

Esposito, John US Army

[00:00:13.01] JOHN ESPOSITO: I was born in Jamaica, Queens, New York City, New York in 1946. Hometown? Right now I like it here in Connecticut. That's where I live now. And I live in Oxford, Connecticut. And I consider that my hometown now.

[00:00:28.76] I have one brother, a younger brother. He managed to not get drafted like I did. But yeah, and of course, I have my mother and father. I have a very large extended family with cousins and uncles and aunts and everybody else.

[00:00:45.53] We actually grew up in an Italian ghetto in Queens, New York, where I was born. Everybody in our block was Italian, in the whole neighborhood. So that's where I come from basically. And family is very, very tight, as Italian families are.

[00:01:07.88] JOHN ESPOSITO: I went to Saint Francis College in Brooklyn, New York. I have a degree in mathematics and philosophy-- crazy combination. And I graduated in 1968 and was drafted in 1968. The day I got home from my college graduation, the notice was in the mail to report for induction-- report for my physical, the day I graduated, literally that day. They didn't waste any time.

[00:01:33.35] MARC HENDERSON: No, they didn't. [LAUGHS]

[00:01:36.50] JOHN ESPOSITO: I had some friends who were drafted before I was. Most of them ended up in Germany. And I also have a cousin who actually volunteered because he was going to get drafted. And he volunteered into the Marines.

[00:01:48.83] So those are the people I knew personally who had been in it, who had gone into the service. And it was very active at that point, especially when I graduated college in 1968. Because of the Tet Offensive, they were drafting everyone. So I knew that I was going to get drafted. There was no question about it because they eliminated the draft deferment for master's programs in 1968.

[00:02:13.13] So I couldn't go for my master's because I was going to get drafted. Every time I went for a job interview, the first question they would ask is, what's your draft status? You say, 1A. Well, call us back in a year, that kind of thing because they knew I was going to get drafted.

[00:02:26.69] But the draft was a thing that was necessary at the time to get people in because it wasn't a volunteer Army like it is today. The draft was less intensive after I got out because, quote, the Vietnam War was winding down. So there wasn't a great need for people again like that because the lead time is almost a year for basic training and infantry training.

[00:02:50.48] So the draft was kind of winding down. So my brother missed it. He didn't get in because he's seven years younger than I am. So he didn't get in, fortunately, because you never know what's going to happen when you go and you get drafted. You could be anywhere. You go wherever you're assigned.

[00:03:11.39] JOHN ESPOSITO: Fort Jackson, South Carolina for basic training and also for advanced training for-- I have three MOSs, Military Occupational Specialties. One is 11-Hotel, which was my primary one after basic. That's antitank and demolitions. And then I also went to NCO school for mortars. And I have a Charlie designation. And of course, I have 11-Bravo, infantry. 11-Charlie is indirect fire, which is mortars. So I have three MOSs. And I also went to NCO school, Non-Commissioned Officer school. So I graduated-- I graduated from there in 1969 as a sergeant.

[00:03:56.93] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. So were you a Shake 'n Bake?

[00:03:59.21] JOHN ESPOSITO: Yes, exactly. I am vertically challenged because I'm only 5 foot 2. So it was tough for me to keep up sometimes with everybody else because it was geared toward the, quote, average person, who's probably around 5' 6" or 5' 7". So it was sometimes hard for me as a small person to keep up with everybody.

[00:04:15.05] And the drill sergeants had no mercy with short guys because they always called us short rounds. And they didn't pick on us particularly. But they didn't make it any easier for us either. So, yeah, basic training was tough. And it needed to be because you were getting in physical and mental shape to do whatever you had to do for the military. During basic training, you take a lot of tests in both physical and mental and psychological. And I guess based on that, they put me into the 11-Hotel program.

[00:04:47.12] MARC HENDERSON: What was that school like? What were some of the things they taught you there?

[00:04:49.94] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, that was very different from basic training and from infantry training because you're just studying and preparing to deal with tanks and armored vehicles and anti-personnel and also demolitions. So I got trained in how to blow things up, which was a lot of fun. And also, we had 106-millimeter recoilless rifles and 90-millimeter recoilless rifles that we trained on. And they were very powerful crew-served weapons. In fact, the 106 millimeter recoilless is the largest-- not largest, the loudest infantry weapon that there is. And that's why I have some hearing problems today, as well as most of the guys who had 106 experience, because the weapon is so loud.

[00:05:42.96] MARC HENDERSON: That weapon was so large it had to be mounted, right?

[00:05:46.74] JOHN ESPOSITO: It was either mounted on a tripod stand or mounted on what we called a gun Jeep. And that's how we mostly used it, in the gun Jeep for convoy escorts. Although we did take it into the field once as a tripod mount when we were on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, to interdict traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Because a 106 is a very powerful weapon against armored vehicles and/or trucks and transport vehicles. So they put us on the trail to interdict. But that was an interesting mission, as you can imagine. Yeah.

[00:06:20.64] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. How did you get selected to go to NCO school?

[00:06:24.30] JOHN ESPOSITO: Same thing. I guess my scores were high enough that they selected me to go to NCO school after I went to the 11-Hotel. And NCO school included mortar training as well. So I got trained in another MOS at the same time.

[00:06:38.76] That was very interesting because mortars are what they call indirect fire. That means you don't actually aim at the target. You aim at an aiming position. And the forward observer, that's the person who was calling in the artillery strike, tells you where he wants the round to go. And you adjust your sights and your elevation accordingly to make the round go into position he wants.

[00:07:04.65] That's all mathematics. And I'm a mathematics major. So it was almost perfect for me. I could set the gun sights and the elevation and deflection quicker than anybody else because I can almost calculate it in my head. So that was kind of interesting.

[00:07:18.33] And it was also-- I had never experienced mortars before other than in the movies. So it was another thing also that was very interesting to learn. I spent one session as an assistant drill sergeant because they found that I learned so quickly that they actually made me a drill sergeant for the next group. So I became an assistant drill sergeant for the next troop that went through. So that delayed my deployment to Vietnam about another eight weeks to get to that next group. And then they deployed me right away.

[00:07:52.45] MARC HENDERSON: So did that training that you went through, in hindsight, did that adequately prepare you for your experience in Vietnam?

[00:08:01.15] JOHN ESPOSITO: Physically, yes, mentally, to some extent, psychologically, no, because there's nothing-- you don't ever forget. And there's nothing like ever getting shot at. And you don't forget that experience. And you do get kind of shot at during training because they fire over your heads during certain procedures, you know, crawl-- night maneuvers and stuff like that.

[00:08:23.47] But you know that they're not shooting at you. They're just shooting over your head. But when somebody actually shoots at you, it's a completely different experience. And that was not something I was prepared for until it actually happened. And after a while, you actually kind of get used to it, although you never forget every time you get shot at because that could be your last. You don't know.

[00:08:43.74] MARC HENDERSON: Do you think NCO school prepared you adequately to step in and take charge?

[00:08:49.71] JOHN ESPOSITO: It gave me the building blocks to do that. But it didn't give me the confidence to do that because I knew that when I got over there, the people who I was going to supervise as a sergeant had more experience than I did. And I was going to be the new meat guy with no experience whatsoever. Shake 'n Bake, as you said.

[00:09:11.49] And they were not particularly supported by the Soldiers themselves because they knew we were inexperienced. But I sat down with my group the first time. And I said, I know I

have no experience, but I have a lot of knowledge. I said, I'll use that knowledge to help you guys.

[00:09:31.68] I want you guys to use your experience to help me as a leader. Tell me what you need as infantrymen. As me as a leader, tell me what I should do. And I also had a good overlap of two-- I was only two weeks with the previous sergeant. So he was able to help me get acclimatized and give me all the information I needed to get started. But it took a good three months before they had confidence in me to be able to say, OK, he knows what he's doing. I just couldn't walk into that situation and be a sergeant, just didn't have the experience.

[00:10:13.66] JOHN ESPOSITO: Flew out to Travis Air Force Base. I'm sorry, not Travis Air Force Base, flew out to San Diego, California and left out of San Diego, California depot, because I was in New York at the time. So I had to take a plane to San Diego and then got set up in San Diego with all my equipment. I deployed in March of 1970 to Vietnam.

[00:10:38.38] I spent a few days in San Francisco waiting for my orders to come through. And then they sent me on a plane. I went on a plane to Bien Hoa. That's where I got in country.

[00:10:49.48] MARC HENDERSON: Was it a military plane or a civilian plane?

[00:10:51.00] JOHN ESPOSITO: Yeah. Well, a civilian chartered plane through the military, right.

[00:10:54.85] MARC HENDERSON: Mm-hm And what were your first impressions of Vietnam?

[00:11:01.03] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, like anybody else, it was really hot. And it also smelled pretty bad because of-- well, it was a war going on, so kind of tough to do that. But kind of what I expected because everybody had told me-- my cousin had told me what it was like when he was in Vietnam in the military. So he kind of gave me a little bit of an expectation of what to do.

[00:11:21.46] And it takes a week or so to get acclimatized to that level of temperature and humidity. I went over in March, which doesn't sound too bad. But it was still pretty hot and humid in March in Bien Hoa. When I got my orders, it was to report to Vietnam to-- well, it was report to Vietnam first. And then they deployed me to the 2nd/17th Cavalry-- the Delta Troop, 2nd/17th Cavalry when I was in Bien Hoa because we still didn't have our detailed orders yet as to which unit we were going to get assigned. So they assigned me there. And I had--

[00:11:55.87] MARC HENDERSON: As a replacement.

[00:11:56.86] JOHN ESPOSITO: Right. I had no idea what 2nd/17th Cavalry was or where they were or who they were. So it was a complete-- it was a shock to everybody when they got their assignment because you never know where you're going to go. I actually consider myself lucky, in a lot of ways, that I got into this unit because this unit was primarily a volunteer unit. And I was one of the few draftees in the unit.

[00:12:19.84] There weren't a whole lot of draftees. But I was, you could look at it either in the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the wrong time because my three MOSs were exactly what the unit was looking for because the two sergeants who were rotating out had those two MOSs, 11-Hotel and 11-Charlie. And I had to replace them.

[00:12:41.56] One had already left. The other one, like I said, had a two-week overlap. And that was why I probably was selected for the 2nd/17th because I had the MOSs that they required.

[00:12:54.01] MARC HENDERSON: Did you receive any other specialized training once you initially got into in country?

[00:12:58.87] JOHN ESPOSITO: Other than what they called in-country familiarization, no. In-country familiarization was they took you on a hike through the jungle near Bien Hoa in a secure area so you weren't going to get shot at. So you get acclimatized to going through the jungle.

[00:13:15.22] They took you on-- you had to cross a river on a line, a static line going across the river. You had to do that. You had practice your rifle again, throw grenades, all of that kind of military training again. Even though you had gone through it in boot camp and advanced training, they still wanted you to refresh it again. So that was the kind of in-country training, if you want to call it that. Yeah.

[00:13:41.14] MARC HENDERSON: And this was all right around Camp Eagle?

[00:13:45.61] JOHN ESPOSITO: No, this was around Bien Hoa.

[00:13:47.20] MARC HENDERSON: Oh, sorry.

[00:13:47.77] JOHN ESPOSITO: Right.

[00:13:48.12] MARC HENDERSON: Bien Hoa?

[00:13:48.82] JOHN ESPOSITO: Around Bien Hoa. When I got to Eagle, I went right to the unit.

[00:13:51.73] MARC HENDERSON: Mm-hm.

[00:13:53.02] JOHN ESPOSITO: I flew in a helicopter from Bien Hoa to Phu Bai, which is the next town over from Eagle. And then from Phu Bai, I got in a Jeep, and then I went over to the 2nd/17th.

[00:14:09.70] JOHN ESPOSITO: In the unit area itself, they weren't too bad. I had a hooch. And all the sergeants that were in my platoon were in the same hooch. And hooch is basically a shack.

[00:14:19.96] And you have a cot. And there's two cots high. There's an upper and lower cot. And you sleep in a cot. And that's pretty much all you would have in there is your cot and your equipment. And then everything else is outside in the area.

[00:14:34.82] My gun Jeeps were outside. The mortar was on a place called Mortar Hill because we provided base defense for our mortar. We covered a sector of the perimeter with our mortar. If anything came in or it got attacked, we would provide mortar support for the people on the front line in the compound for that whole complex. Many times we fired star shell at night to illuminate because they were under attack.

[00:15:01.84] MARC HENDERSON: What's a star shell?

[00:15:02.83] JOHN ESPOSITO: Star shell is an illumination round from a mortar. Instead of having an explosive, it fires out-- and you have to set the fuses. At a certain time, the fuse goes off. And it sets a flare off, instead of an explosive round, with a parachute.

[00:15:22.81] And now that parachute slowly descends with the flare lighting up the area. And they're very bright. It's a magnesium flare. So they illuminate a lot of area. And that was used to help the people on the front line to see the enemy attacking. So that was the illumination. We fired those--

[00:15:40.54] MARC HENDERSON: Did you do that often?

[00:15:41.64] JOHN ESPOSITO: Yeah, quite a bit because Camp Eagle was attacked quite a bit. They never really successfully breached the perimeter. But they made some pretty serious attempts at doing that.

[00:15:52.16] When we were at the camp, we were living in the hooches, which was pretty nice. I mean, it was comfortable, although they leaked, and it was cold. But at least it wasn't pouring rain. Of course, when you're in the jungle, it's a totally different experience because you have no shelter whatsoever. All you have is your poncho, and that's it.

[00:16:12.47] And in the jungle, it's very damp all the time. It's also pretty cold in the mountains. And people think-- it would be 90 degrees at our site. But when we went into the mountains on a patrol, it could be 45 or 50 degrees. That's a big difference.

[00:16:31.05] And at night, it goes down. That got chilly. So in the field, living conditions were Neanderthal, basically. You're living-- you're living off the land, basically. You have no shelter whatsoever.

[00:16:43.64] Food? Actually we had a really good cook in the Delta Troop. He made his best efforts to cook us the best meals he could. So the food in the compound was very good. Of course, food in the field, C-rations, LRRP-- long range recon patrol-- rations, those were basic survival rations.

[00:17:03.29] MARC HENDERSON: So you have a couple of those here. Do you want to show them?

[00:17:05.30] JOHN ESPOSITO: Sure. I have a C-ration here. This is just one can. Each C-ration package would be three or four of these with different meals. Some of it would be pound

cake or white bread or a muffin. Some would be a meal like franks and beans or chicken or beef, pork, whatever, different kinds of meals.

[00:17:28.31] And then there would be cigarettes, sugar, coffee, a spoon and other things to-- for a meal. And you carried-- each meal was one complete meal. And you carried three of those for every day you were in the field.

[00:17:46.73] I didn't do that because I found it to be too heavy. I mean, we were carrying 40 to 60 pounds as it was. And to carry more food, to me, was not practical. What I did is I carried less food and more ammunition. Because if we were out in the field, the one thing I didn't want to do was run out of ammunition.

[00:18:07.40] So I carried three times as much ammunition as everybody else did, but only one third of the food. And I could live on that little bit for a period of time. I just didn't want to run out of ammunition if we got attacked, which we often did.

[00:18:21.50] This was the better meal. These are long range recon patrols. It's basically freeze-dried food. And it's also a complete meal in itself. All you have to do is add water. The C-rations you could just open them up and eat them, or you could open them up and heat them and eat them.

[00:18:38.24] This you actually had to add water, which in a way was bad because water was limited supply in the jungle. But you did have to put liquid in the meal to make it. And then there's no way to heat these because-- unless you could put them in boiling water. But that you couldn't do in the field.

[00:18:56.16] This is a complete meal. This would be the main course. And this would be the dessert. And there's spoons. There is also a packet, again, of cigarettes, matches, toilet paper. It's a complete package.

[00:19:11.66] Whenever we stopped, if we had time, we would eat the meal. But obviously not everybody ate at the same time. Two people were guarding while you were eating. And then you were guarding while somebody else was eating because you couldn't do that in the jungle. You had to be constantly alert.

[00:19:27.38] The kind of missions we went on were mostly either reaction force, that is another unit is in contact and we were the backup reinforcements, or we went in on reconnaissance. And reconnaissance means that they fly you into the jungle somewhere and say, go out there and see if anybody shoots at you, basically. And they want to know what-- we were trying to gather intelligence.

[00:19:53.12] And of course, the areas that we were in were-- the NVA, North Vietnamese Army, considered their territory. So they didn't like us there. So if they found us, they attacked us very heavily because they didn't want us there. They wanted to wipe us out.

[00:20:07.86] But fortunately, we had gunship support through the Cobras. And of course, we had our own reaction support. If we were out in the field and we got attacked, another platoon would come out and help us as reinforcements.

[00:20:21.44] But they were 45 minutes away. So you had to survive for that first 45 minutes on your own. And in the jungle, when you're attacked, you have no idea what your opponent is. You don't know whether it's a squad of six or eight guys or a whole company of a couple hundred guys. You have no idea what force you're up against. So that was always a challenge.

[00:20:46.22] This is an anti-personnel mine that we would put out at night, or even during the day on a perimeter. It has 800 ball bearings in it and an a pound and a half of C-4 explosive. And it's angled this way so that when it goes off, it's like a giant shotgun.

[00:21:06.36] And we would put these out on the perimeter. And either they would be wired with trip wire, so if a person came and tripped it, they would set it off, or we could set it off electrically with a clicker device through electronic wires with a blasting cap. So this is called the Claymore mine, used extensively in Vietnam. And even today, these are still used by a lot of units because they're very effective.

[00:21:31.96] It's light-- it only weighs a few pounds-- and very effective against personnel attacking-- called a Claymore mine. Every other person carried one of these. And the other person carried the clicker. So it was a team effort.

[00:21:49.93] That's one weapon that we carried. The other weapon that we carried, but not everybody carried one-- we only had one of these per squad-- was this antitank rocket. It was called the LAW, Light Antitank Weapon, 66-millimeter rocket that could knock out a tank, just something this small.

[00:22:07.78] It's basically what World War II would have called a bazooka, an antitank rocket. But they made it lightweight and easy to use compared to the bazooka. But it was a one-shot-only item. You only had one shot at this. There was no-- you couldn't reload it. Once it was shot it, it was disposed of.

[00:22:28.33] This one is disarmed, as is the Claymore I have. But they're just for display. But we carried these, too, because these were not only effective against armored vehicles or trucks, transport vehicles, they were also very effective against bunkers.

[00:22:43.03] So if we attacked a bunker, we could fire the rocket into the bunker and blow the bunker up and kill the people inside. So we used these that way too. Cavalry gets assigned everything. We get to do everything.

[00:22:56.17] Well, I was trained in helicopter recovery. I was trained in Vietnam as a helicopter recovery specialist. So whenever a helicopter got shot down, I would go out and recover it.

[00:23:07.79] And those were really the most dangerous missions because if a helicopter got shot down, they would wait for you because they knew you were coming. So you always got shot at

when you were going to recover a helicopter. Fortunately, again, the gunships would pepper the area before we went in to suppress as much fire as they could before we went in.

[00:23:29.98] In many cases, a helicopter recovery was on rappel. Rappel means they throw a rope off the helicopter, and you slide down the rope into the jungle because there's no landing zone because a helicopter got shot down in the middle of nowhere. So a lot of times we had to rappel. And the gunships would suppress fire while we were rappelling so we wouldn't get shot at.

[00:23:50.38] That's another type of mission. We also did convoy escort with the gun Jeeps. We would escort convoys to the fire bases. We also did base defense, where we had a perimeter assigned to the 2nd/17th that we had to have people on every night and every day.

[00:24:07.14] We rotated off doing different missions. So one week we were out in the jungle. The next week we were all on reaction for anybody who was in the jungle.

[00:24:16.05] The next week we were on convoy duty. And the next week we were on base defense. That was kind of our rotating schedule. So those are the kind of missions we went on.

[00:24:26.89] The only time you really had to yourself is when you were on reaction because you were in the camp. And you were waiting for something to happen. But that was not so much easy either because you had to sleep in your clothes. You had to have all your gear packed and ready to go.

[00:24:46.57] You had five minutes to get on the helipad. If something happened, they would come down and say, get to the helipad. And you had five minutes to get there. Any time of day or night, you had to get to the helipad.

[00:24:58.54] You took your rucksack and your weapon and everything else to the mess hall as you were eating lunch. And then they called you out. You ran out and went to the helipad. And that was because somebody was in trouble. And you reacted quickly because when you were out in the field, if somebody was on reaction, you wanted them to do the same thing because you were 45 minutes away from help.

[00:25:19.84] And we knew that the guys who were out there were 45 minutes away from help. And we don't want to have that be any longer than 45 minutes. We went out and we supported Ranger teams and the Marine teams that went out even further than we did.

[00:25:34.03] And a lot of times, the Ranger teams would get in contact. And they only went out with six guys. They didn't go out with 12. They went out with six people, which is even nuttier to go out in the middle of enemy territory with just five other-- with six people total.

[00:25:47.56] And they would go out for a week at a time. And they would go out and gather intel, see what was going on. When they got in contact, they called us. We were their backup. And we meant it. We were serious about supporting them. So we would be on the helipad in five

minutes and on the ships and out. So even though you had time, it wasn't really time because you never knew when you're going to have to run up to the helipad and get on a chopper.

[00:26:16.16] MARC HENDERSON: What did you do for recreation in that year you were over there?

[00:26:19.17] JOHN ESPOSITO: I didn't-- I don't remember any recreation. [LAUGHS]

[00:26:22.37] MARC HENDERSON: Yeah. [CHUCKLES]

[00:26:23.18] JOHN ESPOSITO: There was a couple of guys who liked to play chess. I like to play chess. And there was a couple of guys that I played chess with. But that was about it. There's nothing else you could do.

[00:26:31.79] You could listen to music. Guys had boom boxes, and they'd play music and stuff like that. And I played chess with some of the guys. That was about it.

[00:26:40.25] MARC HENDERSON: Are there any-- you mentioned music. Are there any songs or books or movies that you remember specifically from your time in Vietnam?

[00:26:49.64] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, the usual traditional ones, "Bad Moon Rising," those kind of songs that are traditional Vietnam songs, not so much protest songs but just this is what it's like. All the traditional kind of early rock-and-roll music from the '60s was what people played at that time. The only recreation I got, actually, I took my R&R in Australia. I went to Sydney, Australia for my R&R.

[00:27:16.37] MARC HENDERSON: Did you get a choice of where you went?

[00:27:17.75] JOHN ESPOSITO: Yes, that was nice. I chose Sydney because I said I'll probably never, ever get an experience to go here again. So I wanted to go to Sydney. So that was quite nice.

[00:27:27.68] MARC HENDERSON: Did it afford you the opportunity to decompress?

[00:27:30.95] JOHN ESPOSITO: No. [LAUGHS] No. In fact, it was funny because you could tell the combat veterans because they would walk from doorway to doorway down the street instead of just walking down the street. And I did the same thing. It was the same thing.

[00:27:45.89] I couldn't walk down the street. I couldn't do it. So, yeah, at least you got to interface with something that was not in a constantly dangerous situation. So that kind of relieved you a little bit. And I got to sleep a little bit, which was nice. Because when you're on any of those kind of situations, you don't get much sleep.

[00:28:06.44] If you're on convoy duty, you're driving a Jeep, a gun Jeep, for a whole day, escorting convoys back and forth. If you're on the perimeter, you're out there for a full day. And

you have to be completely vigilant all the time. Although some people sleep, some people stay up, you don't get much sleep.

[00:28:22.49] If you're in the jungle, I didn't get any sleep in the jungle. That was nothing. And of course, reaction, you got some sleep, but you never knew when you're going to get woken up. I got woken up in the middle of the night sometimes to go on a mission.

[00:28:35.33] So you were on high alert all the time. And your adrenaline is going a little bit at least all the time. In fact, it was interesting. When I came home, I went back to my parents. And I spent some time with them during the day.

[00:28:53.36] I came back. I don't remember what day I came back on. It must have been a Saturday. And I said, I'm really tired. I got to go to bed. I had been up for, like, three days straight coming back.

[00:29:03.77] And I went to bed. And I looked at the clock, and it was 5 o'clock. And I fell asleep. I looked at the clock when I woke up, and it was 6 o'clock. And I looked at the sun. And you get to understand those things in the jungle, where the sun is and what time it is.

[00:29:18.45] And I said, wow, I only slept an hour. I must have not been too tired. So I went downstairs. And my parents looked at me. And my brother looked at me and said, are you OK? I said, yeah, what's the matter? I guess I wasn't that tired.

[00:29:30.55] He said, you slept for 25 hours. I didn't think I could sleep 25 hours. But I did. My body said, and my mind said, you're safe. But you don't get sleep in the jungle.

[00:29:44.49] In fact, there's a book, I'm the Reason You're Alive. And one of the comments he makes in that book is in the jungle you sleep, but you never really sleep. And I thought that was very appropriate. Yeah.

[00:30:05.34] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, you see, we come here all the time. I've got quite a few friends from this that we continue the friendship over the years, yeah. In fact, we lost a good one just recently. Charlie Brown died, one of the people I was very friendly with.

[00:30:21.34] And last year-- well, just after the last reunion, another one of the people in my platoon died that I had a long-term relationship with. And those are hard because we become like family. We're an extended family. We really are, all of us.

[00:30:37.05] Even though we're not related, we still think of each other as family. And we help each other out whenever we can. I've helped some of the guys out. They've helped me out over the years. You form that, quote, band-of-brothers relationship that people talk about. But this is-- it's real.

[00:30:54.15] MARC HENDERSON: So do you think you formed friendships with folks from different racial backgrounds that you would not otherwise have engaged in?

[00:31:03.90] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, I went to school with a lot of integration, in college and high school and elementary school growing up, Queens and Brooklyn. There was a lot of integration there. So I wasn't unfamiliar with integration and different races and everything else. But yes, I formed friendships with a lot of people in this group that are not of my own ethnicity. Right.

[00:31:29.76] Some people had some adjustment to make if they weren't exposed to racial integration before. But they got over it because when you're in the field and you're-- we would go out with 12 guys. That was our standard operational group, 12 people. Those 11 people that you're with are protecting you, and you are basing your life on them. You're trusting them with your life.

[00:32:02.79] Doesn't matter what race, nationality, or nowadays even gender these people are. They're protecting you. They're taking their life and putting it on the line for you. And you're taking your life and putting it on the line for them. Race, ethnicity doesn't matter at that point. People who have been in combat have a different view of race and stuff like that than people who haven't been.

[00:32:28.38] MARC HENDERSON: So when people did disagree, was there a way they could-- an outlet for them to kind of settle it?

[00:32:34.50] JOHN ESPOSITO: That was kind of my job as a sergeant was to resolve that. And I had to do that a few times, but not very often. Most of the time they resolved it themselves because they realized that race doesn't matter. We're all human beings. We're all Soldiers. Let's get the job done.

[00:32:51.03] This group, a very professional group of Soldiers, not like a normal-- I would consider-- again, I consider myself lucky to have been in this unit because other unit-- other people I know who were in units said it was much worse than it was in a unit like this, which is a very specialized-- we're not elite, but we're a special unit.

[00:33:14.88] And everybody has to work together because if one person fails, the weak link, everybody can get killed. And that's a different position that you're in than some other units because you're only out there with 12 people in the middle of an enemy territory with unknown forces attacking. I went on a total of 26 air missions.

[00:33:37.79] An air mission is when you fly out in a helicopter, for one reason or another, and you go into the jungle. Out of those 26 missions, I got shot at on 24 of them. Only two missions I didn't get shot at. So it was pretty intense.

[00:33:54.05] And you had to trust the people who you were with. And that's why when I first went over as a sergeant, they didn't trust me because I had no experience whatsoever. I had to earn that trust and develop that experience along with them.

[00:34:11.40] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, primarily we operated in the A Shau Valley, which was west of Camp Eagle and that whole area. And that was a primary route for the Ho Chi Minh Trail

and a lot of infiltration into South Vietnam from North Vietnam and through Laos. So we had to - that was our area of operations.

[00:34:33.97] We also went all the way up to the DMZ, the demilitarized zone between North Vietnam and South Vietnam. There was another base called Quang Tri. And we would fly up to Quang Tri a lot and deploy out of Quang Tri because our helicopters couldn't get to the areas we were going in.

[00:34:52.18] So what we would do is fly up to Quang Tri in a helicopter, change helicopters, and then fly out to the area we were deploying to because our own helicopters couldn't make it that far. It was too far. But that was our entire area of operations. And there were many different fire bases throughout that area that had artillery to support.

[00:35:11.20] So if we got in trouble and we within we were within range of a fire base, they could support us with artillery rather than just have the gunships. But that was our area of operation. It was called I Corps. And it was mostly the A Shau Valley.

[00:35:25.77] MARC HENDERSON: How about the quality of the leadership as high up as you can remember?

[00:35:30.61] JOHN ESPOSITO: Like everything else, good and bad. There were some good leaders and some bad ones. Most of the good--

[00:35:35.83] MARC HENDERSON: What made the good ones good?

[00:35:38.56] JOHN ESPOSITO: Concern about the people and understanding of the people's-- what they were going through and not making it excessively risky for the-- to put them in an excessively risky situation and also understanding of their individual capabilities. Some people could do more than others. Some people could do less. Each person individually has a strong and weak point.

[00:36:07.10] And the key thing of a good leader is to acknowledge that and make those people capable of doing what they can do but not more than what they can do. Because if they're asked to do more than what they can do, they could fail. And that could ruin an entire mission. So understanding how a person is capable of doing a job is, I think, part of good leadership.

[00:36:30.04] MARC HENDERSON: Do you remember any examples of poor leadership?

[00:36:33.85] JOHN ESPOSITO: Yeah, I had some leaders, some people who didn't understand any of that. They just said, this is your job. Do it. Period. Follow orders. Don't give me any questions. That's not-- to me, that's not leadership. That's dictatorship.

[00:36:48.37] Leadership is more empowering the person to do the job and enabling the person to do the job rather than dictating to him to do the job. And I understand. You have to follow orders. And you have to do things. But sometimes there's other ways to do things that are more

effective than actually just following an order. And some people, some leaders didn't understand that.

[00:37:13.67] MARC HENDERSON: How about the quality of the NCOs above you and your peers?

[00:37:17.81] JOHN ESPOSITO: Same thing. Some were good. Some were bad. And I dealt with it. I only knew Sexton, the guy who I replaced for two weeks. But he was an excellent sergeant. And there was a couple of other sergeants also that were more experienced than I was. They were there before I was.

[00:37:34.69] MARC HENDERSON: What did he do that you specifically-- ?

[00:37:36.70] JOHN ESPOSITO: Same thing-- he said-- he knew everybody in that platoon and everybody's capability, who could do what, who could carry what, who could be point man, who could be slack, who could be the RTO. He knew all of their capabilities. And he gave them assignments associated with that.

[00:37:55.49] And that's what I tried to follow. I didn't try to put somebody in a situation where they could fail. Because again, if one person fails out of 12, that could cost the whole mission. So it was pretty intense being a sergeant, yeah.

[00:38:08.56] MARC HENDERSON: Do you remember any significant actions, named operations, that you participated in?

[00:38:12.88] JOHN ESPOSITO: Oh, yeah, quite a few-- quite a few. We had-- well, there's a place called Fire Base Ripcord. I don't know if anybody else has talked about that.

[00:38:21.75] MARC HENDERSON: Yep.

[00:38:22.43] JOHN ESPOSITO: That was a fire base that was one of the farthest out fire bases in A Shau Valley. And it was a thorn in the North Vietnamese Army's side. They wanted that fire base out of there.

[00:38:33.73] MARC HENDERSON: Was this 1970?

[00:38:34.99] JOHN ESPOSITO: This was in 1970, right. Because it had artillery. And it could support a tremendous amount of area with the 105, 105-millimeter howitzers that they had there, for a quite a range around it. And they didn't like that. That was their territory. They didn't want that fire base there.

[00:38:53.05] And they made a significant effort over three months to destroy and overrun that fire base. And that was one of the missions that we were sent in on was we were put on a hilltop opposite that fire base to protect it from attack from that direction. And we spent I think three days there fighting off attacks from the NVA who wanted to get through us to get to the fire base.

[00:39:18.19] Eventually, I think Captain Craig said that they went around us. But it took them more time. And now we knew what they were doing. We could actually call the artillery in from the fire base to hit them while they were trying to attack the fire base. So that was one of our missions.

[00:39:34.54] That was a pretty extensive mission. And it was also very effective because we saved the lives of the guys on the fire base. So it was-- also, another mission was we were called out to find out what was going on. They had a lot of movement in one area in the A Shau Valley.

[00:39:57.00] And we went out to find out what was going on. It turns out the 9th NVA Regiment was infiltrating through the A Shau Valley to go and attack the fire base. And we interdicted them. And with gunships and everything else that we had, we managed to stop them. And they had to retreat. So we-- again, that was another mission that was kind of a crazy mission. [LAUGHS] Yeah.

[00:40:27.95] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, everything that we did was ballistic. That is, there was no wire-guided missiles or rockets or anything else. Everything was you fire the weapon, and that's where the round goes, wherever you fire it. There was nothing automatic about that. It was very basic.

[00:40:46.52] The weapons we were using were-- some of the weapons were still from the Second World War. The 81-millimeter mortar was a Second World War weapon. So we weren't fighting with much high-tech stuff. And in the jungle, you don't have a whole lot of high-tech stuff. And the nearest high-tech stuff we had was something very interesting called the Starlight scope. I don't know if people have talked about that before.

[00:41:09.32] MARC HENDERSON: Please.

[00:41:10.61] JOHN ESPOSITO: But it's a telescope. And it's a very high light-gathering capability. It's electronic. And what it does is it gathers more light than you can see with your natural vision. I think it's 10 times.

[00:41:27.50] So when you look through the telescope at night, it's almost like looking at something in the daylight. It's 10 times-- well, and they were powerful telescopes. They were 20 or 30 power. But they also gathered so much light that you could see objects at night that you couldn't see by your naked eye. So that was pretty high tech, the Starlight scopes.

[00:41:47.29] We used them on radio relay and observation points to try to spot enemy movement during the night because we could see them. Because even though they were hidden in the darkness and in the jungle, we could see them with the Starlight scopes. So that was a pretty high-tech thing I had never heard of before. And we used those on those kind of reconnaissance missions. Yeah.

[00:42:11.75] MARC HENDERSON: How about holidays? Do any holidays stand out in your mind?

[00:42:15.74] JOHN ESPOSITO: [LAUGHS] I'm writing a book about my experiences. And I decided the title of it would be No Weekends because one time somebody asked me, what did I do on the weekends in Vietnam? And they just didn't understand that there were no weekends in Vietnam.

[00:42:37.54] You didn't know what day it was. You didn't know anything. All you knew is you were there. And you had to get done whatever was in front of you right now. So there were no-- the only holiday I remember was July 4th because everybody was shooting flares up and stuff like that because--

[00:42:53.92] MARC HENDERSON: Was that on the base? Or was that everywhere?

[00:42:55.90] JOHN ESPOSITO: Everywhere-- everywhere. Everybody was shooting flares up and stuff like that, yeah. But that was the only holiday I remember, yeah. I don't remember anything else because every day was the same.

[00:43:06.40] You were on a mission. You were waiting to go on a mission. You were on convoy duty. You were on base defense. So you didn't know what holiday was going on, anyways. I never knew whether it was Monday, Tuesday, what. Because you just lost track.

[00:43:24.82] JOHN ESPOSITO: Worst day had to be July 8, 1970. That's when we interdicted with the 9th NVA Regiment. They didn't know they were dropping our company, which was about 100 guys, in the middle of 1,500 NVA. We lost six guys that day from our unit alone that got killed.

[00:43:43.53] I was wounded that day. There's a lot of other guys who were wounded. Fortunately, I didn't have anybody in my platoon who got killed. But we had a number of guys who were wounded because of the fiercety of the attacks. And I was still a section sergeant.

[00:43:57.30] I had 12 guys in my control. Six guys were the mortar crew, and six guys with a 106-millimeter rifle crew. I had 12 guys. And then there was another sergeant who was the other sergeant for the other 12 guys. We had 24 guys in our platoon. And that was a tough day because we got hit pretty hard.

[00:44:19.70] MARC HENDERSON: Were you medevacked?

[00:44:21.76] JOHN ESPOSITO: I was not because I wasn't wounded bad enough. The other guys got pulled out, including my medic, who got badly wounded. He survived. But he never came back to the unit because he was badly wounded.

[00:44:36.13] The medics, they were incredible. They always say that the second guy to get shot is the medic. And they weren't messing around. Those guys ran to help people in the middle of a firefight. They weren't thinking about themselves. They were thinking about saving the other guy, yeah. They were amazing-- amazing.

[00:45:02.27] JOHN ESPOSITO: Best day, again, maybe even on July 8 because I was able to keep my people safe, and nobody got killed. My promise was not to get anybody killed. And fortunately I did that. I'd like to think some of that was my capability.

[00:45:20.69] But it was both a good day and a bad day. Nobody in my unit got killed. But we lost six guys in our unit completely from the other platoons.

[00:45:34.83] JOHN ESPOSITO: There was an Australian group that worked with us on a couple of missions, yeah. There was some Korean-- the Republic of Korean group who worked with us on a couple of missions. There was the ARVN forces, the regular ARVN army. And we also had a good relationship with a group called the Hac Bau. I don't know if they talk about that.

[00:45:57.45] MARC HENDERSON: Please.

[00:45:57.97] JOHN ESPOSITO: Hac Bau is a special forces group in the Vietnam Army. Hac Bau means Black Panther. That was their logo, was a black panther. And they were a very, very dedicated, all-volunteer group. They didn't care if they died. They wanted to kill as many NVA as they could-- very dedicated group of people.

[00:46:21.82] And we worked with them on a number of missions. They were a very dedicated group of Vietnamese soldiers, more so than the ARVN group, who was just basically soldiers. A lot of people who went into the ARVN were just there because they could make more money as a soldier than they could working as a farmer or whatever they were doing with their families. So they joined the military just to make the money.

[00:46:44.98] We also had-- I don't know if they talked about this-- Kit Carson scouts. Kit Carson scouts were North Vietnamese Army or Viet Cong who Chieu Hoi-ed. Chieu Hoi means surrender. And they surrendered, and they volunteered to help us Because once they came over to our side and saw what we were actually trying to do for the country, they joined our side.

[00:47:10.63] We had Kit Carson scouts assigned to us in our unit. Both of them were killed. Two of the four were killed during the time. But they were also very dedicated. Because once they understood what was going on, they viewed the North Vietnamese as their enemy. Because now they were trying to fight for South Vietnam not for North Vietnam. But, yeah, we did a lot of work with foreign units.

[00:47:35.70] MARC HENDERSON: Did you trust the Chieu Hois?

[00:47:37.24] JOHN ESPOSITO: Oh, yeah, completely. They were really dedicated. They were like the Hac Bau. They didn't want any part of North Vietnam. They wanted them out. And they didn't care what they had to do to get them out. They were serious.

[00:47:49.62] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. What were your impressions of the Australians?

[00:47:52.61] JOHN ESPOSITO: [LAUGHS] They went into jungle with shorts. I never understood that because they would always come back from every mission all cut up from the

sawgrass and bamboo and everything else. I said, what are you nuts, going out in the jungle with shorts?

[00:48:06.99] Well, it's our jungle uniform. No, I don't think so. But they were good guys. And they were pretty dedicated too. They were.

[00:48:19.69] MARC HENDERSON: How about the local population? Did you get to interact with any civilian Vietnamese?

[00:48:24.01] JOHN ESPOSITO: Not very much because we were on the base most of the time. And of course the areas that we went into in the jungle, those were known as free-fire zones. A free-fire zone means that if you encounter anybody in that area, it's an enemy because there are no friendlies in that area, either civilian populations, other US military, ARVN units. They're all going to be enemy units. So those are what we call free-fire fire zones. And that meant that anybody we encountered we captured or killed. That was our mission, to be able to go in there and do that.

[00:48:59.04] MARC HENDERSON: What did you do once you captured a prisoner?

[00:49:01.98] JOHN ESPOSITO: We called back and they sent a helicopter and brought them back for interrogation. And we did that a few times. We captured some people right on the LZ.

[00:49:12.79] They were surprised. We surprised them when we landed. They weren't expecting us because they never knew where or when we were going to come in. And then-- yeah, the missions were all different. And like I say, even the mission-- I went on 26 missions. The other guys went on 26 different missions. And their experiences on those missions are different than my experiences. Every mission was different.

[00:49:39.60] So every mission had its different challenge too. Sometimes it was you're going in as a reaction force. And sometimes you're just going out there to see what happens. You never know what's going to happen, yeah.

[00:49:59.72] JOHN ESPOSITO: I was able to write some letters home to my parents. And my brother wrote some letters to me while I was there, which was kind of nice. In fact, I still save them today. I have them all. It's kind of cool.

[00:50:12.77] But, yeah, that was pretty much the only contact I had was through letters because you couldn't do-- there's no telephones or even radio. They had the MARS station. That's the military situation. You could relay through MARS all the way back to the States. But that was only used for emergencies.

[00:50:33.20] So if somebody had a family emergency, they could go up to the CO, commanding officer, and say, hey, my family had this problem. I got a letter. Can I talk to them? Can I get in touch with my family?

[00:50:45.23] Or sometimes the families would call them through the MARS system. And they would go up to the TOC, the tactical operations center, and talk to them on the MARS radio. But that was the only other contact was through the MARS system. And that was only for emergencies.

[00:51:00.29] I tried to keep my parents calm. I didn't want to tell them what was going on. I just tell them, we're doing our job here. I didn't tell them what kind of missions we were going on because I know my mother would especially freak out. She was completely freaked out when I went over, to start with. So I just tried to keep it calm and take it easy on them.

[00:51:23.30] And my brother tried to cheer me up with his letters coming back because he was also into cars. So he was doing the cars the same way I was doing. And so he would send me pictures of him driving an MG or something like that. It was fun. It was good.

[00:51:38.24] MARC HENDERSON: How much news of the war you were fighting in made its way to you?

[00:51:42.89] JOHN ESPOSITO: Not much. Well, I had Stars and Stripes, the magazine, the newspaper, came out every month, and you could read that and catch up with what was going on. But you weren't particularly interested in the overall picture because you were focused on your area and your responsibilities and your missions. You were only focused on that.

[00:52:05.87] You could read about what was going on in III Corps or IV Corps down in Da Nang or whatever. But it really didn't affect you. So you really didn't have a lot of interest in what it was. You were more interested in what was going on right now, right here. That's the kind of-- we had to be that way. We had to be focused.

[00:52:22.48] MARC HENDERSON: Do you think that it was fair reporting, or do you think it was slanted?

[00:52:26.71] JOHN ESPOSITO: The Stars and Stripes tried to be fair. And obviously they were a military magazine, so they're going to be somewhat slanted, no matter how you look at it. The articles I read were interesting. And of course they were pro-military articles because they were sponsored by the military. That was their job was to kind of be a little bit of a cheerleader to show the victories, show the things that happened, and show the people who won medals because of their bravery and that kind of thing.

[00:52:56.32] MARC HENDERSON: What about news of what was going on in the States with politics, or any of the social movements? Did that make its way to you?

[00:53:03.49] JOHN ESPOSITO: No. I didn't know about anything that was going on in the States when I was there, a complete blackout for the-- I was there for a total of nine months. And it was a complete blackout of what was going on. I had no clue as to what was going on other than the letters from my brother when he would tell me about what's happening. And that was the only input I had.

[00:53:28.77] JOHN ESPOSITO: I went to R&R in Australia, as I said, went to Sydney. I was trying to come back. And it was monsoon season. I couldn't get a helicopter back to the base.

[00:53:37.83] So I got stuck for a day or so. And what I ended up doing was hitching a ride on a convoy that was going back to the base from where I was. And that's how I got back to the base.

[00:53:51.63] And otherwise I was going to be down there for who knows how long because the helicopters were all grounded. So I finally got back to the base. And I went back to my area. And I got prepared for the next mission.

[00:54:04.44] And I walked out to the mess hall to get-- I think it was dinner. I think-- yeah, dinner. And the company clerk saw me. And he said, what are you doing here? I said, well, I just got back from my R&R. I'm getting ready to get dinner and be ready for the next mission that we're going out on it.

[00:54:21.39] He said, you got your early out. You can go home. I'm like, what? What do you mean? They gave me an early out, 30 days to go home for Thanksgiving, which was nice. I got to spend Thanksgiving with my family.

[00:54:37.12] But it was a complete surprise. I expected I was going to be-- continue to deploy until December because that was my official date to get out. But he said, no, you got an early out. You can go home. So that was a nice thing. That was a surprise, coming back from R&R and then being able to go home.

[00:54:55.03] I got rocketed the day I went into Bien Hoa, the day I got in country. I got rocketed the day I joined the 2nd/17th. And I got rocketed the day I left Vietnam out of Bien Hoa. It was pretty intense during 1970. People say, oh, the war was winding down. No, it wasn't, not by any means. It was still pretty intense.

[00:55:17.33] In fact, while we were trying to get on the airplane-- the airplane is on the runway. They said, OK, you guys get on the plane. We got rocketed and had to get into the slit trench next to the runway, wait for the rocket attack to get over before we could get on the plane.

[00:55:31.78] So we got on the plane. And of course, as soon as the plane took off and got up to altitude, everybody just went crazy-- you know, yah-ha! Again, the stress was now over. Everybody was, no, we're going home. So that kind of situation was-- everybody was in the same state.

[00:55:54.15] When we arrived back at Fort Travis in Washington, that was the departure center. And I spent some time there waiting for orders because you had to go through the departure process. You had to go through an interview on where were you? What were your missions? What did you do?

[00:56:13.56] They wanted all the technology-- not technology, but all the information that you had. You had to surrender everything that you had to them. You couldn't take anything home. Although I was able to sneak a few things home, which is kind of cool, some of my stuff there.

[00:56:30.00] They tried to get you kind of acclimatized a little bit back to civilian life. But they really couldn't do that because you're still on a military base. And because I was a sergeant, I was put in charge of a platoon that's going to be coming out of the service. So that was kind of interesting, as my last effort. My last exercise was being a sergeant of guys who were going home.

[00:56:57.99] They didn't want to listen to anything anyway. They were going home. They didn't care. But they all took it pretty good. And then I spent a couple of days at Travis, got my orders to go home, and then got a flight back from Travis to New York.

[00:57:13.03] MARC HENDERSON: Did you ever witness any antiwar demonstrations, or demonstrations, civil rights, or anything?

[00:57:20.73] JOHN ESPOSITO: Not on the military base. But I did see some at JFK airport when I flew in coming back. There was some-- there were three groups of people there. There were the Hari Krishnas. They were dancing around and asking for donations, those kind of guys.

[00:57:38.34] There was some people who were just hanging around looking for veterans coming off the plane, looking to give them a hard time. And then there were the protesters. It was like three different groups.

[00:57:52.26] I got off the plane. I had my duffel bag over my shoulder. I had quite a few medals because I got some pretty good medals from my actions. And one of them took a walk up to me. And he looked me in the eye. And I looked him right back in the eye.

[00:58:08.43] And he hesitated for a minute, and then he walked away because I think he knew that he'd better not mess with me. I was not the kind of guy he should mess with. In fact, it was interesting because years later I watched a movie called Sherlock Holmes. And in that movie, every time he's going to get into a fight, he's thinking about exactly what he's going to do during that fight to beat his opponent.

[00:58:35.06] And I did exactly that same thing at that moment. I knew exactly what I was going to do. No matter what he did, he was going down because I knew exactly how I was going to take him down. And that's part of your military training, also. You had to be-- self defense. And I think that's why he backed off because he knew he wasn't going to win against me. I was going to take him out.

[00:58:58.73] Yeah, but that was the only real experience I had. It was at the airport. I didn't have a chance to get much else. Although I did not go back for my master's because I felt that as a Vietnam combat veteran going back to school in 1971, when all these protests were going on, would not be a very favorable condition for me. So I didn't go back for my master's program because of that.

[00:59:25.96] MARC HENDERSON: And what kind of reception did you did you get at home?

[00:59:28.66] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, I couldn't get home first because I got out of the air-- of JFK and had no way to get home. So I talked to a taxi cab driver. I said, can you get me to Queens? And the first two guys said, no, we don't go to Queens, even though JFK is in Queens. They didn't go to part of Queens because my aunt was still living in Queens.

[00:59:55.35] So I said, well, I can't-- forget about going out to Long Island where my parents lived. They weren't even going to think about that. So I said, all right, take me to Queens. So I caught a cab, took me to my aunt's house. Nobody knew I was coming home because I got an early out. They were still thinking I was going to be until Christmas time.

[01:00:15.48] So I walked out of the cab. And my aunt was out gardening. And she looked down. She almost fainted. What are you doing here? I said, well, I got an early out. Oh, she hugged me, the whole thing.

[01:00:31.29] My cousin, who had been in the military, the Marines, he was home, same thing. And he took his car and drove me to my parents' house out on Long Island, where I lived at the time because I had no other way to get there. No one would take me. None of the public transportation would go.

[01:00:50.13] But he drove me home. And then of course, there was a big welcoming there with my parents and my brother, yeah. That was pretty wild. [CHUCKLES]

[01:00:59.37] MARC HENDERSON: Did you have difficulty adjusting to life after the war?

[01:01:03.21] JOHN ESPOSITO: Oh, yes. One of the questions my students ask me when I give my talks is, which was harder to adjust from civilian life to military or military to civilian? It's much more difficult to go from military to civilian, especially after you've been in a combat unit. It's a complete readjustment.

[01:01:20.19] And back in 1970 and '71, there was no help from the VA or any service support groups or anything else. You had to readjust. And you were on your own. And it was difficult to do that.

[01:01:34.47] I couldn't walk down a street in the town. I had to go from door to door. And after a while, I started realizing that wasn't normal. I shouldn't be doing that anymore. So I forced myself to get-- and do it, and walk straight out in the middle.

[01:01:52.62] It took me five years before I could walk across an open field. I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. I'd stop. And that's it. Got to walk around. I can't do it. Took me five years before I could do that.

[01:02:05.91] And adjustments to people and back in just regular civilian life, going to the store, those kind of things made me-- crowds, groups of people made me very nervous because I didn't like to be with other people that close that I didn't know and couldn't trust. I didn't like that. It was difficult for me to gain trust of anybody after that because I have so much trust in these people.

[01:02:34.49] I try to help the veterans out where I am. I have my own business. And I hire vets. That's all I hire, or sons of veterans. And that's worked out very well. I find people who are veterans have a more conscientious work ethic than a lot of other people do. And they do the job because they've had the military training. And it tells you to get a job done.

[01:02:59.91] But, yeah, exposure to other people is difficult. It took me over a year to get back into my profession after I got out of the service. Before I went in the service, the question was, what's your draft status? 1A. Well, call us back. After I got out of the service, well, what did you do in the military? Well, I was in the infantry. Well, thank you very much for your service.

[01:03:22.91] Or-- I'd either get thank you for your service, or you're an idiot for going in the infantry. Well, I didn't have a choice. That's where they sent me. So I wasn't able to get a job for six months after I got out of the service. I was actually on unemployment and almost on welfare. I went all the way from Maine-- well, Boston, Massachusetts all the way down to New Jersey interviewing for jobs. And I couldn't get a job anywhere because they wouldn't hire me because I had no experience now, and I was in computers as a mathematician.

[01:03:57.95] And they wouldn't hire me because I had lost two years. And I was in the infantry. They considered me a loser. See, Vietnam Soldiers at that time, in 1971, were looked down on significantly by the general population. We were losing the war.

[01:04:17.01] And so they didn't want to hear about a Vietnam veteran. Thank you very much. Goodbye. And it took me six months before I finally found a job. And that was very difficult because I had a profession I wanted to pursue. And it was very difficult for me to do that because I couldn't do it. I couldn't get a job.

[01:04:35.06] So, as I said, I went all the way from New Jersey all the way up to Boston, Massachusetts interviewing for jobs and couldn't get one. I finally did get a job with a group, Merrill Lynch, one of the computer support groups for Merrill Lynch on Long Island. And that was as the lowest position, which is midnight to 8:00 computer operator. I had been a programmer, a systems analyst before that. And now I had to go to get a job as a computer operator because that was the only job they would let me have.

[01:05:09.35] And they hired me. But it took me six months to find a job after I got back out, which is another reason why I like to hire vets because I understand what they're going through. It's tough to get back.

[01:05:27.08] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, I won a Bronze Star. That was on July 8 in that action for my actions during that engagement. I had two Air Medals. An Air Medal-- you get an Air Medal for every 10 helicopter missions you fly on. So I had 26 missions. So I got two medals.

[01:05:46.98] I had two Purple Hearts because I got wounded twice. I had a Good Commendation Medal. I had the Vietnam Campaign Medal, all the other medals that you get as well.

[01:06:02.68] JOHN ESPOSITO: Like any kind of experience, it's a life-changing experience. You never know when you're not going to make it. And that changes your perspective on life. You ask any of these guys or any other combat veteran, they have a different perspective on life than most people do because they've almost lost their life. And you never come closer to living than when you're almost dead. That's a famous saying. But then that's very true.

[01:06:34.45] It changes your perspective on things completely, yeah. I'm proud of my service. I consider myself lucky to be in this unit. I feel that I did my job. Like I said, my promise was not to get anybody killed. And I managed to keep that promise, so.

[01:06:56.14] What I tell my students when I give my class, I said, what it teaches you is do everything as if your life depended on it because you never know when it will. And you learn that in combat situations. And even preparing for a mission, make sure you have all your gear, everything's ready to go, everything works because your life depends on that situation. That was one big lesson I learned.

[01:07:22.54] The other lesson is when your life is at stake, you can literally do anything. It's amazing what you can do when your life is on the line. And then also you learn to trust people because you're in that kind of situation where your life is literally dependent upon that other person, and their life is dependent on yours. You create that bond that you never get anywhere else. Those kind of life lessons I learned.

[01:07:56.48] MARC HENDERSON: How did your experience affect the way you think about veterans returning from combat today?

[01:08:01.97] JOHN ESPOSITO: I can relate to them. And I've welcomed some of them home. There's a group in Connecticut that does that. When a group is coming back from deployment, they'll go out and welcome them back. I've done that a couple of times. It's been very nice, not necessarily combat units either, just deployed Soldiers.

[01:08:21.47] They really appreciate that. And that's one of the distinctions I make for my students. I said, I have no problem with you protesting a war. But respect the Soldiers who are fighting the war. See, that didn't happen in Vietnam. We were the war. And we got protested, not the war.

[01:08:41.70] And that was tough because when we came back, we felt we did our job. And here we were looked down on. And in a situation-- I couldn't get a job. I couldn't find any position because I had come back from Vietnam. So, yeah, that's definitely something to consider, too. Respect the Soldier, but protest the war.

[01:09:01.37] MARC HENDERSON: What do you think the Vietnam War meant to your generation?

[01:09:06.17] JOHN ESPOSITO: Well, it's a situation that we had to deal with. Not everybody went there, obviously. But the people who did, have a different view of things. And we feel that

we were let down. We were let down by the government. We were let down by the people who didn't respect what we did.

[01:09:24.59] And one of the interesting articles I read one time was what if Vietnam had oil? Would it have been a different war, like the first Gulf War because of the oil? That was a different situation. Vietnam, there was nothing there but rice paddies. That was their major product was rice.

[01:09:44.34] They were called the Rice Bowl of Southeast Asia. And there was no industry or anything else. It was all rural, all agriculture. But what was Vietnam being fought for? Certainly the Domino Effect, communism taking over the country, and everything else. But that's hard to accept when you're in the middle of a combat situation. Yeah.

[01:10:09.24] MARC HENDERSON: How do you think the Vietnam War's remembered today?

[01:10:13.85] JOHN ESPOSITO: I think it's remembered as a mistake that we shouldn't have gotten involved in. I think some people still despise the people who fought the war. I still get that sometimes. Oh, you're a Vietnam veteran. You're a loser. And, again, we don't think of ourselves that way.

[01:10:32.76] But the Vietnam War is just a paragraph now in the history books, which is why I really like going to teach at the high school because now I'm actually able to tell the students from my side, what a combat experience is in Vietnam. They get a different perspective of Vietnam when they hear that from me and see that I bring these things in to the class and show them. They read a book by O'Brien called *The Things They Carried* and he explains all the things that Vietnam veterans carried.

[01:11:02.79] And then I bring them in in my display. And actually they can handle them and show them and see them. But the Vietnam War is still considered a mistake. And maybe it was. I don't know.

[01:11:12.56] But in the long term it was. Vietnam is now unified under communism. So our efforts there were to naught. One of the things that I remember reading-- and I think I have a poster about it-- is no mother wants to have her son be the last person killed in a war. I thought that was pretty strong, yeah.

[01:11:46.75] JOHN ESPOSITO: I had to go with these guys. I couldn't go there by myself. I couldn't do it.

[01:11:50.92] MARC HENDERSON: What were your impressions?

[01:11:54.40] JOHN ESPOSITO: Pretty emotional. I know a lot of names on that Wall. And in fact-- [CLEARS THROAT] excuse me. There are four Espositos on that wall. And I always wondered if there should have been a fifth. It's a very moving experience, yeah.

[01:12:17.62] MARC HENDERSON: Is there anything you want to say to any one of the families specifically of the names that are on the Wall?

[01:12:23.56] JOHN ESPOSITO: Your sons or daughters, mothers, fathers, whatever they were-- grandfathers now-- they did their job as they were assigned. And they did it. And they gave their entire life for that job and for fighting for this country.

[01:12:42.61] At the time, that was what they were doing. And they should be proud of that. Anybody who is on that Wall, their families should be extremely proud of that. I know too many names on that Wall.

[01:13:02.79] JOHN ESPOSITO: I think it's an excellent program. It's something that needed-- needs to be done. And I'm glad you guys are doing that and taking that mantle and interviewing us because once we're gone, who's going to know? I mentioned, I think, that my father fought in the Second World War in Italy in the Army Air Force.

[01:13:27.81] And I never got really to talk to him about that. And after he died it was too late. I couldn't do that. I'm a member of what's called the second generation of his unit. It's kind of cool. And we get together and talk about it. I've learned a lot about him through the other people in his group that have the same kind of reunions that we have.

[01:13:51.18] In fact, I'm going to their reunion in November in Nashville. They're having their reunion in Nashville too. The 449th Bomb Group. They flew B-24 Liberators out of Italy and bombed Romania, oil fields, Ploesti, a famous place, and a lot of other places there. His unit was highly decorated because they were in one of the most dangerous areas to bomb in Europe.