

Wright, Richard Jr. USMC

[00:00:20.60] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I was born at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard at Vallejo, California, 11 January 1947. My father was Richard M. Wright, Sr., and my mother was Marilyn Duane Burgess.

[00:00:34.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Brothers and sisters?

[00:00:35.90] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I do have one sister.

[00:00:37.19] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. What did your dad do?

[00:00:40.79] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: He was a career naval officer. He graduated from the Naval Academy in 1941, was stationed as a battery officer aboard the USS Tennessee. He was present at the attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December of '41. After that attack, the Tennessee was laid up in shipyards and my father wanted to fight the war, so he requested to go to submarine school. His commanding officer refused him seven times.

[00:01:07.10] And on the eighth application asked, why do you want to leave the battleship? And he told the commanding officer he wanted to get aboard a fighting unit, and the captain immediately signed his request for submarine school. And he spent the rest of his career in submarines.

[00:01:21.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow. What did he retire as?

[00:01:23.96] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: As a captain. We moved around about every three years, two to three years, spent a lot of time in California. My father commanded two destroyers out of San Diego. RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I had received an appointment to the Naval Academy class of 1969. And unfortunately, I could not pass organic chemistry. So we had a parting of the ways. I then attended school for a couple of more years, totally lost interest in going to school.

[00:01:56.19] So without my parents' knowledge, I enlisted in the Marine Corps. And my induction date was about six weeks thereafter, so I pretended to go to school. And on the day of induction, I left a three page letter to my mother on my pillow and said, I've just joined the Marine Corps. And my father called me at the induction center that evening to wish me well. And we went by train down to Charleston, South Carolina and thence by bus to Parris Island.

[00:02:32.68] I completed training, earned the title of United States Marine in April of 1969, went to infantry training. And because I had two years of college, they offered me OCS. And I went to Quantico and was commissioned a second lieutenant in October of 1969.

[00:02:53.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, when you signed up as a Marine, PFC or Private Marine, what was your sense of what was going on in Vietnam?

[00:03:04.82] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I felt our being there was justified. At that time, the Soviet Union was a major threat. Communist China was a major threat. I believed that if we allowed those communist empires to go through one country after another, that we'd be facing a even greater threat. So I supported the war, and I wanted to do my part by going over there.

[00:03:42.67] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: At basic school at Quantico, I took the basic course which teaches every Marine how to be a platoon officer. After being eaten up by chiggers and nearly bitten by snakes, I said maybe aviation would be the way to go. So I applied for flight school and I had visions of flying F-4s and shooting down MiGs.

[00:04:06.88] And they said, son, we're sending you to Army Flight School. And I thought my career was over before it even began. And went down to Fort Wolters, Texas, took my first flight in a helicopter, and never looked back. I've loved every day of it

[00:04:24.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Loved the whole thing.

[00:04:25.27] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: It was outstanding training. They taught us the tactics. The only deficiency is that it did not really suit or train the pilots to fly in instrument conditions. But with our tactical requirements, that really was not too much of a concern. Following Vietnam, I had a tour as a flight instructor at Navy Flight School at Pensacola.

[00:04:52.19] And Senator Barry Goldwater put together a commission to come down and interview all of the Marine pilots who had gone through Army Flight School, and were now at Navy Flight School to interview them to see if it was a good idea to consolidate training into one flight school.

[00:05:10.94] And the wing commander knew of this in advance. He interviewed all of the Marines who would be eligible for interview. And every pilot who favored consolidation was scheduled for cross-country training flights on the day the commission came down. I was against the consolidation, but I thought the Army training was better training-- better tactical training.

[00:05:37.19] JOE GALLOWAY: By then were they training separately?

[00:05:40.56] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: They were training separately. They always have been.

[00:05:44.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Did that flight training prepare you for what you faced when you arrived in Vietnam?

[00:05:50.96] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Absolutely. There was some-- the type of training that was beyond the book--

[00:06:01.10] JOE GALLOWAY: OJT.

[00:06:02.38] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: OJT. It was doing what was necessary that might have violated the operations manual. But in order to get the mission accomplished, you did it anyway. RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Well, my getting to Vietnam was a bit of a side story as well. My

compatriots, my fellow Marines with whom I had graduated boot camp and ITR all were in Vietnam in 1969. I think I was the only one that didn't go, and that was because I went to OCS.

[00:06:40.92] By the time I finished flight training, the Marine Corps was out of Vietnam. And the only unit left in Vietnam was 1st ANGLICO, the Air Naval Gunfire Liaison Company. And I wrote a letter to my uncle lamenting the fact that here I am, a brand new second lieutenant in the Marine Corps and I'll be without combat experience.

[00:07:02.94] About a month later, I got a call from him asking if I would like to go to Vietnam. And my uncle, who by that time was three star and comptroller of the Army, had made a phone call to a close friend of his who was the chief of aviation for the Marine Corps, another three star general. And the Marine general saw that I had the necessary qualifications, which were that I was a pilot, that I had been through forward air control school, and Naval gunfire school. And he basically did my uncle a favor by cutting me orders to Vietnam.

[00:07:44.85] JOE GALLOWAY: I understand.

[00:07:45.82] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: So it was probably very unusual that somebody went to those lengths to get to Vietnam.

[00:07:52.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Had to go through the Army to get the Marines to send you to Vietnam.

[00:07:56.78] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Yeah. Yeah. It was a surreal. We flew from California. We had to make a maintenance stop in Manila, and we flew into Saigon at night.

[00:08:09.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Military or civilian charter?

[00:08:11.29] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: It was civilian. Continental Airlines, a civilian charter. And it was dead quiet.

[00:08:18.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Flew into--

[00:08:19.36] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Tan Son Nhut.

[00:08:19.99] JOE GALLOWAY: --Tan Son Nhut..

[00:08:21.52] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: And aboard the aircraft, it had been noisy, raucous going over. But as we approached Vietnam, it was dead silence. The lights were out in the aircraft, and you looked out and it was total darkness. But every 30 seconds or so were illumination rounds going off on the right and on the left. And as we made our approach, it was just one after the other, and it was silent. And it was fairly surreal, but we arrived at Tan Son Nhut. at about 0100, got processed in, and then taken to our hotels.

[00:09:04.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, how long were you in Saigon before they shipped you north to where you belong?

[00:09:10.94] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Three or four days. And that was to meet my commanding officer who was then Lieutenant Colonel, later Lieutenant General Duane Gray. A marvelous man. Just a gentleman to the core. I don't think in my career I served under a better commanding officer than Duane Gray. RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: My entire time was at Hoi An up in I Corps, about 17 miles south of Da Nang.

[00:09:37.86] It was with a brigade of Republic of Korea, South Korean Marines, the Blue Dragon Brigade. And I was initially dispatched to the 2d Battalion as the air liaison officer. And I had the same job serving three of the Korean battalions. The 2d Battalion, after I'd been there about two months, the decision was made to stand the brigade down and send them back to Vietnam-- back to Korea.

[00:10:12.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Back to Korea. But you were out on the ground calling in naval gunfire and artillery.

[00:10:20.58] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I never had to call in naval gunfire. I could have, but we never had the opportunity. The range of the guns would not have reached-- our area of operation was the Que Son mountains.

[00:10:30.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[00:10:32.16] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: West of Hoi An.

[00:10:35.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Bad country.

[00:10:37.06] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: It probably was at your time. It was pretty well pacified when I was there. The story had been relayed to me-- and this happened before I was there, the South Korean battalion to which I was attached had adopted an orphanage in the village of Hoi An. And at one time, the Viet Cong came through the village, killed some nuns and priests and the children.

[00:11:06.97] The South Koreans captured some of the Viet Cong, determined where they had come from, and leaving the Americans behind on a particular day, they went to that village. And let me just say that we no longer had any problems from the Viet Cong after that. For the most part, except for small skirmishes, the area of operations where we worked was pretty well pacified during the time I was there.

[00:11:44.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, you were what rank at that point, lieutenant?

[00:11:47.18] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: A first lieutenant.

[00:11:48.05] JOE GALLOWAY: First lieutenant.

[00:11:49.79] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: It was primarily-- I had a team of about 19 forward air controllers, and I had about four of them at battalion and the remainder were at the company level. And when we deployed, it was their responsibility if an airstrike was-- or medevac or some

other aviation requirement was necessary, it was their responsibility to provide that air support. My responsibility, I was the air liaison officer, and I coordinated with the battalion staff for any and all of their aviation requirement.

[00:12:27.76] And we had a similar Marine Corps first lieutenant at each of the battalions within the brigade. And then we had a small staff, a major, a captain, and maybe 20 enlisted at brigade headquarters. My responsibility was to provide aviation logistics. That could be bacon and beans, troop transport, airstrikes, medevacs, whatever their requirement was. I would call back to the command in Da Nang and request whatever aviation assets were needed.

[00:13:09.65] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, did you perform these same duties your whole tour?

[00:13:15.73] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I was responsible for that. But once the decision was made to stand them down, mostly it was troop transport, medevacs, very little in the way of airstrikes. I did call in several airstrikes during the first several months while we were deployed up in the Que Son. I had an opportunity to call in helicopter airstrikes when we were in the rear in situations where we saw Viet Cong, available targets.

[00:13:50.75] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like?

[00:13:53.51] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Pretty basic. It was a small wooden hut, plywood. Basically, we had cots inside. Because we were a battalion, we had electricity. So we had some of the creature comforts that they didn't have at the company level. But it was pretty basic. RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Except for one individual, and I think it was just personality, he was a corporal that worked for me, I didn't care for him. Virtually, every other individual that I met and associated with were top notch, best of the Marine Corps. And that was from my officer in command, Major Dyer, down to my corporals and PFCs working for me.

[00:14:49.82] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial or social backgrounds during your time in Vietnam that you might not have had in civilian life?

[00:15:00.50] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Certainly with the Koreans. They are culturally, ethnically different. I did make-- I bonded with them. I made very good friendships. Unfortunately, they didn't last after they went home and I went home. I'm sure they and I got involved in other things and never stayed in touch.

[00:15:26.52] JOE GALLOWAY: This is late in the war, but there's still social and racial tensions back home. Did any of that translate to your Marines?

[00:15:37.67] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Not in Vietnam.

[00:15:38.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Not in Vietnam.

[00:15:40.22] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I was aware of it before I went, and I was aware of it when I came back. Over there, there was none of that. We had every race, ethnic group you can imagine-- whites, blacks, Hispanics, Orientals in my unit, and all of them were wore the Marine

Corps green. Well, I guess in those days, it was the Marine Corps khakis. But we were all Marines first and we cared about each other and we supported each other.

[00:16:20.50] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for recreation or off duty time if you had any of that?

[00:16:25.96] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Two things. One, because I'm not sure how other American units operated, but because I was with an allied unit, I had the liberty of going on liberty, if you will, in the town of Hoi An. And they used to give us-- I think they called them A packets. And they were filled with the cigarettes. They were filled with candy, and chewing gum, and so forth. And we would take these A packs, stuff our pockets full of it, and we'd go into the town of Hoi An.

[00:17:04.29] And I always went with one or two South Korean officers, and then I would have one or two of my own men accompany us. And we would walk the streets of Hoi An, and all the children would just swarm around us. And it became a regular thing where we got to know the children, they got to know us, and we'd hand out the chocolate and they'd follow us all around town. That was one strong memory, and that's one thing that I would do on free time.

[00:17:37.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:17:38.26] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: The other is that when my battalion was in the rear, I volunteered to fly helicopters with the Army up at Marble Mountain. And I would go maybe two or three times a month for a period of two or three days each and fly missions with the Army.

[00:17:59.44] JOE GALLOWAY: And that's where you got to flying SOG missions?

[00:18:03.19] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Right.

[00:18:03.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:05.95] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: For the first month or two--

[00:18:08.20] JOE GALLOWAY: As a volunteer.

[00:18:09.52] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: As a volunteer. That meant one of their pilots didn't have to fly that day. And I was Army trained, so they were more than happy to have me. After the first six weeks to two months, all they put me on were logistics flights. And they were interesting, but they were getting a little mundane. So I requested to be tasked to fly on a CCN mission, Combat Control North, which would have involved a little more activity.

[00:18:44.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:18:44.78] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: So I continued to fly those, and that was the mission I was on when I was shot down.

[00:18:59.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe that action where you were shot down and how you were picked up.

[00:19:04.98] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: We had been briefed for two missions that day. The second mission after we had completed the first was to take a team of Special Forces to take out a North Vietnamese antiaircraft site that had been reported on Charlie Ridge-- I forget the number of miles, but Charlie Ridge, west of Da Nang. The morning mission was to go to Laos to extract a team of Special Forces that were surrounded and under attack by North Vietnamese.

[00:19:38.65] And while we were en route to that, on the south side of Charlie Ridge, we were hit with antiaircraft fire. And the intelligence was that it was a 29 millimeter antiaircraft, and I'm supposing that it was the same site we were supposed to take out in the afternoon. But everything was fairly routine. It was a flight of six. We had three UH-1H helicopters.

[00:20:10.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Had any of them been hit?

[00:20:11.76] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: None of them were hit. And aboard each of the helicopters were teams of about three American Special Forces and nine or ten Montagnard tribesmen. And each helicopter had the same on board. We were the lead aircraft, and I was co-pilot and the pilot was a chap by the name of Bob Hopper, a warrant officer with the Army. And it was 173d Assault Helicopter Company escorting us were three AH-1G Cobra gunships.

[00:20:51.67] And we're following the Hoi An River toward Laos. At about six miles prior to the border, we were leaving the river and in front of us was a valley, steep on both sides with nothing but rocks and boulders. And the first thing I became conscious of was a sound of impacts over my right shoulder. And I looked over my right shoulder and could see holes in the aircraft. The next thing I was conscious of was my wingman saying, we're on fire.

[00:21:32.41] So I looked down and we have an engine fire warning light and our engine was on fire. So there's an extinguisher. I looked over to my pilot to get authorization to execute, put the fire out, but we were without power. We had no choice of going forward because the only landing site was boulders and rocks. It would have been an unsuccessful landing. So we executed-- I handed the controls back to Warrant Officer Hopper. He was the pilot in command.

[00:22:11.29] He executed a 180 degree turn to the left and executed an autorotation to the Hoi An River. And there were two sandbars. We were trying to make one or the other. And we were too steep to make one sandbar, and it turned out we were too short to make the other sandbar. And for the uneducated, an autorotation is like a dead stick landing in a fixed wing where you lose power, but you're still getting lift over the wings. Well, the wings in a helicopter are the rotor blades.

[00:22:42.18] So by gravity, you get the upward lift on the rotor blades and you're able to glide. And at the termination of that, when you're about 50 to 75 feet, you'll flare, which will stop your forward momentum, and you level out and then pull in your power and it'll let you make a soft landing. Well, for us, the landing was in the water. And as soon as our rotor blades hit, the aircraft cartwheeled, tail over nose, and sank to the bottom of the Hoi An River. And--

[00:23:20.93] JOE GALLOWAY: With all of you aboard?

[00:23:22.73] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Well, the crew doors were open, and everybody except myself exited out the side that was up to the surface. And I'm focused on my side, which is basically on the surface of the river. And it's at an angle. So just before impact, I pulled the door release to release the door, but the pressure of the water kept it there. And I kept pushing against the door and it wouldn't budge. And I was starting to get a little panicky. It was probably two, two-and-a-half minutes. And there's a little slide window in a Huey pilot door.

[00:24:07.70] And I got to the point where I was panicking-- I won't say panicking, but I was pretty anxious. And I put my head through the door trying to get out the window, and that was enough to budge the door free. And I came to the surface with the door of the helicopter--

[00:24:24.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Around your neck?

[00:24:25.79] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: --wrapped around my neck. So I threw that off, and then the wreckage of the aircraft was just at the surface of the water and everybody was crammed on what was left. The Cobras were laying suppressing fire from where we think the shots had come from. Meanwhile, the two other aircraft, one was looking for a Special Forces lieutenant who had been swept away by the current. And unfortunately, this is-- if you ask what the worst day is, I was the last person to speak to him, and I watched him drown. And that memory stays with me to this day.

[00:25:19.94] But he had a 50-pound pack on his back. He had safely extracted from the helicopter and he let go of the aircraft to get the pack off his back. And I asked him, do you need help? And he said, no, I got this. And he was still close to the aircraft, and I thought he was standing on something. And I turned my attention to see how everybody else was doing. When I looked away, he was 20 or 30 yards downstream beyond my help. So we directed one or the other aircraft to go pick him up.

[00:25:58.43] By the time the aircraft got to him, he was several hundred yards downstream. He was able to get up the ladder and we thought he was safe. We again turned our attention to ourselves to get ourselves ready for pickup. And next time we looked out at the aircraft, it was only the crew chief, and we assumed that the lieutenant was aboard the aircraft and we started getting ready for pickup.

[00:26:30.06] I then looked down at about a quarter of a mile if not further downstream, I could see his head and his cap just above water. And we were trying to get the aircraft to go pick him up, and then he went under and that was the last we saw of him.

[00:26:46.29] JOE GALLOWAY: How did he fall off the ladder?

[00:26:48.43] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I don't know. Maybe he was just fatigued. And the rest of us had-- all the flight crew had clips in this situation where we could clip on to the rope ladder and we'd be secured. But the passengers would not have that. But his name is-- he was First Lieutenant Joseph Slifka, and I'll never forget his name.

[00:27:19.04] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Probably Christmas of '71. And not only because I'd received a care package from my wife, but I also received a package of Christmas cards from a third grade class in New Jersey. And the Christmas card that I got was from a little girl by the name of Susan Schemmenti, third grader. And I wrote her back a letter from Vietnam, and apparently I was the only one to write back amongst her classmates.

[00:27:57.39] So that class adopted me for the rest of my time in Vietnam. And on every occasion, Valentine's Day, Saint Patrick's Day, Easter, I got a big envelope full of cards from this 3d grade class. And then the school year ended, they went on their way. And later that year in '72, I got a letter from the school teacher, which I thought I still had and I've looked for it and I can't find it. But it was a letter from the teacher saying, I hope this letter finds you. After the school disbanded, we heard nothing more from you and we wondered what happened to you.

[00:28:46.78] I would say that bonding and association with these school kids were the highlight of my tour over there. And during that time, I had received another letter, just a handwritten letter from a girl named Celeste. And she had wondered what happened to me. Well, she grew up and had a daughter of her own. And when that daughter was in third grade, they had a similar Christmas card writing campaign to the Marines in Iraq.

[00:29:28.58] That project got her to thinking, what had happened to a Lieutenant Wright? So her uncle was a retired Marine officer, and he contacted the archives in the Marine Corps and found a likely candidate. At the time I was working for the helicopter association in Alexandria, Virginia. And I got a telephone call. He identified himself as a retired Marine. And he said, are you the Dick Wright that served in the Marine Corps? And I said, yes. The same one in Vietnam? Yes. Did you write to a group of school kids in New Jersey? Yes. They had found me.

[00:30:10.37] It turns out Celeste was best friends with Lee Woodward, who was the wife of Bob Woodward, who did the ABC Nightline program. And they decided to do a television documentary on the letter writing campaign to the Marines in combat.

[00:30:31.82] And they started out with their letter writing campaign to a Marine lieutenant colonel in Iraq and then turned to my story of how she as a child had written to me and that they had discovered me. And Bob Woodward and his crew came down and interviewed us at our home in Oakton, Virginia. And I provided a copy to this office. Yeah, it was a marvelous experience.

[00:31:07.78] JOE GALLOWAY: The Koreans left Vietnam with a rather interesting reputation for being total hard asses.

[00:31:17.77] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I saw an incident of that where you could totally define the chain of command. One day I was drawn out of my bunker my hooch by a commotion and went out there, and the battalion commander-- the Koreans still had swagger sticks.

[00:31:39.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Swagger sticks.

[00:31:40.35] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: The US Marine Corps had done away with them just as I became a Marine.

[00:31:45.39] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[00:31:46.14] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I still have one though. But the battalion commander who was a colonel-- lieutenant colonel, I think, in the Korean Marine Corps, was beating his XO about the shoulders with his swagger stick.

[00:32:01.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Swagger stick, which no doubt had a heavy silver head.

[00:32:04.65] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: It did. And after two or three minutes of that, the XO called one of the company commanders, and he had his swagger stick and was beating the company commander about the shoulders, screaming at him. That lasted a couple of minutes. The captain then got his platoon commander, a lieutenant, and was beating him about the shoulders. The lieutenant then got his platoon sergeant and did the same to him. The noncommissioned officers had--

[00:32:37.61] JOE GALLOWAY: It does roll down hill.

[00:32:39.02] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: And they had what was called a wanton stick, which was about maybe three quarters of an inch in diameter, about two feet long, resembled a swagger stick, but it was solid wood. And he got his squad leader, and then the squad leader got the two recalcitrant troops who had irritated the battalion commander. And I had to go to brigade that day, and I was leaving just about the time this chain was finished.

[00:33:11.76] And as I was leaving, I looked over to the parade ground for the battalion, and these two troops were in full field marching gear low crawling up and down the parade field. And when I returned that evening, they were in a stockade that looked like a POW camp. That was about 20 feet by 20 feet, about ten feet high of barbed wire in loincloths, and they-- that's where they were for the next week. I was glad the Koreans were on our side.

[00:33:42.12] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your general impression of the South Koreans you soldiered with?

[00:33:47.55] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Utmost respect. Professional in every manner, but then they were taught by the U.S. Marine Corps, so that would be the expectation. In Korea, they did not enjoy a good reputation during the Korean War. And the U.S. Marine Corps basically took them from scratch and built them into what they are today. And they are as professional as any Marine.

[00:34:20.95] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Both good and bad. When I was able to walk the streets of Hoi An, I made friendships with the Vietnamese people and was invited into their homes for lunch. And these were repeat visits. I knew the people. And as we made our rounds, we would stop by and they would invite us in for lunch. That's probably an experience that probably most Americans in Vietnam did not enjoy.

[00:34:59.53] I saw a bad side of the Vietnamese in that we had an artillery battery at my battalion. And on a number of occasions, they tried to break into my bunker to raid refrigerators and food supplies that we had. And after the second or third episode, I rigged booby traps for them. Nothing that would harm them, but they would alert us that they were there. And after two or three nights of setting those off, that was the end of that.

[00:35:40.68] I think the worst that I saw of them on a personal level was I had a corporal who had adopted a small dog who had been injured by the Vietnamese. When it was a puppy, a Vietnamese had poked its rifle barrel into the eye of the puppy. So we called it One-eye. And it was a cute little puppy, and my corporal had already made arrangements to be able to take the dog back to the States when it was time for him to rotate back home.

[00:36:22.81] And about a month before he was to be sent back home, we heard a yelping, and the dog had come running back obviously in distress and had been mutilated by the South Vietnamese soldiers. And I called the battalion doctor in to see if there was anything he could do to save the dog and he said, not really. So I counseled the corporal that he probably should consider dispatching it, and he agreed. And I tasked two of my other Marines to dispatch the dog. And that sticks in my mind.

[00:37:09.40] So yes, I saw a good side of the Vietnamese. I saw a bad side of the Marines. And knowing that I had a pet dog, just a mongrel. But it stayed with us and ate our food and when we walked around that dog would walk around.

[00:37:29.63] And knowing that when we left, the Vietnamese would undoubtedly put in a stew pot, I took it out to the beach-- by that time I was with a battalion on the shoreline, and I stroked it for about a half hour. And I dug a pit, and after about a half hour of stroking the dog, I dispatched the dog and laid it to rest. RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Letter writing. I don't think a day went by when I didn't write a letter.

[00:38:06.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you ever get a MARS phone call home?

[00:38:08.76] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: One time.

[00:38:09.51] JOE GALLOWAY: One time.

[00:38:10.26] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: One time, and it was-- I don't remember the particulars. It was late in the tour, and I had heard about it. And I made the necessary inquiry, got it arranged, and they said, be up here at such and such a date. And I was there, and there was a line of us. And we were allowed a couple of minutes, I want to say no more than three or four minutes. And we had to say, over and out, proper radio etiquette. But we did talk, and it was marvelous.

[00:38:41.94] And I will say that my wife belonged to the Overseas Wives Club while I was in Vietnam. And Lieutenant General Brown, who was the wing commander at El Toro, took her under his wing. And she was the youngest wife in the Wives Club, and they-- at every luncheon or meeting of the Wives Club, they would acknowledge-- I think it was the senior most wife and the junior most by age. And they would always acknowledge my wife Diane.

[00:39:22.65] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: October of '72. I left from Okinawa. I had a split tour. In March of 72, the Koreans had deployed back to Korea. I went down to Saigon, and Colonel Gray asked me what I wanted to do. And at that time, everything was pacified. There was virtually nothing going on. He offered me an assignment either in the Delta or up at Dong Ha, which--

[00:40:01.36] JOE GALLOWAY: As adviser.

[00:40:02.47] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: As an adviser with the Vietnamese-- I forget whether it was Vietnamese Rangers or Marines. But it was the entity-- it was Vietnamese up at Dong Ha, which a month later was to--

[00:40:17.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Overrun.

[00:40:18.61] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Nearly overrun. Because nothing was on, I said, is there anything-- are we going to do anything other than just sit around? And he said, right now, there's no intelligence to say that there's anything going on. So I said, might it be better if I joined a squadron in Okinawa where I can maybe do more good for the Marine Corps. So that was agreed upon, and I was assigned to HMM-164 in Okinawa.

[00:40:48.92] But when they-- after the Easter Offensive broke out, which is only a week after I got to Okinawa, I was excess property, if you will, in the squadron. So the squadron commander said, we only need 50 pilots and you're number 52, so we're going to deploy you over to HMM-165. Same thing happened with 165. I was excess. By that time, I only had three months left on my tour. So they said, we'll send you over to base operations where I worked until I came home.

[00:41:23.01] So the day came in October to come home, and there was still the war going on more hotly than when I was there. And there were protests, and I was advised not to wear my uniform when I came home. And I gave that a rather curse reply, and I said I'll be in uniform when I step foot on home soil. But there was a lot of--

[00:41:56.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you land?

[00:41:59.63] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: It was in California. And I've forgotten the name-- Travis. Travis Air Force Base.

[00:42:03.38] JOE GALLOWAY: So you had to go over to San Francisco or Oakland.

[00:42:07.07] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: No. My wife was-- we had a house at Santa Ana, California--

[00:42:13.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, all right.

[00:42:14.48] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: --where I'd been assigned before I went to Vietnam. So we had a house there, sold that, and I had orders as a flight instructor at Navy Flight School. So we packed up the car and drove to Pensacola and had the rest of my career.

[00:42:31.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you stay in the Marine Corps after Vietnam?

[00:42:34.30] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I tried to augment, which meant going from a Reserve officer to regular. And I was on a five-year special written agreement called five year swag, which carried me out to 1977. And each year, I applied for augmentation. But because the war was over, they were downsizing.

[00:42:56.24] And I had three years at Pensacola as a flight instructor and then three years at Cherry Point, Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, as a search and rescue pilot. And the last year I applied, there were, if I recall correctly, about 80 of us had applied for augmentation, and they retained the-- and they didn't augment. They just retained by contract two Marines. One was an F-4 pilot.

[00:43:27.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Out of 80?

[00:43:28.87] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: Out of 80. So that was an indicator of the fact they just weren't keeping people. So I was wondering what I would do, and a friend of mine by the name of Stan Antrum-- he was the officer in charge of my SAR det at Cherry Point, said that the Coast Guard was taking pilots from other services under what was called a direct commission program. So I applied to that, and I was accepted, and I spent the rest of my career in the Coast Guard.

[00:44:00.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after the war?

[00:44:05.02] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: No. I grew up in a military family. I had always wanted to serve in the military. Oddly, as a youngster, I wanted to be a submariner like my dad. But we're presented forks in the road, and you decide to take one branch of the fork instead of the other and that's what happened to me.

[00:44:29.23] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with veterans, Marines that you served with in Vietnam over the years, if any?

[00:44:38.26] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: None. I had more contact with the Marines with whom I went through flight school and with whom I served in my squadrons, both on Okinawa and Pensacola. But the Marines-- the U.S. Marines that I associated with in Vietnam were so few that I could almost count them on one hand. There was one Marine at each battalion, and there were two Marine officers at brigade.

[00:45:14.87] JOE GALLOWAY: That was it?

[00:45:15.41] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: And that was it. RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I grew up pretty quickly, having that kind of responsibility. I would say that my lack of success at the Naval Academy might have been a lot due to a lack of maturity at that age.

[00:45:41.83] And that was one reason why I entered the Marine Corps in the first place, was I wanted to get my head screwed on right, and they have a way of doing that. Vietnam matured me. I saw things that probably most civilians in life never see, but it broadened my experience.

[00:45:59.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

[00:46:07.12] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I see the difference in the attitudes of the American population toward them. And I think it's just wonderful. I see vignette after vignette where Soldiers, Marines, Sailors, Guardsmen are met at the airport, and not expecting it but getting a warm reception. In the last few years since we've been in Iraq, Afghanistan, for the first time I've been thanked for my service. I came back and nobody cared. I couldn't even get a discussion from my own parents about my experience in Vietnam.

[00:46:54.45] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today?

[00:47:02.02] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I think in a lot of respects it's been forgotten. I've just finished taping the series, Vietnam.

[00:47:11.37] I'm anxious to sit down and watch it. I think history will show that there were good things about it, there were negative things about it. And in hindsight-- I'm a historian by education, I can say that history will treat it properly. That it had its good points, but it also had its negative points.

[00:47:40.33] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you would like to pass on?

[00:47:45.31] RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: As MacArthur said, there's no substitute for victory. If you're going to commit your troops, do it with the intent of winning and don't do it if winning is not the objective. And I don't think we've learned that lesson. RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I'm overwhelmed. I look at names and remember. RICHARD WRIGHT, JR: I'm privileged, appreciative, and thankful for the opportunity.

[00:48:36.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Commander Wright.