war.

[00:26:38.90] DAVE WOODRELL: Right. Yeah. Kind of like when I was growing up my parents and my relatives war was World War II. Of course we heard a lot more about that one, and for many years, than we hear about the Vietnam War now. I think it's generally perceived at least in the media as a loss for us. I tend to think of it more as a stalemate rather than a loss.

[00:27:09.06] JOE GALLOWAY: As more of a-- ?

[00:27:10.23] DAVE WOODRELL: Stalemate.

[00:27:11.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Stalemate.

[00:27:11.71] DAVE WOODRELL: Rather than a loss.

[00:27:17.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from your Vietnam deployment more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:27:33.16] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, it was a lot of hard work getting ready for it, but I got a lot of really great experience both in aviation and in interaction with my fellow man by what I did over there, I think. I got a great appreciation for courage and all that, and I saw a lot of that. And duty, how people step up when they have to and do what they need to do.

[00:28:11.32] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from that experience that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans?

[00:28:24.42] DAVE WOODRELL: Well, I would say that you-- if there's a need for service, people need to be willing to do it. We need to choose our battles carefully. Not-- not giving it the proper thought is not a good idea. We've seen experiences in that. But if the time comes in which we have to perhaps take the ultimate sacrifice, I suppose that that's something we just all will have to determine on our own whether we are going to do it or not, but somebody's got to step up and do the job sometimes, so--

[00:29:13.27] Very impressive. You don't hear a lot of noise there. It's usually just people looking and thinking and searching for names that they may recognize. It's an impressive moment. Done a little reading on it.

[00:29:44.12] JOE GALLOWAY: What are your thoughts about that?

[00:29:47.03] DAVE WOODRELL: Long overdue. I'm glad that-- glad that it's taking place and I'm glad to be a participant in that for that matter.

[00:29:56.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Mr. Woodrell. I appreciate it.

[00:29:59.14] DAVE WOODRELL: Thank you. Thank you for all you guys are doing.