

## **Caron, Robert US Army**

[00:00:17.92] ROBERT CARON: Born in Accord, New York, 1933.

[00:00:21.73] JOE GALLOWAY: And who were your family members?

[00:00:23.89] ROBERT CARON: Mother, father, four sisters, and one brother.

[00:00:27.91] JOE GALLOWAY: What did your dad do?

[00:00:30.22] ROBERT CARON: He worked in a lime quarry--

[00:00:32.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:00:32.86] ROBERT CARON: --driving a truck.

[00:00:38.76] ROBERT CARON: After the first grade, all us children were taken from our families and put into a foster home. And so we wandered around for-- many, many foster homes. None of them were very good.

[00:00:56.20] But what happened was, by doing this, we became in contact with a lovely woman.

[00:01:04.62] She was good friends with the number two Republican leader in New York, Arthur H. Wicks. So she told him about this young boy that she liked, which obviously was me, and then, would he like to meet me? So we did. We talked a few times. He liked me.

[00:01:23.46] So he said, well, what about you go in the West Point? I said, well, I live 20 miles from West Point. So, of course, I thought about it. He said, OK, let's make it happen. So he did-- got me a principalship. I passed all the tests, and then went to West Point.

[00:01:39.42] So as I was trying to say before-- what I was thinking. God closes a door and opens a window. So maybe that's what that was. So I don't really--

[00:01:50.94] JOE GALLOWAY: West Point, what class? Class of-- ?

[00:01:53.19] ROBERT CARON: My claim to fame, Joe, is I am a classmate of Norm Schwarzkopf, 1956.

[00:01:58.92] JOE GALLOWAY: '56.

[00:01:59.97] ROBERT CARON: We say, Black '56, sometimes. But I have no idea why. We really weren't that bad.

[00:02:06.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me any memorable stories from your time at the academy.

[00:02:13.51] ROBERT CARON: Well, the time we beat Duke, 14-13, we stood all game, never sat down. And actually from high school, my girlfriend went to Duke. And I went to Army. Of course, couldn't get married because I'm at West Point, right?

[00:02:31.96] Anyway, we were corresponding back and forth. They had an All-American end, defensive guy, named Ed Meadows. She knew him, personally, whatever that meant. I don't know.

[00:02:50.59] Back then, the players played both ways. So our quarterback was-- well, Don Holleder was quarterback. He also played safety.

[00:03:02.02] And let me see. Their quarterback, Worth "a million" Lutz he was called, played safety. So Pat Uebel, captain of our football team and also a wonderful player, All-American really, he broke down their sidelines,

[00:03:22.01] one person in front of him, he juke'd him to the center. He went for it. He went straight for a touchdown, and we won. And later on, one of the people were talking about, what do you think of Worth "a million" Lutz? He said, oh, you mean Worth "a shit" Lutz? Because he let Pat Uebel go untouched into the end zone.

[00:03:41.83] Oh, and the other thing that saved the game, we had an All-American defensive end-- Lowell Sisson and Bob Mischak. Bob Mischak was awesome. He played for the Berlin Bears after he got out of West Point. And then he played for the New York team. I'm not sure which one it was. Then he played for a California team.

[00:04:04.57] But he was All-American. Oh, he was blocked down about the 10, 15, 20-yard line. Duke's All-American halfback cut three and was running for the end zone. Bob chased him down, caught him on the 10-yard line. He slid to the 6 or 7-yard line.

[00:04:26.57] So they had first and goal from the 6 or 7. But our guys, our coaches had G-2'd Duke's tendencies. So they went four times straight up the middle. And we got them every time. So we won 14-13. I don't know why they didn't kick a field goal. That was pretty exciting.

[00:04:52.95] ROBERT CARON: Initially went artillery at Fort Sill-- no, I'm sorry, not Fort Sill, Fort Bliss. Artillery had field artillery at Fort Bliss and anti-aircraft artillery-- missiles and stuff-- at Fort-- what did I say, Fort Sill?

[00:05:11.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Fort Bliss.

[00:05:11.97] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. That's at Fort Bliss. Fort Sill was--

[00:05:15.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Standard artillery.

[00:05:16.65] ROBERT CARON: Yes. Standard or field artillery. Then we went from there to-- my friend, Jack Plato Chambers, and I had to put in for somewhere here in the States. But one

day, we were sitting together in class and said, what the hell is wrong with us? They tell us, pretty much, that we'll get our first choice out of the academy.

[00:05:37.35] So we called-- went out to the street, got on a payphone, called Washington and said, no, we both want to go to Germany. So I went to a field artillery unit. And he went to the 3rd Armored at Hanau.

[00:05:50.67] Oh, after I go to jump school. Oh, jump school-- my good friend, Norm Levy. You know the 300-foot towers? Have you ever seen them at Fort Benning? He's up there.

[00:06:01.86] They put you up there. Then they release you. The canopy is already open. They release you. You can float down, learn how to steer a little bit. OK?

[00:06:11.19] Norm's up there-- Norm Levy, he's up there. All of a sudden, every snap on that parapet, whatever you want to call it, comes loose. And you're looking at a cigarette, basically. And they don't know what to do. They're so scared that the--

[00:06:27.84] JOE GALLOWAY: You can't drop him though.

[00:06:28.53] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, because there's no time for the chute to open, 300 feet. So they're trying to decide what to do. So this hook, whatever the hell it was, we'll let you down slowly. And I still remember the NCO saying, don't move. Don't even breathe.

[00:06:46.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Don't even breathe.

[00:06:46.98] ROBERT CARON: So he let them down. He got all the way down and they saved him. And he remembers that, of course.

[00:06:52.95] JOE GALLOWAY: I bet he does.

[00:06:54.48] ROBERT CARON: Let's see. That's jump school. Oh, we had a lot of bad weather. And one of the young guys, I forget his name-- Bill Haponski, I think. He landed, the wind caught his chute, and it was dragging him through the mud and water face down.

[00:07:15.24] And he couldn't get enough strength to get out of the mud and stuff. And he probably would have drowned, died, whatever. But the NCOIC on the ground jumped in his Jeep and saw that and raced after him and emptied the parachute.

[00:07:29.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Saved his life.

[00:07:30.80] ROBERT CARON: Basically, saved his life. A lot of people say, go to field artillery and then go fly. Because initially out of West Point I thought I might go Air Force. But like Norm, I didn't think that was what my ultimate goal was.

[00:07:45.69] So I went artillery and then flight school. And we went to San Marcos, Texas, for basic. Then we went to Fort Rucker for what they call B phase; short-fuel landings and stuff like that. It was, I think--

[00:08:06.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Something you wanted to do.

[00:08:07.29] ROBERT CARON: --something I wanted to do and, I think, as it turned out, preferably to go in the Air Force. I don't know how I'd have done flying 100--if you're not-- you've met a lot of pilots, right?

[00:08:19.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:08:19.50] ROBERT CARON: If you ain't gung ho, best pilot in the world, you're not going to make it.

[00:08:25.17] JOE GALLOWAY: You ain't gonna make it.

[00:08:25.93] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. And I'm not that kind of guy. So I think it worked out better for me. But now I do have some stories, flight school in Germany. You ready?

[00:08:37.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:08:37.92] ROBERT CARON: OK. I did two or three stupid things, as we all do. Anyway, we're at Grafenwoehr for training. I'm in a 280 outfit, which is the only nuclear-capable artillery piece in the world.

[00:08:54.24] JOE GALLOWAY: 280 millimeters.

[00:08:55.02] ROBERT CARON: 280 millimeter. It's a big, big gun that A and B unit would move in, lift it up and then travel. When it moved, this guy would turn right. And then this guy, the aft one, would turn left. And that's how they got around corners.

[00:09:12.99] We stayed at Fulda back in the Cold War days. And our objective was, if the bad guys came through the Fulda Gap, which you may not recall is historically the avenue to invade Germany--

[00:09:27.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:09:28.12] ROBERT CARON: --we were supposed to put a nuclear round--

[00:09:30.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Right in the middle of it.

[00:09:31.29] ROBERT CARON: --in that gap. Would we have done it?

[00:09:34.17] JOE GALLOWAY: How far can that thing shoot?

[00:09:36.33] ROBERT CARON: About 30 miles.

[00:09:37.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Is that enough to give you a running start in the other direction if the wind is coming this way?

[00:09:44.43] ROBERT CARON: Oh, yeah.

[00:09:45.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah?

[00:09:45.87] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. It was very interesting. Anyway, I'm there. And somebody wanted to go home, back to Darmstadt. I was in Darmstadt, which is about an hour-and-a-half ride.

[00:10:00.83] So I started to go in the snowstorm. Pretty soon, even stupid Bob realizes, hey, this ain't going to work. So I turn around to come back. Now I can't see to come back.

[00:10:11.72] Now, in Germany, we have the Autobahn. I know if I can get to the Autobahn, I turn left and the airfield is right there. So I get back there, find the Autobahn, turn left and follow it just to the right.

[00:10:26.12] Somehow, I missed the airfield. And I'm flying. And I'm flying. And I'm flying.

[00:10:32.57] Do you know what I see next? Big barricades. I said, what the hell can that be? Then it comes to me. This is the East-West German border.

[00:10:44.96] So I did a hairy turn. Low level like that, you can kill yourself. So I did a hairy 180, came back.

[00:10:51.57] Long story short, I found the airfield. And I kept making circles over it. And each time I made a circle, I'd back up to where I knew where I was.

[00:11:00.38] So finally, at a point, I was on final. And I knew the airfield was there, although I couldn't see it. So I let down that--

[00:11:07.84] JOE GALLOWAY: What were you flying?

[00:11:09.23] ROBERT CARON: Oh, L-19. I got 2,000 hours of L-19. I probably couldn't fly it-

-

[00:11:14.38] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a Piper Cub, basically.

[00:11:15.44] ROBERT CARON: Basically, yeah. But a big engine. I think over 200 horsepower. And the problem with single-engine airplanes-- you may or may not know-- if you apply the power too abruptly, you get a tendency to yaw to the left. And I've done that once or twice. All right. So that was once.

[00:11:33.86] Oh, then another snowstorm, I was in Heidelberg trying to get up the river past Mannheim to Darmstadt. I'm going, going. I say, if I follow the river, I'll be all right. I look up there. And I see three or four big, huge smokestacks.

[00:11:50.59] And I thought, oh, no. This is not for me. So I turned around and went back. So I could have probably wiped myself out twice. I think every pilot does that. And they say the most dangerous pilot is the one with 500 hours. He thinks he got the--

[00:12:06.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Thinks he's got it all.

[00:12:07.25] ROBERT CARON: He got it all. Squirrel by the tail.

[00:12:11.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Did all of the training and all of the experience you had to that point prepare you for what you faced when you landed in Vietnam?

[00:12:23.63] ROBERT CARON: First of all, I'm airplane and chopper qualified. And as most airplane pilots are, we're not crazy about choppers. We don't like choppers. We can fly them. But we don't like them.

[00:12:36.62] And then I get into the queen of the Army fleet, the Caribou. After I finish the advanced course, I get sent to Fort Benning, 187th. And I go to Caribou transition. I'm happier than a pig in you know what.

[00:12:51.86] Then all of a sudden, 1st Cav is at Benning looking, scrounging for chopper guys. Me and Lou Caldwell, and another guy-- they got this two-story building. We're up on the first floor in the Caribou, the 187th. Upstairs are those bad guys, the stupid Chinook drivers, which we don't understand how it flies with two rotors and all that stuff. So we're snickering. Too bad about you guys.

[00:13:23.51] So Benny says, the first guy said, Washington, we can't find chopper guys. There ain't none left. And they said, you're not doing your job. Back then, we had the IBM punch cards. He said, go through those again. Guess what?

[00:13:39.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Got you.

[00:13:40.40] ROBERT CARON: Bob Caron, Lou Caldwell, and then the third guy. So there we are snickering down here in the Caribou outfit. Go upstairs to the Chinook. I can't fly a Chinook. I'm not qualified. I don't have the basic hours. I don't have cargo time. I don't have this. I don't have that. We'll waive all that.

[00:13:59.48] So I went to Rucker for Chinook transition. So it turned out I liked the Chinook. And the Chinook did me good things. When I got to Air America later on, the Chinook time was important. It helped me get a good job.

[00:14:15.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, at any point, have they given you Huey training?

[00:14:20.09] ROBERT CARON: That's another thing. You know when I got Huey training? After all this time-- I've sat with people. And I played with the stick a little bit. Never got trained, properly checked out until I went with Air America.

[00:14:34.79] I flew airplanes in Saigon. I was on the same ramp that I was with the Army. Army was here, Air America was here. That's how I got involved, I guess. So anyway, where was I?

[00:14:49.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Hueys.

[00:14:49.64] ROBERT CARON: Hueys. OK. So then I couldn't make captain in airplanes, I asked Red Dawson, the personnel guy, what about me going choppers? I got a lot of chopper time. He said, I'll look into it.

[00:15:02.34] So they sent me to Udorn. I spent five years there. They did the peace treaty in Laos in, what, March '73. So they kicked us out. And I was the last American to fly the line in Laos.

[00:15:14.18] Came back. Went to Saigon. Hey, you never checked out in Huey. This is the end of 1973. How come you're not checked out in the Huey? Oh, OK. So I flew, got checked out. Shit. Couple hours, I was ready to go.

[00:15:32.85] JOE GALLOWAY: You were good to go. Where did you land in Vietnam for the first time? What rank were you? And what were your first impressions?

[00:15:45.05] ROBERT CARON: I had a tough trip to Vietnam, first of all. They made me supply officer, which I didn't want at first. But later on, I worked it to my advantage. Four or five people had to go early to organize logistics, stuff like that.

[00:16:03.62] JOE GALLOWAY: For who?

[00:16:04.94] ROBERT CARON: For? I'm sorry. Oh yeah, I went upstairs to the Chinook company, the 147th. Right after we got there, Lou and I, we were told we were all-- well, that July, LBJ said, I'm sending the 1st Cav over there.

[00:16:19.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Sending the 1st Cav.

[00:16:20.31] ROBERT CARON: So then the next thing, we got orders. So then we went. I went with advance party to--

[00:16:26.04] JOE GALLOWAY: To An Khe.

[00:16:27.69] ROBERT CARON: No, no, no, no, no. You're talking to Bob Caron. I don't go to An Khe.

[00:16:33.62] JOE GALLOWAY: You're not cutting any air field with a machete.

[00:16:37.13] ROBERT CARON: That's right. And I feel bad about that to a degree. But I went with the 147th. We were direct support of all of MACV. Of course, the 1st Cav had their own Chinook company, two Huey companies and a Chinook company, 228th or something like that.

[00:16:53.97] So anyway, I had to go advance party. I had to go on a Pan Am flight. I had to meet this gorgeous stewardess.

[00:17:02.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, of course you did.

[00:17:03.40] ROBERT CARON: There's a story to that later on.

[00:17:05.13] JOE GALLOWAY: And your rank at this point?

[00:17:06.77] ROBERT CARON: Is a captain. I made captain. Our whole class made captain in, I think, '61.

[00:17:11.96] So anyway, I go there, advanced party. And I coordinate with some of the Chinook people already, because, see, the first problem you got Vietnam is that Kinnard didn't want us or anybody to take stuff in the CONEX other than authorized parts. And there are some parts that, if you don't have, the aircraft is grounded come hell or high water.

[00:17:37.74] So we stored them into these CONEXs And that's how we survived the first six months, because what's the supply train? 7,000 miles, 8,000 miles?

[00:17:48.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:17:49.00] ROBERT CARON: It was a hell of a job. So we resolved it. But I'll tell you what. We started flying end of December, January, February, March. We're out of time. We didn't have enough parts to fix the aircraft. So in March of '66--

[00:18:06.95] JOE GALLOWAY: You're starting to ground for lack of maintenance.

[00:18:09.29] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. We're playing volleyball on the beach. We had a tough time. And now, I'm sorry. You were talking about An Khe, elephant grass and stuff.

[00:18:24.11] I had to live in an apartment building. So my brother and I are out there sweating. Me and the doctors and my flight surgeon-- we're still friends, he's still alive-- and another guy-- I forget his name now-- we roomed together on the third or fourth floor. We had a hell of a time. We were difficult.

[00:18:50.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe the atmosphere in Vietnam during your two Army years there.

[00:18:57.65] ROBERT CARON: The first year, Chinooks of course. It was hot and humid. You know that.

[00:19:05.43] But we were kind of naive, I think. We were there to serve, to save democracy. At that time, we all believed in the Domino Theory: Vietnam falls, Laos falls, Thailand falls, Cambodia falls, Then what, India's next?

[00:19:25.34] So we were very concerned. So we thought we were doing our duty there. We thought we were doing the right thing.

[00:19:34.37] Today, who knows if it was the right thing or not? Maybe if we embraced Ho Chi Minh, we could have done it a little differently. But we were eager to be there, do our thing, and save democracy, so to speak.

[00:19:52.44] One of the things we did with the Chinooks. One day, we're standing around operations, get this message down from MACV. Take two Chinooks, go into Site 85 in Laos and move a TACAN for the US Air Force to the top of this site called Site 85.

[00:20:12.63] What the hell are they talking about? Where is Site 85? The route was from Vung Tau, that's the R&R center of Vietnam. I didn't tell you about that. So I had to stay there for the whole year.

[00:20:26.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, boy.

[00:20:26.75] ROBERT CARON: Bum luck. Anyway, Vung Tau, Pleiku, right where you were at, Dak To, the Special Forces camp, jump over Laos into Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand, refuel, go from there to Udorn-- Ratchathani, whatever-- Udorn. And then there we go across to Vientiane in Laos, which was only about 20 miles away across the river.

[00:20:54.47] We get there. The CIA want it. They blacken out Army. They take all our ID. Got nothing left. We follow an Air America Porter-- see, this was before I knew much about Air America-- Porter, north from Vientiane near Site 85, to Site 85, which is about 20 miles from Dien Bien Phu over into-- you know where that is, of course.

[00:21:19.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:21:19.55] ROBERT CARON: So we did that and move the TACAN from the base of the mountain to the top down because the Air Force didn't have the Jolly Greens yet, the heavy-lift chopper. They got those, I think, two years later.

[00:21:32.87] JOE GALLOWAY: So you set up Site 85.

[00:21:34.70] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. But nobody knows what a wonderful mission we had. And the thing is, near as I can figure out, it's about 700 miles, maybe more, one way. We did that, went up there, came back.

[00:21:49.41] And I don't think we got one caution light the whole cotton-picking time. It was a miracle. I mean, choppers, what do they say, 10 hours of maintenance for how many hours of flight. But we did that successfully and had no problem.

[00:22:03.44] I talked to Dick Secord. And he may begrudgingly say, yeah, we did it. But the Air Force, they didn't want the world to know the Army had to help them do that.

[00:22:17.54] So anyway, we did that. And we got back safely. And the thing was, when I got with Air America later, I spent some time at Pakse, which is right across the border from Ubon Ratchathani, and the Bolaven plains plateau there. Down on the other side is that city we passed in our Chinooks that's controlled by the bad people.

[00:22:40.22] And the other thing was-- we say Monday morning quarterbacking now-- what if one of the birds had a severe problem, had to land? Do we leave it? Do we get on one chopper and continue the mission? Of course, we could have. I think, we had two because, in case one did go down, you had the other one.

[00:23:04.07] Nobody told us anything about the route. So we flew over all this bad country. And nobody told us anything.

[00:23:11.75] Anyway, we get it done. Nobody showed any appreciation for what we did. I think that's higher than-- to me, more whatever you want to call it than my rooftop thing. Rooftop thing was just right time, right-- right--

[00:23:34.65] ROBERT CARON: The worst day is in December of '66 when my request to be transferred to the 61st Caribou Company, the guy-- I told the guy-- I met my friend walking across the ramp. He says, Bob, you can forget about going to the 61st.

[00:23:49.88] I said, what do you mean? It's all approved. He said, no. 1 January, '67, the Air Force takes possession of all Caribous. Oh, I think if Harold K. Johnson, the Army chief of staff, knew how much we loved that bird and how successful with it--

[00:24:07.05] JOE GALLOWAY: He would he would have fought for it.

[00:24:08.34] ROBERT CARON: --he would have fought for it. But instead, he says, oh, we did this wonderful thing, me and the Air Force chief of staff. We didn't have to get our government people involved. We just did it.

[00:24:19.86] The Air Force said, OK, you can fly choppers now and armed choppers. We were already doing that. OK? What the hell did they do for us? Nothing.

[00:24:28.56] JOE GALLOWAY: There wasn't any trade. Yeah.

[00:24:30.06] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. That's a trade crap. So anyway, then I said, well, what do I do now? Then I went to MACV Flight Detachment. They flew VIPs.

[00:24:37.98] JOE GALLOWAY: What were you flying there?

[00:24:40.02] ROBERT CARON: U-8F, U-21, Beaver. Oh. Then I finally got checked out in the Beaver because--

[00:24:46.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Beaver.

[00:24:47.19] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, because, well, I was in Saigon, another tough assignment. And I was flying the fixed-wing, the multi-engine. And the other pilot said, what the hell is Bob doing just flying multi-engines? Get his butt in that Beaver, the single engine. I flew Charlton Heston in the Beaver, by the way. Anyway, so they got me checked out in that.

[00:25:13.17] Oh, and then-- oh, hardship-- the only hardship was, I got into a building in Cholon, the Chinese section of Saigon. And I'm thinking, why am I here and not downtown on Tu Do Street, Nguyen Hue? If you know those places, you know what I'm talking about.

[00:25:36.87] JOE GALLOWAY: I know them all.

[00:25:37.07] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. Anyway, so I go to the personnel, the BOQ people, and said, why in the hell am I not somewhere better? I should have a better choice. Well, you only came in the country November of '67. I said, whoa, whoa, whoa, how about November of '65-- oh, not-- '66.

[00:26:01.97] Nobody's more senior than me in the country-- nobody. So he says, OK, where do you want to go? So they ship my butt down to what they call the tax building, which was-- I'm supposed to be talking about a hardship tour, aren't I?

[00:26:16.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:26:17.06] ROBERT CARON: I'm giving the wrong impression. Anyway, I got a nice building out of it and flew all kinds of generals. I flew Charlton Heston in the Beaver. I flew him from Saigon about 100 miles to Can Tho. And after we landed, I said, sir, with all of your influence, you should not be running around Vietnam in a single-engine airplane.

[00:26:46.34] When you get back to Saigon, if you get back of course, make sure you tell somebody-- the nearest general you find, and say-- I've been told I should be in a multi-engine airplane flying around Vietnam. Can we please work that out? So we did.

[00:27:03.74] Glenn Ford, in uniform, because he was called to active duty. James Garner, nice guy. Raymond Burr, not too heavy yet. And finally, Chuck Connors. Here's a great story. Chuck Connors was a baseball player, first baseman for the Dodgers.

[00:27:24.89] One weekend, he runs down to Tijuana and watches a bullfight. Well, the guy does well, and as the occasion may be, when the bullfighter does well, the audience somehow awards him the tail and ears. So they did all that.

[00:27:41.54] And Chuck was saying to himself, how about that? He does a little bit of that and gets all this reward. How about me when I hit a home run? Nothing, I just trot around the bases. So he said, I've got to change that.

[00:27:56.67] He goes back to the Dodgers, home run-- he hits a home run. He stands there, he looks at the umpire behind him and says, what do you think of that, ump? And the ump says, get your butt around the bases.

[00:28:08.01] So he trots down to first base-- you know, does a little trot. And the first base coach is there. And he said, you know, I have never stolen second base. I'm gonna steal second base. So he runs like hell, goes headfirst into second base.

[00:28:25.77] And he gets up, dusts himself off, trots over to third base. Now, he says to the third base ump, I have never stolen home plate. So he [VOCALIZING TROT SOUNDS], slides into home plate, gets up, dusts himself off. And the crowd goes nuts.

[00:28:43.77] Two days later, he gets this phone call. This is so-and-so, and so-and-so. I'm a movie producer. We think we can use a guy like you. And that's how he got into The Rifleman. Good story. And he was a nice guy.

[00:28:57.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you come home before you signed on with Air America?

[00:29:00.75] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. I left the Army in the middle of December of '76.

[00:29:05.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me about the trip home.

[00:29:08.53] ROBERT CARON: Uneventful.

[00:29:09.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Uneventful.

[00:29:10.18] ROBERT CARON: Well, not really. No-- I'm trying to think-- let me back up. In that second year, when I was flying, I made a couple of flights from Saigon to Bangkok. This airplane called into-- you know they have what's called flight center. You talk to them as you're flying around, so they keep track of where you are and how you're doing in case you have a problem.

[00:29:36.06] This airplane-- this guy calls up-- it's a 144, a big four-engine bird. We saw him parked there at Saigon. And he said, this is so-and-so, and so-and-so. I lost number three engine. And Center says, come again. You're coming in garbled. I lost number three engine.

[00:29:56.55] OK, Roger. We understand you've shut down number three engine. Are you going to be OK? No, I lost number three engine. It fell completely off the aircraft.

[00:30:07.91] [LAUGHTER]

[00:30:09.06] And I don't know how you could survive that because of the wiring and gas and stuff. But that's what I heard. I swear to God. So anyway, getting back, middle of December, I rotated back at Oakland, got discharged. I should have gone Reserve, but I didn't. I was thinking, maybe, it was in my best interest not to.

[00:30:33.72] So I get back-- oh, I've already had contact with Air America from my Saigon people. I talked to Washington. They said, come over here for the interview. So the end of-- middle of January, I was in Washington talking to the personnel guy, Red Dawson, I think his name was. And we interviewed. Everything went OK. He said, OK, here's your tickets. Get your butt to Saigon.

[00:31:00.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Back to Saigon.

[00:31:01.65] ROBERT CARON: Back to-- and my APO, 95306 or something-- the same APO I had-- address I had in the Army. But in the Army, airplanes are parked here, the Air America airplanes are parked here. So I'm flying airplanes, but I'm pretty low on the seniority thing.

[00:31:22.05] After a year, I could see I was never going to make captain. And there's no money-- not that there was all that much money to start with-- no money as a co-pilot. But I had the luck to fly him. I said, sir, I've got a lot of chopper time. What about you getting me in with the choppers up in Udorn or wherever?

[00:31:42.38] JOE GALLOWAY: This is with Air America.

[00:31:44.19] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. Red Dawson, yeah, Air America. This was early '69. He said, I'll let you know. So a month later, he sent the TWX out to my chief pilot there at Saigon-- get your butt up to Udorn. And I got checked out in the 34s, which I love.

[00:32:05.86] I love tires, I don't like all this metal. I'm not good with metal on concrete, the Huey. I never did land a Huey good. Take off is all right, but landing is not smooth. But the 34, you roll, and as you're getting up to speed--

[00:32:23.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Are you talking the old Sikorsky 34?

[00:32:25.68] ROBERT CARON: Yes, absolutely.

[00:32:27.00] JOE GALLOWAY: With the titanium skin-- or the magnesium?

[00:32:29.42] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, and we burned one up in Pakse.

[00:32:32.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah.

[00:32:33.65] ROBERT CARON: Something happened, I don't know what. And the next thing we know, it's gone--

[00:32:36.65] JOE GALLOWAY: It's gone.

[00:32:37.38] ROBERT CARON: --because of that.

[00:32:38.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. You can pick it up in a matchbox.

[00:32:39.75] [LAUGHTER]

[00:32:40.57] ROBERT CARON: I remember one time I landed on a road. And my crew chief said, holy shit! Or it was something like that, you know? What? What? Are you OK? Yeah. He said, I didn't even know we were landing. And I look out, and there's the ground right below my feet. I wasn't always that smooth though.

[00:32:59.83] JOE GALLOWAY: What aircraft did you fly during your eight years with Air America?

[00:33:05.53] ROBERT CARON: The C-45-- what's her name, the girl that disappeared in the Pacific?

[00:33:11.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, uh--

[00:33:13.02] CREW: Amelia Earhart.

[00:33:13.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Amelia Earhart.

[00:33:14.75] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, that's the one she disappeared-- C-45. Then they lengthened that, called it a Beech 18, a little bit longer. The Volpar, which is a C-45 fitted with two turbine PT6 engines. I then flew the Caribou a little bit again, because I had done it with the Army. I think that was about it.

[00:33:43.42] JOE GALLOWAY: And helicopters with Air America?

[00:33:46.78] ROBERT CARON: All fixed-wing. Oh, see, that's when I got moved up to Udorn, Thailand, and got checked out in the 34. And I flew it for almost the whole time I was there, 4 and 1/2 years. I probably got about 5,000 hours in the 34. I loved that bird. It is a beautiful bird.

[00:34:06.57] JOE GALLOWAY: That was my next question. What was your favorite aircraft to fly?

[00:34:13.08] ROBERT CARON: I want to say Caribou in the airplane. But the Air Army got the C-12, which is a King Air 200. Let me come back to that. But the chopper, the 34, is my favorite of all time.

[00:34:27.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you ever get to fly the Porter?

[00:34:30.32] ROBERT CARON: No, I would have loved to though. The Porter and the Twin Otter, I wanted to fly. But let me back up a little. I'm in Turkey, flying a C-12, up at 25,000 feet. Can you imagine, a L-19 guy flying treetop level, and a C-12 King Air 200 at 25,000 feet?

[00:34:54.42] So I'm taking off from Izmir, down in Southwest Turkey. And I'm going to Erzurum, Northeast Turkey, which is way the hell up there. And I hear an Air Force 130 saying,

I need a radio relay. That's when you're down low and you can't reach Center, but you want to let them know you're off and stuff like that.

[00:35:18.67] So I say, OK, this is Army so-and-so and so-and-so. Can I help you? May I help you? Whatever. And he said, yeah, I'm down here, out of so-and-so, with so-and-so, and can you radio relay the op's normal or whatever? I said, sure.

[00:35:32.40] So then, I go back-- after that, I go back to thinking of my early years. If I could have had a dream as an L-19 guy, or a Beaver guy, I want a radio relay from 25,000 feet for an Air Force 130 below me.

[00:35:50.10] [LAUGHTER]

[00:35:52.26] Anyway, it's good for a laugh.

[00:35:55.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were your most interesting passengers while you were flying for Air America?

[00:36:00.90] ROBERT CARON: Chuck Connors, absolutely. Oh, I forgot, Henry Fonda. You know, I was so stupid. I got one picture of all those VIPs I flew, and that was Henry Fonda. He's like this, looking out the window. And that brings up another thing. How could a man so awesome, wonderful, produce a daughter like Jane Fonda? That kills me.

[00:36:27.15] Anyway, Henry Fonda-- but Chuck Connors had that story which I told you already, that was very interesting. And he had a guy with him, a gopher with him, that was really nice. Jim Garner, just a nice guy. He had all those TV shows.

[00:36:48.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you live while you were with Air America? And what were your living conditions like?

[00:36:56.18] ROBERT CARON: I was married at the time. And I was living in a-- on the economy, no problem.

[00:37:01.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Off of Udom.

[00:37:02.72] ROBERT CARON: No, Saigon.

[00:37:03.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Saigon?

[00:37:04.52] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. And then in Udom, I lived on the economy also. Economy was pretty good. Thailand was really a great country.

[00:37:17.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, nobody's shooting at you either.

[00:37:18.71] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, yeah. Their king was awesome. He's passed away now. And the new king is--

[00:37:29.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell us about being shot down in northern Laos.

[00:37:33.74] ROBERT CARON: Well, we worked for the agency. And they will admit it. They won't just pay us for all of that. We would put troops in, like a squad, five or six people in, and they'd run around. And then we'd come back after they finished their mission, pick them up. Well, this squad was put in up north of the Old World capital of Thailand-- or no, Laos-- was Luang Prabang.

[00:38:03.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Luang Prabang.

[00:38:04.28] ROBERT CARON: Way up there. So I went in-- somebody else had dropped them off. And they had contact with them. And they said they were ready to be picked up. Their job was to analyze how they were coming on the Chinese road, just across the Laos-Chinese border. So they said they were fine.

[00:38:24.62] I went out the day before with a fixed-wing from Continental Air Services, called CASI. And we talked to the guy. He supposedly had been captured and then escaped. So you'd expect a guy like that to be a little tension in his voice. He was like you and me talking.

[00:38:44.42] In fact, I told the captain, he sounds too quiet-- not enough stress in his voice. But I said, well, maybe I'm just imagining things. So the next day, we come out-- oh, and we'd fly around, A, B, C, like that. Because if the guys down below are looking at us-- if they see us circle one spot, they know that's where the team is.

[00:39:06.72] So anyway, came back the next day with three choppers-- two for the pick-up, three and three. One is a SAR bird-- SAR, search and Rescue. His only function-- as the first two land, he's up there, 2,000 or 3,000 feet. And if we have a problem, he get his butt down there and picks us up, period. That's all he has to do.

[00:39:30.04] Anyway, I'm coming down-- I'm the hero. I wanted to be the leader, so I come in first. I'm coming in. And as you know, choppers, this is how you slow down. You decelerate. Well, when you decelerate, where does that put the nose? Right up here. What's in the nose? A 600-pound engine, 9 cylinders, I think it is.

[00:39:51.28] I'm looking out, all of a sudden I see smoke everywhere, on this little clearing. What it is, is AK-47 smoke. They literally knock out my engine, no power whatsoever. I'm about this high, 20 or 30 feet, so you pull the clutch to autorotate.

[00:40:11.29] And I key the button, tell the guys to come down and pick me up. We need help. But the thing is, when the engine is gone, you can't talk unless you move the toggle switch to off, or on, or battery-- to battery, I guess it was. So they didn't hear me. And I didn't have my radio, because I lost the radio when I got out. I lost the radio, lost the cart-- the thing to my Uzi.

[00:40:41.53] And he circled, and circled, and circled. Frank Stergar, I'll never forget him. He never came down and picked me up. He just orbited for a while, then went on back to Luang Prabang. Who picked me up, and the other pilot, Captain Freddy Framm was a 34 guy from 20

Alternate, the CIA headquarters, capital there, and a Huey with a guy named Ted Cash and Hal Miller. They're both--

[00:41:09.79] JOE GALLOWAY: So both of your pick-up birds were shot down?

[00:41:14.29] ROBERT CARON: No, the second-- I'm sorry. The second one just left.

[00:41:17.10] JOE GALLOWAY: He just left?

[00:41:18.09] ROBERT CARON: He just-- well, he was up there, but it wasn't his job. That's a good question. I never asked myself that question. Why didn't he become search and rescue? I don't know. Anyway, he didn't.

[00:41:30.93] JOE GALLOWAY: But you got picked up how much later?

[00:41:33.73] ROBERT CARON: Oh-- well, I was talking to you about the elephant grass before. We jumped out, and I'm looking at the other pilot. He's got blood coming down his eye, because a bullet had creased his helmet and fragments of that had penetrated the skin.

[00:41:49.24] So we cut out, and we talked for a second or two. And then, we took off in the elephant grass. We're jumping on the grass that's like tall as this building, knocking it down so we can escape. Being the leader, I'm saying, come on, guys. We'll go run over here.

[00:42:07.15] JOE GALLOWAY: You've got the other pilot and who else?

[00:42:10.06] ROBERT CARON: Oh, sorry. An interpreter to make sure we got the right guys, which is stupid. Because if they're there by the chopper and they're the wrong guys, it's too late already anyway-- and the flight mechanic. The flight mechanic was the only one that got a bullet wound.

[00:42:25.00] He got shot right in the shoulder, right here. It nicked his nerve. So it took a year for the nerve to grow back, but never got to the fingers. And I used to contact him when I went back to Thailand, a guy named Champinal, but he's passed away now also.

[00:42:42.49] But anyway, Ted Cash came over. They both were at 20 Alternate, 100 miles away. And you don't fly direct normally, because there's a lot of dangerous stuff down there. But they flew straight over there-- Hal Miller-- they both landed, filled up with fuel, and then went straight over to pick you up.

[00:43:03.76] The 34 has a hoist, some of them do. So he lowers the hoist, because I'm on the hillside and they can't land. He puts one wheel on the hillside, and then the crew chief, Bill Long-- who also passed away-- lowers the hoist. I've got this hoist collar, I'm thinking, how will I know what the hell to do. But trust me, you just get in there, and grab, and hold on, and they lift you up, and away you go.

[00:43:26.38] And then the Huey picked up Freddy Framm, the other captain, and the interpreter. I wanted to get the guy fired, but he lived with the chief pilot, so I couldn't get him fired.

[00:43:42.82] JOE GALLOWAY: [CHUCKLES] Your SAR guy.

[00:43:44.17] ROBERT CARON: But the thing was, he did the same thing again down at Pakse. A good friend of mine, Joe Lopes, he was down there. He said, OK, Frank, sweetheart, come down and pick me up. No, the CIA man on board says I can't come down. And we all know that whoever run-- who's the captain of that chopper, he decides--

[00:44:05.40] JOE GALLOWAY: He's in charge.

[00:44:05.81] ROBERT CARON: He's absolutely in charge. And again, he didn't get fired.

[00:44:14.71] ROBERT CARON: I think the Air America pilots were some of the best I've ever seen or worked with, just incredibly skilled and good people. And I think the Air Force, they always looked down upon us as mercenaries and gave us the credit for what we deserved. Because a lot of our guys were Air Force.

[00:44:36.29] My first pilot, that captain that I flew with, he came out of flight school, went into Saigon. I'm try to think of his name now. Oh, Burt Opitz. We flew down to Can Tho, down south. He flew the first leg.

[00:44:49.96] Second leg, he said, OK, you got it. I'm brand new. I wouldn't have given me the controls like that until I'd seen what you could do on a nice long airfield. But he was awesome, retired lieutenant colonel, wonderful guy.

[00:45:05.37] One of the guys that lived up here, Clyde Morehouse, was a B-52 pilot, B-52 IP, a P-51 IP. So we had some awesome, qualified people.

[00:45:18.84] JOE GALLOWAY: You were over there for a long time. And things changed back home-- social tensions, racial tensions--

[00:45:26.29] ROBERT CARON: Yeah.

[00:45:26.98] JOE GALLOWAY: --assassinations, the whole nine yards, while you were over in the elephant grass. Do you witness any of that? Any of that come over to where you were?

[00:45:40.21] ROBERT CARON: Actually, very little, Joe, very little. It's like my sister would ask me questions about this, about that. She heard about Da Nang. She heard about Pleiku. She heard about this. What about it? I said, I don't know about that. Because I'm in my little cubbyhole doing my thing. Get up at 6:00, go to fly, come back at 8, 9 o'clock at night.

[00:46:05.64] We're so busy doing our thing, we don't really think about all of this. And then she said-- I don't know if I have this right or not-- The Deerslayer movie. Do you remember that?

[00:46:16.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, vaguely.

[00:46:17.49] ROBERT CARON: About drugs, guy go dealing drugs, going into Bangkok, playing--

[00:46:23.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, not The Deerslayer, The Deer Hunter.

[00:46:28.03] ROBERT CARON: The Deer Hunter, yeah. And she believed that. She thought that was what we all were, idiotic druggies. And I said-- and the other thing is, in aviation, you kind of get the cream of the crop. You get the good people, hardworking people, and smart people.

[00:46:45.74] So I never saw-- when Hemingway's son came out with a story about-- you probably know more about that than I do-- about drugs with the troops, I didn't believe any of it. But when you're out there slugging through water this deep, you got leeches all over you, and you're fighting a war you don't really believe in-- I can see where drugs might be something you'd get into.

[00:47:14.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, but they--

[00:47:15.11] ROBERT CARON: But I never saw it, never was comfortable talking about it.

[00:47:19.27] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for recreation and off-duty time?

[00:47:23.14] [LAUGHTER]

[00:47:24.36] ROBERT CARON: Little or nothing. Now, occasionally, we got to locate the bars, local bars. We'd go down there and have a drink or two like that. But there wasn't much recreation.

[00:47:36.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Not much time off?

[00:47:38.73] ROBERT CARON: No, very little. Oh, that's when the Seiko watch became famous. We used to joke, what is it? What day is it? Oh, it's a red-letter day, which was Sunday, of course. Otherwise, we didn't know what the heck time of day it was.

[00:47:53.32] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS] Red-letter day. Share with us any memorable leaders that you recall from your time in Vietnam.

[00:48:04.38] ROBERT CARON: I don't know. In aviation, especially in MACV, there was so much rank. We had majors flying airplanes. That was their primary duty-- a major, had some lieutenant colonels. General Ware, 1st Division Commander--

[00:48:27.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Keith Ware.

[00:48:28.13] ROBERT CARON: He was killed.

[00:48:28.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:48:29.75] ROBERT CARON: He was my instructor at the Point. He was a guy that just oozed leadership and whatever-- respected. He was a major teaching Middle East history, or something like that. But he just-- fantastic leadership, wonderful, wonderful person.

[00:48:51.65] Back when he was at the Point-- oh, oh, that was-- no, no, that wasn't Ware. Ware was a colonel then. He was one of the brigade commanders. I'm trying to think. I can't think of this major's name.

[00:49:08.43] But he was a two or three-star over there later on, just wonderful leadership. It's like a congressman said, I don't know how to describe pornography. I just know it when I see it. And that's what leadership's kind of all about.

[00:49:24.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Dawson?

[00:49:29.34] ROBERT CARON: No, doesn't ring a bell.

[00:49:32.03] CREW: Red.

[00:49:32.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Red Dawson?

[00:49:34.76] ROBERT CARON: Oh, Red Dawson was the personnel guy at Air America.

[00:49:38.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:49:39.54] ROBERT CARON: He's pretty famous. Did you know him?

[00:49:42.60] JOE GALLOWAY: No, I didn't know him.

[00:49:43.83] ROBERT CARON: OK.

[00:49:44.81] JOE GALLOWAY: But you did.

[00:49:45.89] ROBERT CARON: Oh, yeah.

[00:49:46.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell us a little about him.

[00:49:49.03] ROBERT CARON: He interviewed me for a job and hired me. I can't say nothing but good.

[00:49:55.23] JOE GALLOWAY: That's leadership.

[00:49:56.07] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, that's leadership. And he's the one that I flew-- I had so much luck. I flew him at that time, and I asked him about going to choppers, and it worked out fine. But I also flew-- who did I fly? Oh, General Weyand, the Army Chief of Staff. I flew him at

middle or the end of March. He was over there to evaluate what we could do to help the Vietnamese.

[00:50:24.66] And we were going to go to Lai Khe, a little bit northwest of Saigon. Lai Khe is the little town right next to it. That's one of the first places I saw any action. He said he wanted to go up there and talk to somebody. So I said, sir, the last time I was in there, I got mortared. He talked to his colonel with him. What do you think? Colonel says, no problem.

[00:50:48.79] So I said, OK, we're going up to Lai Khe. Air America operations called me up and said, Bob, Lai Khe's getting mortared. That's how good their intelligence was. So I turned to the general. I said, sir, they're getting mortared. What would you like to do? And he turned to the colonel. They talked a little bit. Then we went back to Bien Hoa. He was from Bien Hoa.

[00:51:14.31] Oh, and I asked him. I said, sir, this war's coming to an end. How do I get back in the Army? He said, I don't know. Call somebody, somebody in there. So that was my first thought about getting back in the Army.

[00:51:27.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Getting back in.

[00:51:29.77] ROBERT CARON: That's all I knew from high school. High school, I had a week off, went right to the Point. Like the group this year, you go into the Point the first Monday of the month of July. Guess what that is this year, the 1st.

[00:51:46.02] What you'd like, and I would've liked, was the 6th or 7th, the first Monday, so I could have another week off from high school. Because I got out of high school, and that was it.

[00:52:03.53] ROBERT CARON: I don't know if we had any best days. They all run in together. All I can tell you is about the worst days. I don't know that I had a best day. I mean, that may sound silly. But two years, you'd think you'd have a good day in there somewhere, wouldn't you?

[00:52:31.73] ROBERT CARON: Not that much.

[00:52:32.31] JOE GALLOWAY: The Koreans, Australians, New Zealand.

[00:52:34.43] ROBERT CARON: Not that much. The Koreans were pretty much fighters on the ground. I know they were in from Chu Lai; where the Navy was set up, they had a division over there in the hills. And I would see them at the PX, when the PX got cameras and stuff in. They had good intelligence.

[00:52:56.29] JOE GALLOWAY: They'd be down there with a deuce-and-a-half or two.

[00:52:59.41] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, right. The Aussies, a little bit. The Aussies had Caribous also. I got to know a few of them a little bit, but nothing close, that I can remember.

[00:53:19.72] ROBERT CARON: Well, you heard so much about them not being good. But one of my West Point classmates, his-- oh, oh, it was my roommate's brother. He knew him. He worked with an adviser in Saigon. His daughter was very sick.

[00:53:35.50] And you always heard about the Vietnamese-- the Vietnamese wanted this. They wanted that. They wanted everything. That guy, although he probably knew he could have gotten some kind of help from his adviser, never asked him for one favor. (EMOTIONALLY) That was very impressive.

[00:54:00.49] And near the end, the Vietnamese fought very, very well. I think, my first action I saw in the Chinook was a place north of Vung Tau, called Xuan Loc. That was one of the last big battles. And the Vietnamese fought courageously, valiantly.

[00:54:19.71] And they got-- what happened is, the Viet Cong-- very clever leadership-- they came out of the forest, the rubber plantation, fought with them, and then withdrew back through the rubber plantation. And then once the Vietnamese, sensing victory, followed him, they called in the artillery, and M79s, and stuff.

[00:54:43.68] But they fought well to the end. I think all in all, they were underrated. One of their problems was, Westmoreland gave them second-rate weapons. And they were outgunned by the AK-47. AK-47 what-- you probably know better than me, Joe-- one of the great weapons of combat.

[00:55:06.77] JOE GALLOWAY: Mm-hm.

[00:55:07.46] ROBERT CARON: It seldom jammed, worked like crazy, 600 rounds a minute. A minute or a second?

[00:55:14.43] JOE GALLOWAY: In a minute.

[00:55:15.67] ROBERT CARON: [CHUCKLES] That's pretty quick.

[00:55:17.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Don't give 'em more than they got.

[00:55:19.86] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. I remember talking to people, friends. I said, the bravest, most courageous people in this country are the women. And I'm not sure why I said that, or whatever transpired to make me think that.

[00:55:41.52] But I still think that today, that-- maybe in a lot of countries. The French-- the French Underground, Reputedly the women were the bravest, most courageous. The men were the first to turn.

[00:55:55.67] JOE GALLOWAY: No question that the women ran the household and kept their hands on the money--

[00:56:02.78] ROBERT CARON: Hm, yeah.

[00:56:04.38] JOE GALLOWAY: --especially. Mrs. Thieu left there with 10 suitcases full of diamonds.

[00:56:13.31] ROBERT CARON: And 11 tons of gold.

[00:56:15.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Yes.

[00:56:17.96] ROBERT CARON: He left from-- they say he's wonderful. He left Air America operations one night, about midnight, in a C-130. Like you say, who knows what kind of stuff he stole, he looted? But it was in Reuters, 11 tons of gold, which he sold when gold was like \$250 an ounce.

[00:56:40.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:56:41.20] ROBERT CARON: He should have held onto it. But now he's gone.

[00:56:43.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:56:44.14] ROBERT CARON: Oh, when I left Saigon, at the end, the last day, guess who was on the Blue Ridge with me? Nguyen Cao Ky.

[00:56:52.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Nguyen Cao Ky.

[00:56:53.95] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. I never saw him, but I saw the guard outside his door. Nobody could get to see him. And, of course, Graham Martin was there too-- my hero.

[00:57:02.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:57:03.45] ROBERT CARON: What a loser.

[00:57:04.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, exactly.

[00:57:10.92] ROBERT CARON: Well, because of our foster situation, we were never together. I got adopted my junior year in high school. That didn't turn out very well. But my sister and brother were 30 miles away here, there. So we didn't have much. And my sister was the one who asked me about The Deer Hunter, because she was interested in all that. I said, I never saw anything, I can't tell you anything bad.

[00:57:39.27] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive from home about the war you were in, about what was going on back home? And did it bother you? Or were you so busy--

[00:57:49.75] ROBERT CARON: Didn't hear much. And it seemed like I was focused on what I was doing all the time. And then, as I say, from the time I was out of first grade-- I was second oldest. All the others were much younger, so they went to this family. In fact, the youngest girl was adopted by a California family. And I only saw her once before. She just passed away last year. But there was not that much communication.

[00:58:27.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:58:33.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Where were you living and working in April of '75, as Saigon was surrounded by the NVA and about to fall?

[00:58:42.72] ROBERT CARON: I was flying Hueys. I think what we did is, we'd go to Pleiku for a week, and leave the chopper there if it was good. If it had maintenance problems, we'd fly back. We'd go to Nha Trang for a week. We'd go to Can Tho for a week, Da Nang for a week. So I was out all the time.

[00:59:07.77] The only thing I remember, one night, when I was back in Saigon, one of the agency people-- they lost contact with him down, actually, right near where I-- Vung Tau, a little town north of there. It's called Ba Ria. And they lost contact with him. And we flew down there-- Dave Kendall and I flew down there to see if we could locate him. And we circled, and circled, and called, and called. Finally, they said, oh, our mistake, he's in Saigon already.

[00:59:41.59] I do remember going to Pleiku and Can Tho. After I get to know the people, the cooks, the waitresses, the people that work with you and help you-- I remember talking to them and saying, you know, it's looking bad. But I didn't realize myself how bad it was.

[01:00:02.70] This one person-- a couple of people I know, I said-- I know they came from Nha Trang. And I had a bunch-- in the flight suit, I had this pocket full of Vietnamese money, probably 30,000 dong--

[01:00:16.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Piastres.

[01:00:17.45] ROBERT CARON: --peastres in there. And I left with that money still in my pocket. Or I threw it away at the end. I don't remember exactly. But I should have told-- I said, here, take this. Go to Nha Trang, and get yourself out of here.

[01:00:36.34] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you learn there were going to be evacuations by helicopter? And did you have the option to leave early? Or were you ordered to stay and fly? Or did you volunteer?

[01:00:47.59] ROBERT CARON: The families left in the middle of March. My wife and daughter left in the middle of March. I don't know. It just-- I'll tell you the truth. We always had hope that it'd be resolved. Even though, when I flew that General Weyand, I knew he was wasting his time.

[01:01:11.06] Because Congress had already cut off all the money. There was no way they could help. That peace treaty, for lack of a better word, it was a bunch of garbage-- left the Viet Cong in the south. President--

[01:01:27.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Left the NVA in the south.

[01:01:29.48] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, that's who I'm talking about. Nixon promised to help if they invaded. And he promised to resupply weapons and tanks and stuff like that, and Hueys and aircraft, if they were invaded. Nothing-- nothing was done.

[01:01:46.88] JOE GALLOWAY: He was gone by the end. It was Jerry Ford.

[01:01:49.55] ROBERT CARON: You think if he hadn't been impeached, he could have done anything or-- ? Congress took the money.

[01:01:55.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. It was over.

[01:01:58.22] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. And I don't even know why I was flying General Weyand around, because there's nothing he could do. It was really, really sad.

[01:02:06.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you volunteer to stay, or did--

[01:02:07.99] ROBERT CARON: Oh, yeah, yeah. Well, near the end, one guy-- Vic somebody-or-other, he said he'd just as soon leave. Now, I'm not sure if it was the last day or a day or two before that. But no, no, we weren't going to leave.

[01:02:27.43] And we didn't expect it to fall like-- nobody expected it to fall. Da Nang, and then they invaded the Pleiku area to cut the country in half, which was a great military scheme.

[01:02:44.62] I was at Nha Trang during late March-- no, middle of April. And we were talking to some agency people. The agency guy was at Ban Me. I'm in Nha Trang, going to Saigon. He was at Ban Me Thuot. And he's saying, there are tanks coming down the road. What do you want me to do? He said, hunker down. I'll get there as soon as I can. They never got to him. He was captured.

[01:03:16.96] They didn't systematically kill Americans as much as we thought they might. And people say, they were shooting at us with SA-7s, and I don't really believe that. There wasn't much gunfire that I was aware of that whole day.

[01:03:33.71] The only thing that screwed me up-- my wife's cousin, Phan Thi Mong and by the way, if that guy can help me find her, I'd love to get his name-- Phan Thi Mong, I wanted to help her get out.

[01:03:48.87] Oh, I took her to the airport. And her cousin, for some reason, didn't like me, didn't trust me. And she said, I want to see my cousin. I said, she's at the airport, Tan Son Nhut. If I take her out, the guards with the guns at the gate may not let her back in. Because the reason I got her back in the first place, I had a fake ticket of some kind. So I said, if I take her out, maybe I can't get you guys-- both of you back.

[01:04:19.98] So I went in. I had a car, drove around. And I was going to try to see them the next day-- like Saturday, Sunday, Monday. But remember martial law? And I was afraid if I walked out, that the guy would kill me. So I didn't dare go out.

[01:04:39.15] Like I say in some of my stories, I think about Phan Thi Mong a lot, if she's still there. Unless she got out by boat, and if she got out by boat, did she survive? That was a mess.

[01:04:51.90] JOE GALLOWAY: What preparations were made for the helicopter evacuations in the urban areas of Saigon? And who carried them out?

[01:05:01.23] ROBERT CARON: What we did was-- well, first of all, the embassy was an automatic yes. Because it was a big area. The base, Tan Son Nhut, the PX, the commissary, the parking lots were used. Now, how about in town? There's thousands of people in town.

[01:05:20.40] What we did-- Nikki Fillipi and another guy, I think, Wood-- Glen Woods, they went around and selected 11 rooftops. They actually landed on them and let the power down. Now, we didn't ever let the power down all the way. In other words, there was always a little bit of lift in the blades, because you didn't know how heavy or how strong that rooftop really was.

[01:05:42.30] So like, when I landed on that rooftop, I let the power down a little bit. But then, as people are climbing up on board, I had to bring in a little more power to make sure we didn't fall through the damn roof.

[01:05:54.18] So we did that-- Nikki did that. Nikki was one of the IP. He checked me out on the Huey. But that, and everybody became acquainted, and I think they may have put an x on there. I'm not even sure anymore.

[01:06:13.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe flying the evacuations. How did you know where to go? You were going to those same 11 rooftops?

[01:06:27.00] ROBERT CARON: It just-- we just did. I don't know why. I think we started--

[01:06:32.61] Well, first of all, I was in the first hotel. It was right-- shoot, a quarter-mile, a half a mile at the most from Tan Son Nhut. So I was in there. And we had crews that slept at Tan Son Nhut, so that they could fly out tomorrow and on these rooftops. Like in my place, they knew Bob Caron was here, somebody else was over there, like that-- pilots. So Dave Kendall picked me up, for example.

[01:07:02.70] And then, I went out, checked my helicopter real quick, took off, flew to-- I think I flew to the embassy first. And from the embassy, I flew-- took them to the Tan Son Nhut base, the PX commissary area. It was a big parking lot area.

[01:07:21.69] Then, about the third trip from there to there is when O.B. Harnage came up, stood at my door here, and said, I want you to do something for me. I said, well, who are you? I'm so-and-so. I'm Harnage with the agency. I'm a ops officer. I said, fine, what do you need? He said, I want you to go pick up the deputy prime minister and his family. I said, no problem, climb on board. And he showed us where to go.

[01:07:45.64] We went over there, and we're approaching the rooftop where these people are. And we see the ladder and everything. And I turned to Pogo Hunter, the other pilot, I said, man,

that deputy prime minister's got a huge family. But it was-- it was like one person told another. And then, geometrically, instead of 10 people, there were probably 40 or 50. So I did that once or twice.

[01:08:11.67] Then, I'm getting low on fuel. Our chief pilot was down there, and he called us in for a briefing. He said, take as many as you can. And then, before it gets too late, fly whatever you can out to the carrier. I think it was the Hancock-- I'm not sure-- or the Blue Ridge, the command ship.

[01:08:31.11] JOE GALLOWAY: The Blue Ridge, yeah.

[01:08:31.72] ROBERT CARON: That was the command ship. So we did that. Oh, and my radio went out, and I had to follow another pilot, a good friend of mine, Israel Freedman, better known as Super Jew. He was proud of that name. He's a character. He's still living in Bangkok.

[01:08:46.92] So I came back, did a couple more. And then about 5 o'clock or so, it wasn't getting dark, but we weren't going to fly at night. The Navy, they had the big bird, the 46. The Marines had the 46. The Air Force had the Jolly Greens.

[01:09:05.55] I think they were 10 Air Force birds there. I don't know how they got involved, because the Navy had the carry all the ships there. They said OK, take that last flight out, and then park your birds on the carrier. So that's what we did.

[01:09:24.00] No, back up a little bit-- OK, it's the last day. They're knocking at the gate. We're up at 5 o'clock in the morning, waiting for the Christmas song--

[01:09:38.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:09:38.45] ROBERT CARON: Bing Crosby, whatever the hell it was.

[01:09:40.31] JOE GALLOWAY: I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas.

[01:09:42.27] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, uh-huh. So waiting for that to come on the radio-- and we had walkie-talkies. But 6 o'clock, 7 o'clock, 8 o'clock, 9 o'clock-- what the hell is going on? Now, this guy always did-- the bastard, Graham Martin, he dragged his feet the whole way.

[01:10:00.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Right.

[01:10:00.88] ROBERT CARON: He dreamed of a democratic Vietnam, which was totally out of the question, and he put big men in there to negotiate the peace treaty.

[01:10:08.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:10:08.73] ROBERT CARON: Who's going to negotiate with you, when they're knocking on your front door, kicking your butt, so to speak? So anyway, 9 o'clock, 10 o'clock, 11 o'clock-- somewhere around then, finally, they do it, which means what? You've wasted five or six hours.

[01:10:23.60] JOE GALLOWAY: You've wasted five or six hours of light.

[01:10:25.08] ROBERT CARON: Yeah. They could destroy top secret documents. They could let people in. They could do all sorts of things. Oh, now, jump to the Blue Ridge. I'm on the Blue Ridge, looking for my suitcase.

[01:10:40.24] And I'm walking around the ship. What do I see? My two Army buddies from Fort Benning-- Jim Clinton and Bob Brown. They're on the admiral's staff. So we introduce ourselves and everything.

[01:10:57.16] And they told me what had happened. The admiral told Graham Martin very clearly, I need four hours, move my ships in, (EMOTIONALLY) air cover, and get my people in to brief your people, and your people to brief my people. So I need four hours to get that done. So when Martin said, OK, we'll leave here at 10:30, or whatever it was, then the admiral sent his people in.

[01:11:32.55] And when I'm talking to Jim and Bob, they're saying, we've been all morning-- see, back in those days, no internet, right-- sending cables back and forth. Because Graham Martin called what's-his-name--

[01:11:47.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Kissinger.

[01:11:47.66] ROBERT CARON: --Kissinger and said, the admiral has screwed up. He's incompetent. Fire his butt, whatever. And it turned out, it was the ambassador who was incompetent. Because all this delay, that means he--

[01:12:02.51] JOE GALLOWAY: We all knew that.

[01:12:02.72] ROBERT CARON: --got in there at 3 o'clock. He got in there at 3:00.

[01:12:04.26] JOE GALLOWAY: We all knew that.

[01:12:04.84] ROBERT CARON: Not enough people knew. Listen, some people called me the other day and said, what do you think about a movie, kind of making Graham Martin out to be a hero?

[01:12:13.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Uh-uh.

[01:12:14.06] ROBERT CARON: I said, no way. He's a loser. And my CIA friend was living in Can Tho. He wanted to ship his household stuff home in February or March of that year.

[01:12:25.12] JOE GALLOWAY: He wouldn't let anybody--

[01:12:26.16] ROBERT CARON: Wouldn't let him, because that would tell the Vietnamese we're leaving. The whole world knew we were leaving. Everybody knew we were leaving.

Anyway, so they were defending the admiral, showing how he had told the ambassador he needed four hours, and this, and this, and that. But-- terrible, terrible.

[01:12:48.50] Oh. And then, of course, he says, you go on board, you leave Saigon-- don't take any pets with you. Don't take any personnel with you-- maids, butlers, whatever you want to call them. None of that's allowed.

[01:13:03.56] I get on the Blue Ridge. By luck, they got me a good bunk with Jim and Bob. Who's walking Graham Martin the ambassador's dog? His butler. And then also, his maid was on the ship too. That happens. But this shows you how two-faced he was.

[01:13:22.25] And then a month before all this happened, he's at Congress saying, President Thieu was military and politically in control. That couldn't have been further from the truth.

[01:13:33.40] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[01:13:34.82] You were flying the Huey in a famous photograph, a news picture, taken by Hugh Van Es of United Press International. Tell me about that final mission. I assume that was your last flight.

[01:13:51.45] ROBERT CARON: No, it wasn't.

[01:13:52.17] JOE GALLOWAY: It wasn't?

[01:13:52.73] ROBERT CARON: It was like 2:30 in the afternoon. And I took them to Tan Son Nhut--

[01:13:58.11] JOE GALLOWAY: To Tan Son Nhut.

[01:13:59.28] ROBERT CARON: --there. And, of course, being deputy prime minister he had, probably, contacts everywhere. So then I went back-- I don't know if I landed there or not. Oh, I landed one of these times-- about 10 or 15 flights around Saigon-- I landed and got fuel. And since the first-- it was the first time that I looked--

[01:14:22.23] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you go to refuel?

[01:14:23.08] ROBERT CARON: Right there, we had a refueling truck. We had two refueling trucks. The day before, on Monday--

[01:14:29.59] JOE GALLOWAY: In Tan Son Nhut?

[01:14:30.82] ROBERT CARON: Tan San Nhut, yeah. The idiot safety officer said, that truck can't be here on the ramp. It's a safety hazard. Move it. So when we went looking for fuel the next day, the truck was gone. Nikki Fillipi had it all set up-- some idiot, I don't know if he was American, Vietnamese, or what.

[01:14:51.47] Anyway, the first time, I did a quick check of the bird, chopper, I walked around. OK, kick it, you know? We're ready to go. I flew. So when he's refueling, I got more time. The drivetrain from the engine to the tail rotor, right, I opened up the cover. What are we looking at? A hole that big in the driveshaft, which means if it had broke, I ain't got no power to the tail rotor.

[01:15:21.79] So that's when I switched to the other chopper number, 47004. We always used the last three numbers, 004. That was the easiest. So I ran around, and I found the other one, and got it, and then continued on out.

[01:15:41.14] I got to the Hancock and left the chopper there. But I somehow misplaced my suitcase, attache case. I had a bunch of stuff in there. So I found out it went to the Blue Ridge. I don't know why. And that's how I got on the Blue Ridge.

[01:15:57.90] I think this might have been the second night. Because I think the first night, I slept with the troops-- bunk, bunk, bunk, you know, nose to the back of the person above you. But I got with Jim and Bob on the admiral's staff. I got a first-class-- then we sailed to Manila.

[01:16:17.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:16:19.47] ROBERT CARON: But anyway, O.B. was fine. In fact, Izzy Freedman told me-- the guy that led me out to the Navy ships-- that O.B. had asked him to do that mission. And Izzy said, no way, get out of here. So that's how I got to be famous and Izzy didn't.

[01:16:43.82] JOE GALLOWAY: [LAUGHS]

[01:16:45.04] ROBERT CARON: Well, and the trouble-- I went back in the Army. So I had all these reunions, people talking about that rooftop photo. I was completely not involved, no idea. So I couldn't defend myself. I couldn't put my two cents in, whatever. You know?

[01:17:05.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, you finished in Vietnam in '75 and left with the refugees on the aircraft carrier headed for Manila. Where did you go next? You said you wanted to get back in the Army. Did you?

[01:17:23.71] ROBERT CARON: We-- let me see. We got into Manila. Then we flew into Hong Kong. Hong Kong or Taipei, I forget. And we out-processed. They paid us, I think, through August of that year. But that was it. We were history. We still couldn't believe it. We thought-- we were expecting to do this for another 10 years. But it didn't--

[01:17:51.76] Then I went to Bangkok, picked up my wife. She went over there, like I said, the month before Saigon fell. We went back to the States and lived in Fort Lauderdale. The senator, he lived down there, and we stayed-- didn't stay with him, but we visited with him and looked around.

[01:18:12.16] I was thinking about going back to law school. But I didn't know how much, really, incentive I had for that. I was looking around. So then I said, well-- I called a couple of friends. I said-- well, no. The Army, after Vietnam fell, threw out a whole bunch of pilots--

[01:18:33.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:18:33.50] ROBERT CARON: --I mean, just a whole bunch.

[01:18:35.36] JOE GALLOWAY: And a whole bunch of officers were reverted to NCO rank.

[01:18:40.66] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, yeah. When I got to Germany, our S2 sergeant was Harden Lomo, OK? A nice guy. He had been an officer, reduced, had like 18 years in. So when I went back to the States in '61, from Germany, I'm looking-- I'm at the bank. And who's in front of me? Sergeant Lomo. I say, hi, Sergeant Lomo. How are you? That's Lieutenant Colonel to you. [LAUGHS]

[01:19:11.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh. How did he do that?

[01:19:12.93] ROBERT CARON: 'Cause when he retired, he was able to retire at the highest rank held. I'll never forget that. I didn't know. What the hell would I know? That's Lieutenant Colonel Lomo to you.

[01:19:26.67] JOE GALLOWAY: But you were wanting to get back in the Army.

[01:19:29.57] ROBERT CARON: Yeah, I heard a rumor. So I called up-- I had a good friend who was in personnel in Washington. I said, what are the chances? He said, well, we could get you back in. It might take some time, but send me some paperwork. So I did. And then he processed it. And then later on, he just sent me orders to report to Fort Bragg.

[01:19:58.31] Initially, I was with the Golden Knights. That would have been a nice job. But that didn't work out. I had a lot of fun. I was at Fort Bragg for a couple of years, Korea-- Korea, I flew the C-12, then Turkey, back to Korea, C-12. I had some nice years.

[01:20:22.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Got in enough years to retire.

[01:20:24.03] ROBERT CARON: Oh, yeah.

[01:20:27.85] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after your time in Vietnam? Or were you too busy to-- ?

[01:20:35.86] ROBERT CARON: Not really. You know why? Because I was back flying again with the Army.

[01:20:40.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:20:41.11] ROBERT CARON: And guess what was still out there? The Cold War.

[01:20:44.60] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[01:20:45.13] ROBERT CARON: The Cold War, see, it didn't change-- I don't know. Maybe I'm just naive, but things didn't change that much, I didn't think.

[01:20:58.23] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today?

[01:21:03.54] ROBERT CARON: Poorly. Two years ago, a girl from Hong Kong contacted me, wanted to know my thoughts on the war. And she contacted a Vietnamese soldier-- major, captain, whatever. And she wanted to get opposing viewpoints. And, of course, he was sort of that we were wrong to be in there.

[01:21:28.26] And I said, well, at the time, we were all under the influence of the Domino Theory. So we thought it was something we had to do. Today, am I adamant that we did the right thing? Not really.

[01:21:43.32] We sort of did the right thing. And she wrote both those up in the newspaper and sent me a copy. So really people like Jane Fonda-- and there was another guy involved, male involved. He was--

[01:22:04.58] JOE GALLOWAY: You talking the New York Times guy?

[01:22:06.72] ROBERT CARON: No. He had an important position, not secretary of state, something like that, but he was pretty high up. And he also did a Jane Fonda thing. And, you know, Jane went over there--

[01:22:23.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, you can forgive her for her ignorance.

[01:22:26.42] ROBERT CARON: Oh, no.

[01:22:27.19] JOE GALLOWAY: No?

[01:22:27.70] ROBERT CARON: Oh, no.

[01:22:28.67] [LAUGHTER]

[01:22:29.49] Oh, no. And then, she-- what'd she do? She sold a half a million discs on how to-- fitness, a fitness disc, CD, how to keep-- stay fit. And she's still making movies. And her brother, he's out there doing stupid things too.

[01:22:57.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Are there lessons you took from your Vietnam experience that you would like to pass on?

[01:23:07.68] ROBERT CARON: If you send your troops to fight and die, stand behind them. They didn't. It's like today, you've got these people in Congress saying impeach the president.

He's done nothing wrong. It's just their attitude and dislike is so intense they can't see anything. But you know better than me, that battle was just--

[01:23:44.99] ROBERT CARON: I couldn't handle that. A lot of my classmates have gone, and they say this and that.

[01:23:57.95] ROBERT CARON: Chuck told me about it. Well, I knew there was a pin out. I think there's a pin out?

[01:24:01.44] JOE GALLOWAY: There is a pin. And how about if we put one on you?

[01:24:08.73] ROBERT CARON: That'd be nice.

[01:24:10.28] JOE GALLOWAY: There we go.

[01:24:11.42] ROBERT CARON: Thank you.

[01:24:11.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you for coming in.

[01:24:13.55] ROBERT CARON: Thank you. My pleasure.

[01:24:13.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you for your service.

[01:24:15.76] ROBERT CARON: And I enjoyed it.

[01:24:16.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.