

Allen, John USAF

[00:00:13.66] JOHN ALLEN: Fortunately, I grew up here in Columbus, Georgia. I'm one of seven children, six sisters, no brothers. And I grew up in an era of segregation, so I went to all-black schools, high schools.

[00:00:31.54] And my associations at that time, of course, were within the African-American community. But it was a good life in Columbus, Georgia. However, I did leave here and swore I would never come back. But there's no place like home once you get away and get an opportunity to come back--

[00:00:49.23] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure.

[00:00:49.63] --and experience life elsewhere. So it was a good life.

[00:00:59.87] MARK FRANKLIN: You went to Tuskegee University.

[00:01:01.61] JOHN ALLEN: Yes, and all the way, 45 miles away from here. Long distance to go to college.

[00:01:09.38] MARK FRANKLIN: What year did you start college?

[00:01:12.23] JOHN ALLEN: I believe in '61. Long time.

[00:01:14.00] MARK FRANKLIN: So you started in '61, so you're a '65 graduate.

[00:01:17.33] JOHN ALLEN: Actually, '66 because at that time, engineering was a five-year curriculum.

[00:01:22.41] MARK FRANKLIN: And your degree was in mechanical engineering.

[00:01:24.52] JOHN ALLEN: Mechanical engineering, right.

[00:01:26.99] MARK FRANKLIN: During that time, what was your sense of what was going on in Vietnam, the Vietnam War in general?

[00:01:31.64] JOHN ALLEN: Well, back up just a second. Tuskegee was called a land grant college, and we had our mandatory ROTC for the first two years. So I got my first introduction to consciousness, if you will, of what was going on in the war through ROTC. And of course I finished ROTC and got commissioned into the Air Force.

[00:01:55.01] But back in college, there was not a lot of discussion among the student body about the war so much, and quite frankly, because we were diverted by civil rights movements and actions going on at that time. So we were more focused, the student body in college, on what was going on in civil rights. Now of course, there were those of us who were in ROTC, who had a little bit of an introduction to the war.

[00:02:24.21] But it was more of a distant problem than what we were dealing with immediately. So I didn't have a real feeling one way or the other. I was more apathetic about the war at that time, I guess you could put it, until I got closer to the time to go in.

[00:02:43.26] MARK FRANKLIN: So you were commissioned out of Tuskegee University in the Air Force, and did you know then you wanted to be a pilot, or did that come later?

[00:02:50.75] JOHN ALLEN: No, I went right into pilot training, but I didn't know at the time. MARK FRANKLIN: Ah. It's just that going into Advanced Corps after the first two years, you were committed to serve in the Air Force, as I had chosen.

[00:03:05.18] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:03:05.96] JOHN ALLEN: And quite frankly, I just figured that if I had to go to the Air Force I might as well fly. Actually, some of my elementary school and high school classmates told me that I had talked about flying before, but I don't recall it, quite frankly.

[00:03:21.35] MARK FRANKLIN: Yes, sir.

[00:03:22.98] JOHN ALLEN: But yes, I had a regular commission. I was commissioned a regular officer into the Air Force back through ROTC at Tuskegee. Went to Williams Air Force Base in Arizona.

[00:03:36.66] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:03:37.74] JOHN ALLEN: And quite frankly, there were probably more African-American pilots were sent there for some reason. Maybe the atmosphere was more conducive. And I went through the normal-- there's a 52-week program, started out in propellers, single-engine propeller aircraft. But I had gotten that same training at Tuskegee by being in Air Force ROTC, advanced ROTC, and went into something called a flight instructional program at the same field that the Tuskegee airmen trained at back in World War Two. And in fact, one of the instructors that the Tuskegee airmen had was there to instruct us, Chief Anderson, he was called.

[00:04:21.78] So my first portion of Air Force flight training I had covered at Tuskegee in ROTC. And then you advanced to subsonic jet training, T-37, then supersonic jet training for about the last quarter of training. It was just, if I can refer to it as run of the mill flight training, a lot of simulation courses in weather and navigation and of course, on the systems of the aircraft itself.

[00:04:59.46] Quite frankly, not very taxing, not that I was outstanding or anything. It's just that it wasn't very taxing. I kind of had a knack for it. Although the first time I'd ever flown in my life I stepped in an aircraft to take a lesson to fly. So I'd never flown as a passenger, never been in an aircraft. But that was at Tuskegee.

[00:05:24.54] And Chief Anderson to me up and said, OK, let's go to Columbus. And I said, where's that? I had no idea what things looked like from the air, but that was my very first

introduction to flying. To be frank with you, when I got to Williams Air Force Base, as I've indicated, there was a larger contingency of African-American student pilots.

[00:05:47.40] But when I got there, they were having what's called a wash-out party for several of the black pilots. Our attrition rate was extremely high, African-Americans. I made it through. I either made it through by washing back a class sometimes, or my roommate and I made a vow to each other that we would kick each other's behind to stay on task. And he and I made it through on time, graduated on time. And he was Lloyd Fig Newton, four-star general when he retired.

[00:06:25.64] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:06:26.25] JOHN ALLEN: Got to be four star when he retired.

[00:06:29.37] MARK FRANKLIN: He was your roommate.

[00:06:30.08] JOHN ALLEN: He was my roommate throughout pilot training. Actually, Lloyd and I had made a vow to each other. He was going to be the first African-American to fly with the Thunderbirds, and I was going to be the first African-American astronaut.

[00:06:42.78] Because at that time, astronauts had to be engineers and rated. But while I was in pilot training, there were a couple of other blacks that went through the astronaut program. So I said, if I can't be first I don't want-- I don't want to do it.

[00:06:59.43] MARK FRANKLIN: Yes, sir.

[00:07:00.84] JOHN ALLEN: But Newton did go on to be the first Thunderbird-- African-American Thunderbird pilot.

[00:07:07.95] MARK FRANKLIN: After your training at Williams, you went on to advanced tactical training with the aircraft?

[00:07:11.97] JOHN ALLEN: Yes, you were selected to go to various aircraft out of pilot training, and my first choice was fighters, and I got it. But I came and went to-- was assigned to fly F-4s at that time, I believe Davis-Monthan.

[00:07:31.35] MARK FRANKLIN: And that is where?

[00:07:32.52] JOHN ALLEN: In Tucson, Arizona.

[00:07:34.78] MARK FRANKLIN: Okay.

[00:07:37.80] JOHN ALLEN: But at the time, I was assigned to be what's called a GIB, a guy-in-the-back. The F-4 was a two seater.

[00:07:42.84] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:07:43.47] JOHN ALLEN: But they were both pilots. And I went through training at Davis-Monthan. It's called advanced training to transition into fighters. But from there, we went to every survival school there was: sea survival, jungle survival, and mountain survival up in Washington, State of Washington. And then straight to Southeast Asia.

[00:08:08.99] MARK FRANKLIN: Talk about that training a little bit, your survival training, the SEER training, as it's known today, but you did--

[00:08:13.77] JOHN ALLEN: Yeah.

[00:08:14.10] MARK FRANKLIN: --all types of environmental survival training. Talk about that if you would.

[00:08:17.31] JOHN ALLEN: Literally back to back.

[00:08:18.99] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:08:19.68] JOHN ALLEN: And Homestead Air Force base, I believe, was the first; sea survival. And of course, they trained us as if we were-- and of course, going to Southeast Asia, being bound for Southeast Asia, right on the water, on the coast--

[00:08:32.85] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:08:33.68] JOHN ALLEN: --the possibility of getting shot down and what were survival techniques? So they would drop us off in the ocean off Homestead. You climb into a one-man raft. You stay out there for several hours, you will try to desalinate water, try to catch fish. But I drank so much water when I was released by parachute that I got nauseated before I could release my parachute.

[00:08:59.56] MARK FRANKLIN: So when they dropped you in the water, you were parachuting out of an aircraft.

[00:09:03.37] JOHN ALLEN: No, actually, they would tow you--

[00:09:05.02] MARK FRANKLIN: Oh.

[00:09:06.04] JOHN ALLEN: --behind a speedboat. And then you'd have to release the catches on the-- face down, and then you have to turn over and release the catches.

[00:09:14.17] MARK FRANKLIN: Much like you would if it were an actual parachute, right?

[00:09:16.30] JOHN ALLEN: Right. Inflate your Mae West.

[00:09:18.98] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:09:21.46] JOHN ALLEN: Inflate your raft.

[00:09:23.53] MARK FRANKLIN: And the Mae West was your life vest.

[00:09:25.30] JOHN ALLEN: Life vest, yes. Climb into your one-man raft, and do what you have to do to survive. So I did. I climbed into my one-man raft, and I didn't do anything. Just survive.

[00:09:38.24] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:09:40.82] JOHN ALLEN: But I can't remember how many days it was. More than just the one day, of course. And I believe I left there and went to Spokane, Washington. Fairchild Air Force Base, maybe, in Spokane, Washington. Now there it was an extensive period of training in the mountains, and I think we were there like 19 days, seven days classroom and about seven days in the woods, and I can't remember what the others were about.

[00:10:11.54] Oh yeah, I know. We went through simulated VC prison camps, very lifelike. You were stuffed into little boxes for hours on end that you couldn't move around in. They'd interrogate you harsh-- they'd say pretty antagonistic things to you; in your face; just what they felt that you might be exposed to in war. Except they didn't strike us.

[00:10:36.70] MARK FRANKLIN: Oh.

[00:10:38.23] JOHN ALLEN: And we had to go through the process of-- just as would happen in a prison camp where you'd have a commander of the camp, you'd have an escape committee and escape groups. And I successfully escaped from the camp.

[00:10:54.84] MARK FRANKLIN: Did you?

[00:10:55.66] JOHN ALLEN: On the very second day there. And--

[00:11:00.63] MARK FRANKLIN: Well, how did that happen? Talk about that a little bit.

[00:11:02.45] JOHN ALLEN: Well, we had a little committee to get together to talk about possibilities. And when I left the camp to go get firewood or something, I think they probably provided various opportunities. But I went immediately. I didn't wait for any planning, and I stayed out in the grass and very high grass around.

[00:11:23.71] I stayed out there for a couple hours, and they sounded a bullhorn for me to come back in. And as a reward for escaping, they gave me an extra bowl of soup, rice soup. And then we went through night navigation, day navigation. And quite frankly, a lot of pilots, and quite oddly, the navigators (former navigators in the Air Force) got lost more than anybody else.

[00:11:51.67] MARK FRANKLIN: When they're on the ground.

[00:11:52.63] JOHN ALLEN: When they're on the ground. So they had to send helicopters out to find some of the guys. But that was a good experience. They sent you in groups of two or three, and you got to work with each other. So that was a very useful survival experience.

[00:12:09.07] MARK FRANKLIN: And then where did you do your jungle training?

[00:12:11.11] JOHN ALLEN: In the Philippines. Now interesting-- my introduction to it was to get there and they showed us a 22-foot python in a cage, feeding him a pig.

[00:12:23.55] MARK FRANKLIN: Oh.

[00:12:24.70] JOHN ALLEN: So went through normal class work, and they would put us out in the jungle to survive overnight for two or three days. And I specifically remember on a couple of occasions, walking through the jungle initially with the Negrito guides they called them, indigenous persons. And the little guy didn't speak English, but he threw up his hands as if to stop, and I stopped. And a snake went across in front of him I thought would never stop crossing that path.

[00:12:56.68] So I hugged my little Negrito guide, and I didn't turn him loose for three days. But I also paired up with another young Air Force-- kind of an Air Force Special Forces, I can't remember the precise name for it. And we built sleeping facilities together, made campfires, and just kind of generally survived for a couple of days.

[00:13:25.18] And of course, that was to simulate as close as they could to the actual experience in Vietnam if you didn't get shot down in the water; you got shot down in the jungle. So I thought that was quite useful. I paid close attention to everything that was going on at that point.

[00:13:41.73] MARK FRANKLIN: And you think that was really good training and well prepared you for--

[00:13:44.61] JOHN ALLEN: I do think it was.

[00:13:45.83] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:13:47.67] JOHN ALLEN: And we experimented with all of the survival equipment; the various flares and guns we had in the vest and seats, and-- everything; compasses and navigating at night and day. That came kind of easy for me.

[00:14:03.51]

[00:14:10.29] Stamped on my orders from the very first survival training school was Pipeline Southeast Asia. And it literally meant every survival class that we got to, those of us who had Pipeline on their orders went to the front of the class.

[00:14:25.45] In other words, we had to get out first. We were destined to be in-- pilots were destined to be in Southeast Asia as quickly as possible.

[00:14:33.76] MARK FRANKLIN: And what year did you arrive in theater?

[00:14:38.79] JOHN ALLEN: I went twice. So my first arrival was during Tet in '68. I think, if you remember the dates of Tet.

[00:14:48.39] MARK FRANKLIN: It was January through February of '68.

[00:14:51.84] JOHN ALLEN: Well, I came right after because I think I went in March.

[00:14:54.00] MARK FRANKLIN: Okay.

[00:14:54.81] JOHN ALLEN: Just after Tet.

[00:14:58.53] MARK FRANKLIN: And you were assigned to--

[00:15:00.66] JOHN ALLEN: 13th TAC Fighter Squadron. It was actually the 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing, and there were two fighter squadrons attached to the wing. One was a 13th TAC Fighter Squadron. The other was the Triple Nickel.

[00:15:14.91] And when I arrived at the base there in Udorn-- Udorn, Thailand, by the way Udorn Thani, Thailand. Young, maybe I had made first lieutenant. I can't remember. Kind of a weird sensation.

[00:15:35.64] I didn't really have any apprehensions about the war, just curiosity about what was awaiting me. And when I got there and saw the chaos that was going on at the-- these terminals were just chaotic; people lined up to fly out, persons being transported in, dogs, people walking around with machine guns, and you know-- . So it was kind of, wow, what am I in for here?

[00:16:06.48] MARK FRANKLIN: Did they give you a period of transition to acclimate, or were you immediately given your first mission brief? How did that--

[00:16:11.58] JOHN ALLEN: I really think my orientation might have been one or two flights around the base and to look around. I was a back seater, but I still had to fly and land the aircraft and refuel and do things like that. But I think by about my third mission or so I was in combat. It was a combat mission.

[00:16:31.18] But of course, with a seasoned pilot in the front, and I'll tell you about that transition later on. So we were right off to do the things that we had been trained to do at Davis-Monthan, radar, navigation, and bombing, VFR bombing.

[00:16:50.46] MARK FRANKLIN: VFR?

[00:16:51.18] JOHN ALLEN: Visual bombing, and just everything it took. I mean, that was required. I have to describe it from my two tours because they were vastly different. First tour I was just a young, inexperienced lieutenant. So I did the things that most young officers do in bases like that: duty officer, helps with the scheduling; pulling extra duty, and flying.

[00:17:26.59] MARK FRANKLIN: Okay.

[00:17:27.42] JOHN ALLEN: But we were there my first tour-- and did we have time to relax? Yes. Udorn had-- you might say it had a town or city attached, but not in the sense that we understand cities, more a little village.

[00:17:42.22] And there were seven or eight restaurants down there we would go to, and several Howard Johnsons. But let me tell you what Howard Johnsons are: the little woks on blocks along the side of the road where they cook you a seven-course meal all in the same wok, several of those around that we didn't dare eat too much of that food.

[00:18:06.04] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:18:07.27] JOHN ALLEN: But there were restaurants downtown and, quite frankly, bathhouses, massage parlors we'd go to after a while, after you got comfortable in that environment. But actually, on base we had pretty good facilities. We lived in what we called hooches, were wooden buildings, wooden floors, two pilots to a room, had an air conditioning unit, not central air.

[00:18:36.31] But you'd wake up in the morning, there'd be lizards in your room. And you'd always inspect your bed to see if there were spiders or something in it before you climbed down in the bed. So it was not exactly a Ritz Carlton.

[00:18:49.21] MARK FRANKLIN: No.

[00:18:50.20] JOHN ALLEN: But compared to the circumstances of the persons in country and living on the ground, we had it where we lived as pilots. I even had a maid who picked up my soiled uniforms and washed them and my boots on a daily basis and shined them. So each day we went to fly a mission, we were in spit-shined boots and a freshly pressed uniform.

[00:19:11.69] MARK FRANKLIN: So pretty good living compared to what some of the others were doing in country.

[00:19:14.77] JOHN ALLEN: It really was. 'Course we paid for it.

[00:19:16.93] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure. Oh yeah, of course.

[00:19:18.55] JOHN ALLEN: I mean, paid for it literally, out of our pockets.

[00:19:21.04] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:19:21.30] JOHN ALLEN: We had to pay for maid service. Also had an officer's club that they fed us very well. You could stop and eat from about five in the morning until 11 or so at night. And you didn't have a menu every day, but you had a menu every day, different menu each day. But you were limited in your choices, of course.

[00:19:51.42] JOHN ALLEN: Another interesting story.

[00:19:52.68] MARK FRANKLIN: Yes, sir.

[00:19:54.15] JOHN ALLEN: We were flying out of Udorn, Thailand at the time because of some-- I didn't never read the treaty, of course, some crazy treaty-- we couldn't fly in South Vietnam. Therefore, out of Thailand, all of our missions involved North Vietnam, DMZ north for a while, all of Laos. And northern Laos was as hot as North Vietnam. I mean, shooting missiles, you name it. It was there.

[00:20:21.00] MARK FRANKLIN: Surface to air missile-- ground-based surface to air missiles, right?

[00:20:23.05] JOHN ALLEN: Right. Because we were still going to North Vietnam, and so we were exposed to it there, and then all of a sudden, Laos, and later to include Cambodia. What we call the tri-border: Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos came together at a juncture.

[00:20:43.50] MARK FRANKLIN: Now if-- back up for a second. You were not allowed to fly through South Vietnam to get there? You had to stay--

[00:20:47.97] JOHN ALLEN: We were not allowed to fly in-- missions in South Vietnam from Thailand.

[00:20:52.61] MARK FRANKLIN: Okay.

[00:20:54.33] JOHN ALLEN: The first time out--

[00:20:55.14] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:20:55.77] JOHN ALLEN: --first tour. So I think when I had arrived, I think bombing Hanoi, flying into Hanoi proper had ended. But we were flying missions in North Vietnam, south of Hanoi, all the way down to the DMZ.

[00:21:12.84] Called interdiction missions where we were trying to bomb supply routes and trails and trucks and ships and bivouac areas where troops were bivouacked. So we ran the gamut. What we didn't do in those areas was run much close air support because we didn't have the ground troops in northern Laos the way we did in South Vietnam.

[00:21:37.67] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:21:39.24] JOHN ALLEN: So most of our missions were high altitude. My first time over, if you got 100 missions up north you can go home, kind of like the book Catch-22. You get so many missions. Well, I was flying so often until I had about 92 or 93 missions after only six months.

[00:22:01.54] So it was close to time to go home. So the commanders came and said look-- and all of my little cohorts that were the younger pilots, we had just been volunteering, you know.

They said, well, if you guys will agree to fly more than 100, we'll let you get your 100, which was where that expression catch-22 came from.

[00:22:23.86] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure, right.

[00:22:25.93] JOHN ALLEN: So we said, mm, I think not. So what the command did was instead assigned us, or assigned me in particular, and others, I'm sure, to fly more missions in Laos, northern Laos, which was just as hot. So I ended up flying about an additional 60, 65 missions in Laos before I was allowed to get my 100 over the north. So I ended up with about 165, 170 missions my first time.

[00:22:58.20] MARK FRANKLIN: So those 100 missions all had to be over North Vietnam.

[00:23:00.72] JOHN ALLEN: Well--

[00:23:00.98] MARK FRANKLIN: The missions in Laos didn't count.

[00:23:02.28] JOHN ALLEN: Missions in Laos didn't count for coming home. So I think I was allowed to come home after about ten-and-a-half months the first time. And like I say, I was a GIB, guy-in-the-back. And we ran radar bombing, we could refuel, we could land the plane. We could do everything the pilot in the front could do except aim and drop the bombs.

[00:23:27.30] So I got immediate assignment to go to school to upgrade to front seater. And I went to Victorville-- George Air Force Base in California and upgraded to aircraft commander, went right back to the same base, the same room. Some of the same people were there when I got back the second time.

[00:23:53.43] MARK FRANKLIN: And what year was that, sir?

[00:23:55.38] JOHN ALLEN: That was sometime in '69. Now my role there was vastly different being a front-seater, aircraft commander, I was also checked out as flight commander. In other words, I could lead flights wherever we were going as a young captain.

[00:24:18.10] And I was assigned other duties in headquarters. I was made a young commander of what they call the frag shop, which is where all our top secret orders came in where-- to equip the aircraft for targets, for target briefing. So I had a colonel, wing commander at that time who took a liking to me. And he asked me to come take this position because they were short of field-grade officers.

[00:24:46.63] And he promised me that as soon as a field-grade officer came in, he would relieve me and let me go back to flying. So a field-grade officer came in. He said, well, John, I think I'll keep you here a little bit longer. So I end up staying in headquarters, and as a trade-off he allowed me to fly any mission I wanted to fly.

[00:25:04.84] And my-- the persons who worked for me, if I asked, they could fly whatever mission we wanted to fly together or with others. So I had a lot of other responsibility. I was also

a check pilot while I was there. In other words, every time we had an aircraft that needed testing, you have to put it through its routines while you're even in a combat environment.

[00:25:28.88] And we had air-to-air intercept missions when I was there the second time. In other words, we were the northernmost base, Air Force base, in Southeast Asia. So at night, the MiGs would come out of Hanoi and head south, and we'd have to scramble, literally like crew scrambling an air defense, to go up and meet them.

[00:25:56.93] But of course, they'd just come so far, and after the four of us got airborne and relatively close but outside missile range, they'd always turn around and go back. And they'd only do it at night to interrupt our sleep.

[00:26:12.67] MARK FRANKLIN: So you think that was the purpose, or were they testing our response, or what do you think they were doing?

[00:26:15.55] JOHN ALLEN: Well, I'm sure had we not responded--

[00:26:18.34] MARK FRANKLIN: They would have done more.

[00:26:18.93] JOHN ALLEN: --they might have come more. But we had a five-minute from bed to airborne--

[00:26:25.90] MARK FRANKLIN: Five minutes.

[00:26:26.68] JOHN ALLEN: --requirement. So you slept in your uniform. You changed your boots from stringing up boots to zippered. You just learned to lay things out, and instead of cranking the aircraft with air machines, they had cartridges that they will blast and blow. And believe me, you'd be taxiing out still strapping into your parachute to get airborne in that five minutes.

[00:26:55.66] I had an encounter one time-- at this time, I was flight lead-- to scramble four aircraft at night. One aborted right there in the revetments. Another aborted on the runway. And when we got airborne there were two of us, and then the third one aborted.

[00:27:13.75] So I'm headed north to meet these MiGs, and they didn't turn around this time. They came a lot closer. So with my back seat, I said, okay, we're gonna fire first two missiles. We had two different missiles, missiles to fire hit on and missiles to fire heat seeking. I said, well, just as soon as they get in range, we're going to-- and it's night. I'm not seeing anybody.

[00:27:38.86] MARK FRANKLIN: And you're the only aircraft.

[00:27:39.85] JOHN ALLEN: Yeah.

[00:27:40.09] MARK FRANKLIN: You're all by yourself.

[00:27:40.84] JOHN ALLEN: Yeah. And I can't remember how many MiGs, a couple, three maybe, four maybe, I don't know. But as soon as they got-- they must have known our missile range-- as soon as they got within range, they turned around and went back. But I had to keep flying closer and closer and further and further in North Vietnam to try to meet them as great a distance as we could. But boy, that was one big sigh of relief.

[00:28:05.32]

[00:28:12.98] JOHN ALLEN: Two or three. The first time I had a SAM to go off near us.

[00:28:18.11] MARK FRANKLIN: And that's a surface-to-air missile?

[00:28:19.46] JOHN ALLEN: Yes. We were flying, I call it a gaggle. We had about 50 aircraft, not just from our base, but from other bases, F-105s. And we were going north to destroy some SAM sites that were coming further and further south.

[00:28:36.44] And of course, the further south they came, the closer they got to our tankers. They could shoot our tankers down refueling. So every time we got wind of one that was-- from Intel, we'd go up and bomb the site. So we didn't really know it was there, but we took off.

[00:28:52.32] And sure enough, I can talk about this because we had equipment that would tell us, you're being painted. And then it'd say, they're now painting your flight. They're now painting you. And a missile, SAM, came up. So there were some maneuvers we'd have to go through. We went through the maneuvers.

[00:29:15.83] MARK FRANKLIN: Can you describe those? What were those maneuvers? What would you do if you knew a missile was coming your way?

[00:29:20.84] JOHN ALLEN: Well, it probably doesn't apply now. Let me put it very generally, maneuver in such a fashion that the missile going Mach 4 could not keep up with your turn, all right?

[00:29:33.65] MARK FRANKLIN: So you're flying violently, pretty much.

[00:29:35.42] JOHN ALLEN: Yes. But this time, we didn't start our maneuver early enough, and the missile was coming very close. And there were a lot of aircraft around. And this missile came so close I was going through the maneuver, and I could see the fins on the missile trying to deflect to turn it.

[00:29:59.06] And I remember sitting there saying, man, don't let it blow up. Don't let it blow up. because that's where they hit you, by frags, not hit you physically, but it's fragmentation. And it seemed like time was standing still. I could even see grains of sand floating in the cockpit, quite frankly. The loose papers were floating, the pens, because of the maneuver I was going through.

[00:30:22.07] And I said, oh, don't let it blow up. Don't let it blow up. And it didn't, it went up-- I thought it was only two feet above me, but it was probably more like 1,000 feet above. And it's just a huge explosion. And that, too, was in slow motion, watching it happen.

[00:30:40.73] And then after it blew up, everything came back to real-time speed. And so fortunately, we saw where it came from, and it must have been 25, 30 aircraft. But we were all in disarray at that time, just went down. And at the same time as we're going to hit the site, of course, they had 85, 100 millimeter, every range that was possible.

[00:31:05.54] Your shells would be up at 30-- 35,000 feet, some at 20,000 feet, others down about 15,000 feet. So we knew we had different guns shooting. So we rolled in and literally destroyed the-- well, it was saturated with bombs, put it that way. They didn't get off another missile.

[00:31:26.03] And so I was coming out of-- humorous part about it was when I was coming off the target-- because my flight had broken up. So the order was to join anybody and head south. So I decided to stay in the trees instead of going high. And-- because they couldn't see me down there until I was over 'em, past them really.

[00:31:49.19] And I was full mil on my acceleration. And two F-105s went by me on either side as if I was standing still. It's as if these guys were more frightened than I was, you know? And I couldn't even catch them to join up with them.

[00:32:07.04] But after a while, we all got organized through our various radio channels-- coming back. Just kind of flying that day, going-- it was a beautiful day. You could see-- we called it clear and 50. Clear, you could see 50 miles. And everything was nice and quiet and peaceful, and then all of a sudden, the radar.

[00:32:35.14] Far as other aspects of it, also at that time, I was flight lead. I was called on to escort an SR-71 up over Burma to China to North Vietnam, back. And just two of us at that time.

[00:32:53.66] MARK FRANKLIN: And the SR-71's a reconnaissance photograph aircraft, right?

[00:32:55.95] JOHN ALLEN: Yes. Because I could never see it, couldn't paint it.

[00:33:00.74] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:33:02.39] JOHN ALLEN: But when we got near China, everything lit up. I mean, just right at that border. I mean, everything lit up. And I had permission to shoot down any aircraft over 30,000 feet without question. And they sent that order out.

[00:33:21.28] They wouldn't say why. They'd just tell aircraft, do not go above 30,000 feet when you're in this area. So there are just the two of us and the SR-71, and China was just-- and going across North Vietnam was the same. Well, they're right there together at the border, same thing.

[00:33:41.04] MARK FRANKLIN: Did the Chinese scramble any aircraft in response?

[00:33:43.12] JOHN ALLEN: No.

[00:33:43.63] MARK FRANKLIN: No.

[00:33:44.14] JOHN ALLEN: I don't--

[00:33:46.05] MARK FRANKLIN: That order was to protect the SR-71.

[00:33:48.42] JOHN ALLEN: At all costs.

[00:33:49.28] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:33:50.88] JOHN ALLEN: And I don't know if I should mention about one aircraft I did see. It was a friendly, unmarked, and we were about to shoot it down until it went through some maneuvers that we told it it had to do. And that SR-71 sent photographs thanking us for--

[00:34:17.94] from 70,000 feet or wherever they were. They had photographs of guys sitting around a camp, and you could see the cup in their hand.

[00:34:26.04] MARK FRANKLIN: Wow.

[00:34:29.46] JOHN ALLEN: And that was just amazing to me.

[00:34:31.32] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure.

[00:34:32.46] JOHN ALLEN: Because you didn't hear about that technology in civilian life.

[00:34:36.75] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:34:43.93] JOHN ALLEN: Yes. The day I left to come home.

[00:34:45.91] MARK FRANKLIN: That's usually the response.

[00:34:47.53] JOHN ALLEN: And it's strange-- not strange, but the only time I got really cautious was my last two weeks. And I kept thinking, I don't want to fly anymore. But we had a really bad-- we had monsoons in Southeast Asia. There were only four missions flown that day, and I flew two of them.

[00:35:11.23] So I went out of the squadron just cursing. And hell, quite frankly, I said, you white folks tryin' to kill me before I go home. But-- and it seems that the shells got closer and closer. And I just couldn't wait to get past that those last two weeks to come home.

[00:35:37.16] There were lots of days that-- we called 'em all crap days, but that was never a bother. I don't think I was ever frightened, at least not consciously, when flying a mission. And there were missions when there were just ground fire and lots of bombing and shooting and things going on.

[00:36:06.63] So I can't think of a day that was the worst day. I mean, when I went over-- I'll tell you-- I was on the scene in northern Laos, and one of our squadron mates got shot down. And I was in the vicinity, and I saw it. And so I was the first on the scene to go over and call in aircraft and bring tankers close so we could refuel and get helicopters in there, and that wasn't a good experience.

[00:36:37.61] MARK FRANKLIN: Was he able to eject, or was he--

[00:36:39.53] JOHN ALLEN: They ejected, and I know one was picked up. I do not remember if the other pilot was picked up. But I saw the aircraft. I saw it burning, and I saw the chute, and I saw everything.

[00:36:55.61] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:36:57.26] JOHN ALLEN: And man-- and we'd generally fly out there days and think we were not getting shot at, but when I went down treetop, it's like the world lit up. They had guns there that we didn't even know were there. I mean, my wingman, I told him to stay high, and he thought I had been shot down.

[00:37:17.45] But there was nothing frightening about that to me. When shells exploded, if you didn't die you were okay. It didn't hit your aircraft.

[00:37:32.78] JOHN ALLEN: Quite frankly, the first tour, the old guys were not very friendly. Now there were only two black pilots on the base at that time, both in that squadron: myself and one other guy. And we were treated-- I mean, no overt discrimination. It's just that they didn't develop a lot of friends, close friends, except with the other GIBs, guys in the back seat, we called them.

[00:37:59.60] And there were about four or five of us who bonded real close. And my flight commander-- I mean my aircraft commander was really close, and his buddies, we got to know each other. But there wasn't a lot of camaraderie.

[00:38:17.91] I have a couple of pictures I'll show you in here. The second time around, everybody was much closer. Well, I was the old experienced guy, one of the older experienced guys. I had left there a year before. I knew what the targets were without maps and just got along better with the commander.

[00:38:42.89] And quite frankly, I had a couple of occasions that I really got upset about. You'd have these little shops on base that would sell patches-- and everybody bought patches in Southeast Asia. Well, they had patches of the rebel flag, and I wanted a patch of a black clenched fist, which was symbolic in those days. And the guy running the shop said he couldn't sell it.

[00:39:10.25] What do you mean? And he said because his white NCO commander of these shops had told him he couldn't do it. So I went back to the commander and said, I'm tired of patches. I don't want a patch over-- another rebel patch over me in an aircraft. And an order went out over Southeast Asia to get rid of all of 'em-- or Thailand anyway.

[00:39:35.15] And then-- till they opened up and then would sell them, just like they would a rebel patch. Now I had guys, maintenance men, wearing them. I didn't take it as any overt racism from them.

[00:39:50.51] I just resented that top sergeant saying they couldn't sell a black clenched fist, but they could sell a rebel patch. So there was another young lieutenant and myself that we got pretty militant in this shop, but my commanders backed me up--

[00:40:07.84] MARK FRANKLIN: Good.

[00:40:09.05] JOHN ALLEN: --at all times. In fact, I had a wing commander that-- I flew back down to Tampa after I got back later, and asked me to be his aide. But I turned it down. It was my ticket.

[00:40:25.58] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:40:26.93] JOHN ALLEN: But I was getting out at that point. Just with the Thais, because we were in Thailand, remember?

[00:40:38.20] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:40:39.25] JOHN ALLEN: And I have some pictures. I told you that I was called on to give briefings to different persons. I briefed most flights that were taking off. And if some allied generals or commanders were there, they were part of the briefing.

[00:40:54.73] And I have a picture of me giving a brief to the Royal Thai Air Force Academy, the ranking officers in the academy. I don't even remember doing it. And I was asked, also, something that I began to have a bitter taste in my mouth about the war when some reporters from the United States were coming over, and they chose persons to talk to them and gave them a sheet of paper with the answers to give to questions.

[00:41:28.66] And I was chosen as one of those persons. And I didn't refuse from the commander. But with the reporter I said, look, I'm not going to sit here and act stupid in front of this camera giving these pat answers. I said, now if otherwise I have to talk to you, it has to be off the record. But I will not give these responses. I didn't say that to my commanding officer, of course.

[00:41:49.90] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:41:53.35] JOHN ALLEN: And I knew the answers were not true.

[00:41:56.33] MARK FRANKLIN: What were some of the questions and answers that they asked, if you recall?

[00:41:59.20] JOHN ALLEN: Probably about where we flew our missions, and at one point, and we were not openly disclosing that we flew even in northern Laos.

[00:42:07.09] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:42:08.71] JOHN ALLEN: But I had 60 missions there when there was no flying in Laos. I was single at the time. But as I say, I had six sisters, and my mother was just worried sick, so she'd write often. And where we were in Thailand, you could call home, so as often as we were able to get through--

[00:42:36.37] once a week or so, I would call and never talk about the war. But it had gotten to the point that it was being more and more displayed on television. So they knew a lot more in '68, '69 after Tet had really began to be played up in the televisions.

[00:42:55.08] MARK FRANKLIN: Did any of that news reach you back in Vietnam about how the country was feeling about the war? And if it did, how'd that affect you?

[00:43:00.39] JOHN ALLEN: Somehow in Stars and Stripes, we had Stars and Stripes magazine back then. And I didn't really have any heartburn about the protests back in the States. Quite frankly, I can safely say that I never felt any animosity toward anybody that I was bombing.

[00:43:23.23] I mean, if I were down there trying to eat my rice and somebody came and dropped bombs on me, I would shoot at 'em also. But I mean, the shells would go off nearby, and SAM exploding. Well, it's war. You know, I'm fighting the guy that's shooting the SAM and he's trying to keep me from bombing him. I just felt neutral about it.

[00:43:49.33] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:43:51.28] JOHN ALLEN: I didn't suffer from the delusion that I was fighting in the name of God. You know? I was fighting in the name of my country in the sense that it was my duty, but that's what I saw it as. I was a fighter pilot, and it's my job to go over here and fly fighters and do what I'm asked to do.

[00:44:13.93] I mean, with some consideration for humanity, but I'm just saying because we weren't called on to bomb kids to my knowledge anywhere.

[00:44:21.31] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:44:23.29] JOHN ALLEN: If anybody had told me, I want you to go over there and bomb a school, I just don't know that I would have dropped my bombs on it.

[00:44:27.34] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:44:28.06] JOHN ALLEN: I just don't know that I-- . Coming home was not very pleasant, of course, for Vietnam vets. I mean, you came home to a bunch of protests everywhere you stopped. But I wasn't upset or angry at the protesters either.

[00:44:47.62] MARK FRANKLIN: You experienced that yourself when you came home, protesters?

[00:44:49.65] JOHN ALLEN: Not on a wide scale, but of course, when you stop in San Francisco, always. I mean, I got back to the bases, and sometimes going to parties, you would hear-- generally professors, why don't you guys just refuse to go fight? What if you just didn't fight? Wouldn't that end the war?

[00:45:16.78] Then I began-- the only time I've ever defended our position otherwise, I thought that was just a naive position for them to take. But generally, but nobody treated us badly, except the protesters, at any of these parties. Now what I did see on a couple of those parties and that Air Force base was a couple of persons that had been POWs came in their POW uniform, and I thought, man, how morbid is that?

[00:45:47.05] And-- first time I began to think about them having some problems. Because I didn't talk about the war much, and there wasn't an intentional suppression of anything. I just didn't feel the need to be talking about the war. Anywhere. So--

[00:46:07.79] MARK FRANKLIN: And of course, your family was really happy to see when you got back.

[00:46:11.45] JOHN ALLEN: Oh yeah, they were ecstatic. I mean, when I got back, all-- everybody's there, and big party with six sisters and spouses and nephews and nieces and-- .

[00:46:26.66] MARK FRANKLIN: You stayed in when you came back home.

[00:46:28.58] JOHN ALLEN: For a while.

[00:46:29.17] MARK FRANKLIN: You stayed in the house for a little bit, yeah?

[00:46:30.50] JOHN ALLEN: Yeah, and I didn't have a very good experience. I went to MacDill Air Force Base. And I was an instructor pilot who checked out instructor pilots. But not at the Fighter Weapons School out at Nellis, but this just was our role.

[00:46:49.04] And I got back and went in this one squadron, and the commander there had all these young white captains and first lieutenants. He was checking out his fighter pilots. And I would think I was the only one who had two tours and chest full of medals. And I looked around. Everybody was being made fighter pilot except me.

[00:47:11.52] And so I went to the wing commander and said-- well, I went to HR, personnel, said, I want out. Oh, well, what do you mean, sir? I said, I want out. I want to process. I want to get out, whatever it takes.

[00:47:29.43] And naturally, called to the wing commander, and he asked me what the problem was, and I told him. And he said, do you want to be an instructor pilot? I said, that's not going to keep me in the military. He says, young man, that's not what I asked.

[00:47:43.74] I asked if you want to be an instructor pilot. I said, yeah. When I got back to the squadron, I was an instructor pilot. I had perfect ratings. And in fact, my last OER in Southeast Asia, a BG said, promote immediately.

[00:48:05.39] And that's the same one who came down and asked me to be his aide. So I was going to be way ahead of--

[00:48:13.82] MARK FRANKLIN: You would have been promoted early.

[00:48:15.65] JOHN ALLEN: Four years below the zone.

[00:48:17.04] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:48:18.47] JOHN ALLEN: In fact, my last medal had major on it, on the citation and the-- so I just decided that was it, I'm out. And I had one rater to rate me less than perfect. Everything else was perfect.

[00:48:35.69] We had the old nine-four system, I don't know if you remember that. It would be nine nine eight, nine eight. And I mean, that set me off.

[00:48:46.98] And-- but to the Air Force's credit, they called me from everywhere, stay in. Says, you're still in the top 5%. You're going to be a general.

[00:49:00.17] And in fact, I received a letter from the Department of Air Force asking me to go to school. They would send me to school to get a master's in engineering and go teach at the Air Force Academy, which, of course, would have been a plum. But I just decided I would never subject myself to it, so I got out.

[00:49:23.15] MARK FRANKLIN: So you got out, I think it was in 1973?

[00:49:25.94] JOHN ALLEN: 1973.

[00:49:29.66] MARK FRANKLIN: And you went to law school?

[00:49:31.67] JOHN ALLEN: Went to law school.

[00:49:32.75] MARK FRANKLIN: And the rest is history. Can you talk just a little bit about what happened after you left the Air Force?

[00:49:37.58] JOHN ALLEN: Let me tell you about a good thing that happened as a result of the Air Force.

[00:49:40.07] MARK FRANKLIN: Yes, sir.

[00:49:41.39] JOHN ALLEN: I went to law school from MacDill. I was checked out at a couple of schools, and I wanted to go to University of Florida. I hadn't even gone-- completed the

application process. And I got there, and I think I was the dean of admissions at the law school talking with me.

[00:49:58.56] And he says, what do you do? I said, well, I'm a fighter pilot. He says, aw, hell. Said, just come on up here, we'll finish your application later on. So I got in on affirmative action, Fighter Pilot Affirmative Action Program.

[00:50:14.72] MARK FRANKLIN: Is that something created just for you because you're a fighter pilot or that they--

[00:50:17.18] JOHN ALLEN: Well, I think he did.

[00:50:18.32] MARK FRANKLIN: Yeah.

[00:50:18.65] JOHN ALLEN: This guy did.

[00:50:19.55] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure.

[00:50:19.97] JOHN ALLEN: He said, look, if you can fly fighters in a combat setting, you can teach people to fly. So you can handle this. So don't worry about it, you're in. And so it paid off.

[00:50:37.68] JOHN ALLEN: Initially, as a very young pilot, I wasn't giving a lot of thought to the lessons to be learned. It was more learning what this environment is about and surviving. But in my second tour, I did begin to think a lot about, what is this really all about?

[00:50:59.76] Not with a mindset toward being rebellious about it, but just thinking more about what we're doing and what's the message that's getting out and whether it's true or not true and whether this was a career that I could continue to follow in that vein. And I don't think I could have. But I don't think that vein of thought continued long after Vietnam. But I didn't know that it would not, if you follow what I'm saying.

[00:51:31.98] MARK FRANKLIN: Sure.

[00:51:34.23] JOHN ALLEN: So that was another reason. I was just kind of in limbo at the time looking for a reason to get out, and that colonel gave it to me.

[00:51:42.74] MARK FRANKLIN: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[00:51:46.26] JOHN ALLEN: Not very favorably for a couple of reasons. I think there was too much deception of the public, subsequently learned, to think that any of our missions there were noble enough to warrant giving proper merit to all the people who went. But I think the public back then confused us with the messenger. You know what I mean?

[00:52:23.87] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:52:25.30] JOHN ALLEN: But there's a change now with appreciating those that went as Soldiers. So-- .

[00:52:35.29] MARK FRANKLIN: Applications for veterans today, you think?

[00:52:38.62] JOHN ALLEN: Beg your pardon?

[00:52:39.43] MARK FRANKLIN: Experiences from Vietnam, and do you think there were any lessons there that apply to our veterans today from Iraq and Afghanistan?

[00:52:46.60] JOHN ALLEN: Yes. I think, basically, we have very good military persons and lots of outstanding young guys who face some impossible odds and requests to perform, and they do. And they do it now with great celebration from and appreciation shown by the public because the public gets a taste of the war every day, and they can call them up and say, you're doing a great job.

[00:53:18.85] So they could learn from vets in Vietnam that even when it's not there, there'll be times it's not there that you still have to do your job. And it works out.

[00:53:33.75] MARK FRANKLIN: Yes, sir. How about the American public at large? If there was a lesson from Vietnam that you'd like to pass on to this generation and future generations of Americans, what might that lesson be?

[00:53:52.08] JOHN ALLEN: Other than those who were protesting against the war, the message was somehow that these people are a little less human than Americans, quite frankly. They painted them all to be devils, and they were not. That's something as I learned that these people just wanted to enjoy-- I keep putting it on a very mundane basis-- enjoy their bowl of rice with their kids.

[00:54:21.72] And Thais were known for smiling and being gregarious persons. And they just cared about surviving as a family. But they were not projected that way in the war.

[00:54:34.28] MARK FRANKLIN: Right.

[00:54:35.58] JOHN ALLEN: In other words, we had to build our credibility by downplaying the value of the persons in whose country we were fighting. And that was not a very smart way to go about fighting a war, especially if the subsequent impressions and pictures to be painted by history.

[00:55:08.69] JOHN ALLEN: To the extent you celebrate the contributions of vets in general (Vietnam era vet might need it more), but only for the purpose of educating the public about the reality of the war and of the persons who went and their lives and their perspectives is good.

[00:55:32.42] MARK FRANKLIN: Thank you sir. Sir, it's been my tremendous honor.

[00:55:35.03] JOHN ALLEN: My great pleasure.