

Fairfax, James USMC

[00:00:18.73] JOE GALLOWAY: When and where were you born?

[00:00:21.25] JAMES FAIRFAX: Washington DC in 1940.

[00:00:24.70] JOE GALLOWAY: 1940. Who were your family members?

[00:00:29.32] JAMES FAIRFAX: Well, my mother, stepfather, grandmom, grandfather, sister.

[00:00:36.80] JOE GALLOWAY: How many brothers and sisters?

[00:00:38.30] JAMES FAIRFAX: I have one sister. She's deceased. Very small family group, but these are the people-- great grandmother, I remember--

[00:00:49.72] JOE GALLOWAY: And you grew up in Washington DC. You consider that your hometown?

[00:00:53.95] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yes.

[00:00:54.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:00:57.73] JAMES FAIRFAX: Well, honestly, it would be-- I would call it a means to an end. Being a young man African-American, at some point about the age of 15, I realized that the hopes and dreams of what the family felt that they wanted me to be was not going to happen because of the financial and economic situation of the family. So I realized that if I wanted to do something, achieve something, be something, I had to go out on my own. And that is how I happened to join the Marine Corps. My first choice was the Navy because my uncle, World War II veteran, was Navy, but whether I went Navy or Marine Corps, I wanted to be sea service. I was always attracted by the water.

[00:02:11.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, you became an artist in the Marine Corps. I'm going to get to that in a minute, but how old were you when you signed the papers and enlisted?

[00:02:25.75] JAMES FAIRFAX: 18.

[00:02:26.47] JOE GALLOWAY: 18. And what year was that?

[00:02:29.17] JAMES FAIRFAX: 1958.

[00:02:33.91] JOE GALLOWAY: You went through boot camp.

[00:02:36.37] JAMES FAIRFAX: At Parris Island.

[00:02:37.51] JOE GALLOWAY: And what other kind of training?

[00:02:40.67] JAMES FAIRFAX: Well, advanced infantry training. I was an infantryman, mortars, antitank, flamethrowers at that time and--

[00:02:53.11] JOE GALLOWAY: The usual.

[00:02:54.25] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yeah, the usual. I enjoyed it. It was great.

[00:02:57.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Did they put you on sea duty like you wanted?

[00:03:01.07] JAMES FAIRFAX: I didn't have sea duty as we think of it with the dress uniforms serving on a cruiser or something of that sort, but I was very fortunate. This was my great education. I was with the 2nd Marine Division. I started with the 2nd Battalion, 8th Marines, and I went over to 2nd Battalion, 6th Marines.

[00:03:31.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, is this East Coast or West?

[00:03:33.61] JAMES FAIRFAX: That's East Coast.

[00:03:34.54] JOE GALLOWAY: East Coast Marine.

[00:03:35.40] JAMES FAIRFAX: Out of 2nd Marine Division. Yes, Lejeune. So I was very fortunate. I sailed. I was on ships. I was happier than anything. One of the great experiences was an operation called Solant Amity, South Atlantic Peace Cruise. I sailed to South America all down through the Caribbean crossing the equator a couple of times, having the opportunity to be a pollywog and then a shellback, which we can explain what some of that is. Pollywog is first one-- first time you've crossed-- you cross over the equator. And you are initiated.

[00:04:27.19] JOE GALLOWAY: First time you cross the equator. They treat you kind of badly, too, as I recall.

[00:04:31.42] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right, right. And they had the royal baby. You had to kiss the royal baby's belly and all sorts of initiation things. But the second time, I was a shellback because I had crossed. So I had the opportunity to initiate--

[00:04:47.30] JOE GALLOWAY: You got to do the new guys?

[00:04:49.48] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, and we put pepper in the air vent that would go in-- would vent into the chief's quarters and so on, and just a ball. But I sailed to-- up and down the West Coast of Africa and South Africa. Rounded the Cape of Good Hope.

[00:05:13.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any of the combat ops like Beirut?

[00:05:18.67] JAMES FAIRFAX: Not in that sense. But I found myself sailing up the Congo River one morning. They had struck our flag, and we were suddenly under the UN flag. That was the flag that was sailing from the mast of the ship, and we were going up the Congo.

[00:05:40.72] JOE GALLOWAY: This was a rescue American citizens thing?

[00:05:43.71] JAMES FAIRFAX: No, this was bringing out troops from Guinea. At that time in the Congo, we had folks in the news like Patrice Lumumba, Kasavubu, and these people--

[00:06:00.23] JOE GALLOWAY: The Belgian mercenaries, nuns raped, all that stuff.

[00:06:04.69] JAMES FAIRFAX: So Guinea had received its independence from France, and France wanted its troops out of the Congo. And so we went up the Congo, we were bringing out the Guinean troops.

[00:06:24.37] JOE GALLOWAY: What kind of a ship were you on?

[00:06:26.14] JAMES FAIRFAX: I was on, I believe, an LST. And so, we we're bringing the troops out of the Congo, and we're bringing them back to Guinea. And when we were getting them, they were bringing monkeys aboard and so on, and we had to give up our berthing areas. And I remember living on a sleeping bag in the after steering area of the ship, which was fine with me. I mean, I'm young, and this is all fun. It's an experience.

[00:07:00.73] So we got to Guinea, and there are Chinese ships in the harbor, and there are Chinese flags roped from across the boulevards, and so on, little plastic flags.

[00:07:15.10] JOE GALLOWAY: You're talking communist Chinese?

[00:07:16.97] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right. Right. And-- because when the French moved out of Guinea, they took everything they owned, bicycles, you name it. So the Chinese came in. And when we came and we had made friends with many of the troops, then-- when we get back to Guinea, I would like for you to come to my house, and so on and so forth.

[00:07:44.52] Well, as my memory serves me, it was a very short time that suddenly they were not allowed to associate with us, and we were not allowed to associate with them. And normally, when a ship pulls into port, you can place your garbage and refuse on the dock, and trucks come to take it away instead of dumping at sea and so on. Well, we had to take our garbage and everything back on the ships and take it with us.

[00:08:22.71] But what was interesting in Guinea, I happened to meet a former teacher of mine, a high school art teacher. And he was one of the embassy people. He was with the State Department, and they all had to leave as well. So he had a few things that he asked me if I could take back, and, of course, we were a lot freer then, and I being in my position,

[00:08:57.42] I had green boxes that military items were supposed to be in, but I could put things in these green boxes. And when we got back to the States, I could retrieve them. I brought his things back to DC and-- Washington and returned them to him. But that experience, and sailing in the North Atlantic and through the St. Lawrence Seaway and Nova Scotia and Newfoundland, and so on. It was-- that was my sea duty.

[00:09:41.93] Interesting story. I had never planned to make the Marine Corps a career. It was a means to an end, as I stated. And I think that I was about six months from my enlistment ending, and I was still in infantry how--

[00:10:07.28] JOE GALLOWAY: We're talking '61 or '62 now?

[00:10:09.61] JAMES FAIRFAX: '61 because I think I was supposed to leave the service in about-- sometime in '62. So because the unit, the infantry unit, was being sort of disbanded, we had a lot of troops that-- we were just in limbo. And we would get up every day and have formation, and they would take a headcount and put you on odd jobs and painting around the base. JOE GALLOWAY: Painting rocks. JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right, you know, these kinds of things that you've heard of.

[00:10:54.56] So we would spend a lot of time trying to figure out ways to get out of work and go to the movies and whatever we could do. And it was rather loose. So we would have formations about three times a day to take a headcount, make sure people hadn't escaped or something. But anyway, it got to a point where other units would make a request to my unit saying, we need two people in bulk fuel. You know just--

[00:11:38.72] JOE GALLOWAY: They were using us as a replacement depot.

[00:11:40.61]

[00:11:41.60] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right. Just for short periods of time. Well, at some point, most of us got tired of trying to skip out of these assignments of painting rocks and so on. And when we went to formation, and somebody said we need-- bulk fuel has a request for five people, let's say, and maybe five people raise their hand and say, OK, I want to do that. Well, one morning or afternoon, a request came in for a couple of people for an organization called Pioneer Battalion. Now Pioneer Battalion was a small engineering organization. That was a unit that I had attempted to get into when I joined the Marine Corps doing drafting and this kind of--

[00:12:39.01] JOE GALLOWAY: So your hand went up?

[00:12:40.72] JAMES FAIRFAX: My hand went up because I knew something about what the Pioneer Battalion did, and they had heavy equipment and so on. When I got to Pioneer Battalion, the adjutant said, well, what are we supposed to do with you? So evidently, he wasn't in the loop of this request. And he said, OK, well, you were told to come here. Here is what we have. We have heavy equipment. We have surveying and drafting.

[00:13:12.79] And immediately I kind of saw myself. I said, well, maybe heavy equipment. I'm still thinking about a civilian job, and maybe heavy equipment would be nice. But then I thought I've spent so much time outside in the weather, and it was coming on October and so on. And the big thing was thinking, said, I have an opportunity to have an inside job, and that was the drafting and surveying.

[00:13:48.35] And upon telling them that I wanted to be in that side of the house, and I had a background, I knew the instruments and so on. They said, OK, well, you can go there in drafting and surveying. So-- reported to that section, and they had young men in there who were drafting and helping to draw up plans for bridges and so on. And so, they gave me a seat, and I was working along with them.

[00:14:26.45] But they also ran the school to bring people into that occupational specialty. So they had a class, and this was all moving very fast. They had a class that was in, and I asked could I be included in that class that was already in operation. And they said I didn't have enough time to do on my enlistment, and I kept pestering and pestering. And I said, well if I produce here, can I graduate with that class? Because what I wanted to do then what I saw as an opportunity to have my military occupational specialty changed from infantry to draftsman, which I'm thinking civilian job. I'm ahead of them on that, still looking at getting out.

[00:15:30.17] So they, no, we can't do that. We can't do that. So I kept pestering and pestering, well, let me graduate with them. So finally, they concede and say, OK, you can take the exam, and if you pass the exam, we will change your MOS.

[00:15:52.43] So I passed the exam. I came pretty close to acing the exam. It wasn't that difficult. So they changed my MOS. It was a basic 1400, and that covered draftsmen and surveyors, but I was a draftsman. Eventually, a request came in from a place in Quantico called the Marine Corps Exhibit Center. And you had to be a 1400 to qualify for that. Because I was the most senior person in that organization-- not that I had been in that organization, but my time--

[00:16:44.63] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your rank at this time?

[00:16:46.85] JAMES FAIRFAX: I think I was a corporal. But out of all the other corporals, I was senior. And so, they had to offer it to me. They wanted me to reenlist, and I said, no way. And they came back to me a couple of times to reenlist, but I wasn't going to have it. And they came to me for an extension, and this is playing the career planner game.

[00:17:19.64] They came to me for the maximum extension, which was like a year. And I didn't want any part of that. So eventually they came to me for a six-month extension. No, no, no, no, no, I'm getting out. So finally, they came to me last offer, a three-month extension. And I thought about it, and I said, well, I'll be close to home. I'll be at Quantico, and I'll have an opportunity to look for a job and all of those things prior to exiting the Marine Corps.

[00:17:59.99] I had no idea what this Marine Corps Exhibit Center was. I thought it was some place where you were building out little war games on a sand table and the generals and colonels saying, yeah, we would move our troops here and do this and that and the other. But to my surprise, when I arrived there-- this organization no longer exists, the Marine Corps Exhibit Center.

[00:18:27.14] But it was a place where you had just a handful of people run by a master sergeant, and we were all part of the Division of Information at that time. And I think today they call it the Division of Public Affairs. But we were designing and building exhibits for trade shows to tell

the Marine Corps story, and that's where I had my first opportunity to show my abilities and varying elements of art, wood crafting, design, construction, painting, modeling, just to show--

[00:19:27.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Show everything.

[00:19:28.91] JAMES FAIRFAX: --some of everything. And I also had the opportunity to work with civilian exhibit design corporations. And I recall at the 1964 New York World's Fair, I was chosen to work with a Navy, Marine Corps, and civilian team to work on that project, and so on. There were people who were very impressed with my work, and I was like a sponge, and I was taking in a lot and learning.

[00:20:00.77] So it came time for me to exit the Marine Corps, and that's when I decided to enlist because what I was getting was the kind of thing that I had always wanted, plus I was getting more. So I decided-- I mean, I knew how to build crates, I knew how to jig crates up where the exhibits-- because we had to do everything. And I really, in a very sophisticated way, the master sergeant loved for us to have the opportunity to build much of our own projects because he could determine from the effort and the planning you would put into your project, a personal thing. And we would normally use scraps from other major Marine Corps projects that we would do.

[00:21:08.75] But he could make a determination as to what your skill level was or whether you were giving the Marine Corps the depth of your skill. He could measure that based on what you might be doing for yourself. So I designed very sophisticated furniture, sofas, tables for my home and built them, and finished them, and the whole bit. So he was very impressed. And the painting-- because some of the exhibits required background scenery and these types of things.

[00:21:50.17] JOE GALLOWAY: There was an artistic element, very much so.

[00:21:54.37] JAMES FAIRFAX: So that was the real take-off. He was very impressed, and he had quite a reputation in the Marine Corps, not so much as an artist, but he worked for Stars and Stripes in Japan and so on, Tokyo and--

[00:22:11.35] The real project that really elevated me was an unfortunate event in American history, but it was the assassination of President Kennedy. And at some point, the Marine Corps wanted to present a model of Marine One, the helicopter that transports the president.

[00:22:41.80] JOE GALLOWAY: And they wanted to present it to--

[00:22:44.08] JAMES FAIRFAX: To the Kennedy Library. Ultimately. The library had not been built. Through Paul Hartle, that was the master sergeant's name, and others that were not necessarily known to me, my name came up. You know, we believe we have-- well, let me back up a bit. The Marine Corps went to Sikorsky to have a model produced.

[00:23:14.62] The Marine Corps did not like the model that Sikorsky was going to give them, which would be one of these slick corporation-type models that they make of their planes and helicopters or ships or what have you. And they didn't like that. They wanted something that was really crafted and personal. So I believe it came about that it would be really nice if we could

have a Marine to produce this, and that's where my name rose to the surface. But in producing that model, my name was truly out there because that project was assigned to me from the commandant of the Marine Corps, and I was taken off of all duties, except for to produce this.

[00:24:21.82] I was even-- had orders-- received orders to report to Marine Barracks, 8th and I, the drill team, and so on. And that's one of those things that you don't get out of if you're tagged. And I went up for interview and so on. I was accepted, but those orders could not override what the commandant-- and the project that I was on. So at some point, the commanding officer of 8th and I, after waiting for a while for me to report, just had to cancel it and find someone else to come to 8th and I because I was on that project.

[00:25:18.62] So I'm a member of the Division of Information. Somewhere in this time frame, Vietnam was happening, and most of us did not even know what Vietnam was. We had young Marines coming back from Vietnam, and many senior Marines were complaining they have some sort of false medals and ribbons, and that kind of thing. But Vietnam was happening. So then comes they wanted to resurrect an art program that they'd last had it during the Korean War period.

[00:26:07.76] But it goes back further than that, and that's where Colonel Henri comes in, who was a World War II veteran. And he was a writer, and he had organized one of the earlier art programs that had gone defunct, and so on. So I'm there. I'm seeing and being around all of this kind of hearing and absorbing and this kind of thing.

[00:26:40.86] So at some point, I said, well, to myself, I would like to be in that program. I applied. Colonel Henri was not very interested in me and my work because he was interested more in artists who had achieved and had a background or were in the academic art world, and so on. He wanted the program to develop from that perspective.

[00:27:27.32] So what I did, I challenged Colonel Henri. I presented, and I mean, I must admit the work that I was doing at that time was not quite the same as I wound up producing in Vietnam, but I challenged him. I brought my work, samples of my work to Colonel Henri. Of course, I just stated he had rejected me. But that was not acceptable to me. So I took my work to the curator of the National Gallery of Art here in D.C. And I presented it and told him about the Marine Corps program, which he did not know anything about.

[00:28:22.52] And I told him I wanted to be a combat artist in the Marine Corps art program going to Vietnam and all of that. He said, "Well, your work is not the kind of work that we would have here in the National Gallery-- we were talking about the Rembrandts and the Turners, and all of that. I knew that. He said, but your work is quite sufficient for the kind of program that you're describing to me. And if anyone says that they do not feel that you are capable, here's my card. Present it to them.

[00:29:04.81] So then I went to the Corcoran, and I saw one of the head people there. Same response. He said, we only wish that our graduating students would be capable upon graduation of producing what you can produce. He offered me his card. I went to the Navy Art Collection. Got the same response.

[00:29:35.51] So I went back to Colonel Henri. I recall it was around lunchtime of this particular day. He was not in his office. I set up an easel, put pieces of my work on the easel, and so on. And I had the three cards. And I said. Colonel Henri, I went to the National Gallery of Art. I went to the Corcoran. I went to the Navy. Here is their response. And I said, call them. He was livid.

[00:30:14.36] JOE GALLOWAY: You went over his head.

[00:30:15.99] JAMES FAIRFAX: He threw me out of his office. But he opened the door and sent me to Puerto Rico to do some work, and so on. And I had also a couple of Marine generals that were on my side because their position was we know the work that this man has done for the Marine Corps, and if you're going to let civilians come into this program, there's no reason why you can't at least give a Marine an opportunity, yeah.

[00:30:50.90] So once accepting, he said, when would you like to go to Vietnam? I was very fortunate in that sense because being in this unique position, it wasn't just you getting a set of orders, and you're supposed to report to Vietnam. It was very personal. When do you want to go? And so on and so forth. And so, I could write my own ticket of when and how, and so on, and this kind of thing because I'm going to go there as an artist.

[00:31:21.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, we have gotten to where? '64? '65?

[00:31:25.29] JAMES FAIRFAX: No, no. We're in, let me see, '67, I would say. But to this day, I love Colonel Henri. He's deceased, but he did a lot of very nice things for me. I think I surprised him and he, yeah--

[00:31:46.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Turned him around.

[00:31:47.84] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yes, but it also was an awakening to me. When I went to Vietnam, I knew that I had to produce, and I had to go beyond wherever I had been. And I had some people that really coached me and assisted me, and so on.

[00:32:20.56] I entered Vietnam commercial--

[00:32:26.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Charter flight.

[00:32:27.35] JAMES FAIRFAX: --commercial charter and I landed at Da Nang Air Force Base. And from there, just a short drive picked up at the Air Force base. Although I was a member of the 3rd Marine Amphibious Force, my place of operation was the Da Nang Press Center.

[00:32:58.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, I lived there for a whole year.

[00:33:04.31] JAMES FAIRFAX: My impressions were very positive. I was being an artist, I was fascinated with what I saw around me. Of course, I knew that I was in a war zone, but the South China and the greenery in the distance, and so on. I mean, it was like the earlier story that I was telling you about my travels into Africa, and so on. I'm going into this fantasy world, you

might say, from an artistic perspective. And I'm ready to absorb everything around me. So, for me, everything had a positive element to it, looking at it from the perspective of an artist or a writer.

[00:34:15.50] I had credentials that would allow me to go and come. And as a matter of fact, Headquarters Marine Corps had sent correspondence to the commanding officer. You may have-- may recognize his name. JOE GALLOWAY: Lew Walt? JAMES FAIRFAX: No, this was a Colonel Moriarty, but it's-- when I was there. Oh, Lew Walt, the commandant of the Marine Corps. Yes, yes. But there was correspondence that let him know that the artist had free rein. What we had to do was be respectful from the military perspective, but they did not have control over us as it relates to-- JOE GALLOWAY: They couldn't make you paint rocks. JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right, right.

[00:35:06.80] And we had open access to move about and to attach with units as we saw fit go and come. Of course, I'm becoming acclimatized to the whole situation and attempting to figure out and going into briefings and hearing what was going on, where, and so on, like any of the civilian correspondents who happened to be there, and then eventually deciding that I wanted to go this way or go that way. And I had a studio and becoming adjusted to the studio, and my supplies, and all of those things. That was the first order of business. JOE GALLOWAY: First job. JAMES FAIRFAX: Yes.

[00:36:07.91] Well, the Marines that I was living with, of course, most all of them were combat photographers or writers--

[00:36:20.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Radio, and all of that.

[00:36:22.31] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right. From Leatherneck, and so on. There's some names that I recall like Tom Bartlett and Dale Dye, was a staff sergeant, and--

[00:36:37.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Jack Paxton.

[00:36:39.38] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right. So they were all very professional, and we got along very well. I was an odd person for many of them because they were from the typical public affairs side, and this artist thing and these artist people. To some of them, we were kind of like, you know, this odd thing, somewhat of a pain in the butt, because we would be sometimes asking for support from them, and-- but we all got along very well. So there was never any problem.

[00:37:20.31] Some of the senior officers had more of a problem because they might have real cognizance over the combat camera people and the writers, and so on. They had no cognizance over us. [LAUGHS]

[00:37:41.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Couldn't mess in your stuff.

[00:37:43.27] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right, right.

[00:37:44.84] JOE GALLOWAY: That always makes a colonel mad.

[00:37:46.70] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yes, yes, yes.

[00:37:54.37] Tied up with a patrol, and we were-- wherever they were patrolling, I'm sort of tagging along. I want to see what's happening and this kind of thing. We found ourselves caught in the middle of a mined area, and we had a tracked vehicle with us. And that's how we-- because the tracked vehicle hit a mine, and it was blown up and-- well, not completely destroyed, but--

[00:38:39.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Casualties among the crew.

[00:38:41.30] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yes. Yes, we had KIAs and wounded. KIAs, killed in action. And so, as an artist, I'm seeing, I'm feeling. We also had our cameras, and a lot of times, we could--

[00:39:02.48] JOE GALLOWAY: You were shooting some pictures.

[00:39:03.82] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yeah, shoot-- and so on. And the medevacs were called in, and I recall that we were pretty much fixed in place. It was difficult for us to move because we had other elements that were probing for mines, and so on. But when a medevac came in, I decided to-- I wanted to accompany the medevac, and they put KIAs and wounded on the same medevac I got on it. I wanted to see, OK, how is this thing--

[00:39:43.82] JOE GALLOWAY: How's this going to work. Yeah.

[00:39:45.17] JAMES FAIRFAX: So we landed at Naval Support Activity Hospital, and I decided to-- while the wounded were taken off in one direction, the KIAs were taken off in another direction. They were going to the mortuary. So I went into triage. And I'm in triage, and I'm seeing how they worked there. And as I recall, this tent, huge tent, and they had these bottles of plasma attached to the rafters and whatever beams they had. And they are hanging down. My memory tells me that they looked like so many chandeliers, just all over and these sawhorses placed all around.

[00:40:49.43] JOE GALLOWAY: With stretchers on them.

[00:40:50.33] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, and they could put stretchers almost anywhere and just reach up and grab these things, and so on. We had this one young man who had lost both of his legs. And I recall a couple of fingers on one hand or what have you. So I decided to pretty much stay with him, and in the triage, the cutting off his clothes, his rifle, and all like that was on the stretcher and tagged. And you had hand grenades, flak jackets, what not. This stuff is all on the deck, and they're stepping over these things. So they're preparing him to go into the OR. So they let me suit up and go into the OR. So I'm in the OR and the doctors are cauterizing arteries. And I still can pick up the smell.

[00:41:55.82] JOE GALLOWAY: The smell of blood.

[00:41:56.99] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right. So I did attempt to go back to visit him like the next day, but he was already gone. And I visited the mortuary. So it's these two things that kind

of stayed with me. I did a painting called Triage. And my Triage-- were coming back to my feelings of the event. Triage was a still life. Flak jacket, rifle tagged with the Red Cross tag, and all of that. I kind of put the Red Cross on the tag and hand grenades and bandolier, ammunition and helmet, and that kind of thing.

[00:42:54.95] JOE GALLOWAY: And the Marine.

[00:42:56.36] JAMES FAIRFAX: No, no, just the--

[00:42:58.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Just the stuff around him.

[00:42:59.18] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right. The stuff represented the Marine. And I placed graffiti on the flak jacket that said, if I'm hit, take me to NSA. So that's-- as the artist, I'm using license to make a statement. And so, that was the piece I did on Triage. But then there's something deeper about my visiting the mortuary on more than one occasion, and it's with me today.

[00:43:48.97] I have a project that I've been working on. It's-- over the past 40 years. And that is-- the project is From a Grateful Nation, a Eulogy. And it's a combination of my personal visits to the mortuary and near the Press Center, the Da Nang Press Center where my studio was sometimes I would have to cross the river either by boat or by road. And if I was going by road on the opposite side of the river, near the III MAF headquarters there was a huge supply depot. And at this supply depot, they had outside storage, and then they had buildings. It was all surrounded with a chain-link fence and razor wire, and this kind of thing.

[00:45:24.19] At some point, you would come across these transfer cases, we called them. Caskets or coffins, aluminum, and they were stacked as high as the fence was tall. And every time I saw them, there were two things in my head. The mortuary and the cases. Every time I saw them, it was a vivid reality that these cases are there waiting for someone's son, some young man.

[00:46:07.42] And, as an artist, I wanted to see, touch, feel everything. I could move outside of myself. And these cases and what I saw in the mortuary also represented, and to this day, these young people, young men. I always wanted to do something. I knew that a painting of these cases stacked was not going to be sufficient.

[00:47:17.61] JOE GALLOWAY: I will tell you something. I've met a number of Army and Marines who worked in the mortuaries. Every one of them severely PTSD. Worse than combat.

[00:47:33.30] JAMES FAIRFAX: Same with me. JOE GALLOWAY: If you've carried them, if you've held them in your arms, they own you forever.

[00:47:44.26] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right. And many people do not understand us. However, as I said, it's taken more than 40 years for me to come up with this concept of how I wanted to recognize the experience. And with the wars that we have been engaged in today, that was a part of it. Afghanistan, Iraq, I knew there was a supply depot. I don't have to see it. A supply depot with these cases stacked, waiting with someone's son or daughter.

[00:48:48.64] I'm working on-- it's not just a painting. It's a sculpture. It incorporates actual cases. I have, I think it's seven cases. Two of them are upright, and there'd be a panel cut into those two. One of the still-life paintings represents the early life of a young woman. To my mind, she would be anywhere from 18 to 20. Well, actually, for women, about 22, or 18 to about 26 or something. And the still life is all done against the backdrop of an American flag.

[00:49:44.23] And in my style of painting, there would be starting with the birth card. Congratulations, it's a baby girl. And then we have like a Valentine's Day box, a cheerleader trophy, a folded flag, a Purple Heart, dog tags, a teddy bear, I recall, a megaphone, just some things that represent if you were to go to a home where this person probably grew up and still has a room, you might find things like this.

[00:50:33.46] On the young man's side, same age, you have a little rubber duck, a birth card. You have a soccer ball, a football helmet, baseball bat against the American flag. You have a Purple Heart, folded flag, dog tags. What I'm trying to show is the youth. And these from an artistic perspective, these young people who have gone off to war and then returned home to their loved ones in one of these cases.

[00:51:25.18] Yes, and then I have one that or two that have the flag-draped, but it will all be painted opposed to a cloth flag, all artistic stuff to evoke the emotion. And then, it's all against a nice, dark marble, and then the glass surrounding. I have quotes from different folks like President Roosevelt. He gave a very meaningful short quote on the sacrifice. I have some-- a quote from, I think, Harriet Tubman about war.

[00:52:09.67] So the way that I've seen this, although my experience is-- my personal experience is Vietnam, the more I've gotten into this, the more I realize this is not just Vietnam. This went on whether people were returned in wicker baskets or wooden pine boxes, or what have you. The Civil War-- the young people. So I'm trying to produce it as something that's meaningful to families and loved ones who have lost their loved ones. So I have a vision statement, and in my vision statement, it speaks of past, present, and future because this story doesn't end.

[00:53:09.38] There were no numbers that we had to produce. Your subject matter as an artist was your subject matter.

[00:53:22.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Your subject matter. Your choice.

[00:53:23.51] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right, right. At least under Colonel Henri, that's what he wanted. I know that Iraq, it got to be a little more bureaucratic. So some of the artists we had go there you had people saying we want to see this. We wanted to-- yeah. But under Colonel Henri, he wanted the artists to be free. He felt if you produced whatever it was that you wanted, that would be most helpful to the program. And I think he was absolutely right because if you were to look at the Marine Corps art collection from the Vietnam era, you'll see some of everything.

[00:54:14.72] I did festivals. That was something else about Vietnam. What I saw, yes, there was a war zone. I was there as a combat artist, but I also saw people living.

[00:54:27.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Life went on.

[00:54:28.10] JAMES FAIRFAX: Life went on. I recall doing something on the mid-autumn festival. The children and, you know, they would have something like a pinata, and children would dress up with a Buddha face and a dragon costume, and so on. Go around to the houses and beat on the pinata and money and candy or whatever would come, and the mooncake and all of those things.

[00:54:58.58] Babies were still being born. Naturally. Not necessarily an American and a Vietnamese woman, but I'm talking about the normal life. People were still selling at the market. I did a painting called Marketplace. And the women were there with their wares at the marketplace. So to me, it was not just the war. It was life. And in this country, there happened to be a war going on.

[00:55:39.99] JOE GALLOWAY: When you were born in a village, they took the afterbirth and buried it. And it rooted you to that place and that time and that land, and you were never supposed to live beyond the reach of where that was, where your ancestors were buried. And we thought you could just pick those people up and put them in a barbed-wire camp and-- it didn't work like that.

[00:56:13.09] JAMES FAIRFAX: Well, one of the things I learned about Vietnam as well, and I respect, that-- you see, there as-- whether you called it Indochina. You know, I recall, you can recognize this, when I was a kid, there were cartoon strips, Terry and the Pirates, and all of that. That was Indochina, which came to be what we one day would call Vietnam. You know, the Chinese had come, then they're gone--

[00:56:50.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Six invasions.

[00:56:52.88] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right. The Japanese had come and they're gone. The French, they had come, and they're gone.

[00:57:01.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Now us.

[00:57:02.33] JAMES FAIRFAX: We came, and we're gone. We're called the American War. But their nation, their life, it goes on. And some people had learned maybe to sit under a banyan tree or something [LAUGHS] and watch it all go by because it's going to go.

[00:57:31.97] The best day was a Christmas party. Being an artist again, you were like a magnet. Now, keep in mind again, my base of operation was the Da Nang Press Center. So I got to know a lot of people, and there were a couple of French correspondents that-- I remember this woman, Maria Angel. She was Dutch, and she had-- from what I understand, she had been married to someone who was a car dealer down in Saigon, which had a little girl named Belinda. Well, she was dating this French correspondent and-- so we all kind of met, and Maria and I, we got to be very close because I had two little girls, and I admired her little girl, Belinda, and so on.

[00:58:43.43] So Maria told me of this Christmas party that this French couple, Monsieur and Madame Delagoute, was going to have at their villa in Da Nang. And they were the owners, managers, whatever of one of the Tiger Beer outlets.

[00:59:12.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, so we're talking rich here?

[00:59:16.68] JAMES FAIRFAX: Right, right, right. So because I could move freely, I went out in town, and there were Indian tailors, and so on. I had a tuxedo made and shoes and everything. I stored it at Maria's house. So the night of the party, I got a vehicle and said I was going out to another compound. Well, I did go to the compound where they didn't know me, then I'd walk out of the gate because I had the pass. And I went through the alleys and what not to Maria's house, got out of my uniform, put on my tuxedo.

[01:00:13.16] And I mean, I think about it now, and it's kind of funny because Maria was very blonde and very Dutch-looking, and I'm very dark because I'm in Vietnam. And it's nighttime, and we're sneaking through the side streets of Da Nang, making our way to the Delagoute's. So we get there. And of course, the house is very from the outside, very drab looking with the mold and what not, you know, the cement. And we get there, and knock on the door and the servants opened, and it's just beautiful inside. And they had-- I'm sure they had Viet Cong there and the whole bit. But there were Russians. There were Americans. There was some of everybody.

[01:01:21.14] You spoke about your familiarity with the Da Nang Press Center. Well, adjacent to Da Nang Press Center on the river, there was a hospital ship, the Helgoland, a German hospital ship. Well, you had people from that and so on. So we're at this party, beautiful food, music, and the whole bit. They're doing Russian dances, and so on. And so, I'm there in my tuxedo. It was just--

[01:01:56.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Surreal is the right word.

[01:01:58.83] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yeah, so that was something that stays with me.

[01:02:08.20] Mainly my contact was with-- like that was with Australians and Republic of Korea marines.

[01:02:24.80] South Vietnamese. I found myself periodically going to schools with the-- and teachers. Across from the Press Center, there was a Buddhist, I'll say monastery. But I would go over and have tea and sit with the monks and the little novice monks, and you know even though, we did not necessarily speak the same language. We had our way of communicating, and you know I enjoyed that.

[01:03:08.57] I enjoyed-- sometimes the women who would be selling what we would call fast food, their version of fast food, and they would have the business on their shoulder with a basket. I enjoyed partaking in some of the foods that they would have. And, of course, the Vietnamese always found it to be very funny, and, you know, try this and do that. And if you did it, they kind of love you.

[01:03:51.98] Not very much. My wife at the time, we would send recordings. And my children-

[01:04:01.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Cassettes? Or the little round ones?

[01:04:02.72]

[01:04:03.77] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yeah, those little cassettes.

[01:04:11.24] Going home was quite uneventful. When I left Vietnam, of course, I left on a charter aircraft. I think we came into San Francisco, Travis. '70. We came into Travis, I believe, and were processed, and it was very uneventful.

[01:04:44.33] Well, I had the opportunity to complete some works that I had started there, but then the Marine Corps-- I was still attached to Public Affairs, Division of Information. And at some point, I was reassigned to the advertising side of the house, recruitment advertising with manpower. And they put me on a program, you might say, where they wanted me to tour the country with works that I had produced in Vietnam. And that was very interesting. That's where I really started to grow up and understand things about Vietnam, the politics.

[01:05:41.12] I was representing the Marine Corps at organizations like the NAACP national conferences, National Conference of the Urban League, Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH in Chicago, Reverend Sullivan's OIC. I would do things like represent at the NEA, National Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Offices. I found myself-- this is part of Vietnam experience. I was representing the Marine Corps at the National Bar Association. This was the black bar.

[01:06:28.62] Now, what's the significance in that? OK, I was like the honey that attracts the bees. So the members of the National Bar Association, they're seeing this Marine in his dress uniform and these paintings, and so on. So they're drawn to this because this is art. But in the meantime, there are black officers, and JAG officers as well, who are talking to these folks. Now, what was the mission?

[01:07:05.78] Well, during the '70s, there were the services not just the Marine Corps, but particularly ground services, the Army and Marine Corps, and so on, were being cited by many organizations of being very heavy-handed and unfair as to the treatment and the bad discharges that were being handed out to black Marines who were returning from Vietnam. But the JAG systems were predominantly white, and the judges were predominantly white.

[01:07:50.18] So the bad discharges were, in some cases, over the top-- was felt to be over the top of what they should be. And in some cases, many of them were not truly warranted. So what the Marine Corps was trying to get from the Bar Association were seasoned judges and attorneys, bring them in for short periods of time to serve as judges and attorneys to work on these cases and help balance the system.

[01:08:33.42] And the NAACP and the Urban League, and so on was all part of the same thing, to try and tell a story. Yeah, and so, I was used to help to--

[01:08:54.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Bait them up.

[01:08:54.83] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yeah, and I learned a lot. I learned more than the Marine Corps expected me to learn because a lot of this was an eye-opener to me as to what was going on and if we're going to have minorities. And I've done things like LULAC and so on. But it was a double-edged sword personally for me because to the extent that I had people like the commandant who wanted me to be out there. I remember it was maybe General Chapman or Cushman.

[01:09:41.24] I met with him like we are talking right now, and I had an afro hairstyle. And he said, are you going to cut your hair? And I said, no, sir. He said, good, because when you go out there, I want you to be able to relate to people. But then I would come back, and there might be some hard-charging colonel or something that would see me-- yeah, is that hair regulation? And I had no choice, yes, sir, and so on. But it was all good.

[01:10:18.54] In some ways, yes. When I returned from Vietnam, my wife had abandoned the family. I found myself with two little girls, four and six years old. I raised them. But Vietnam was a help in raising them. It was very difficult, but some of the things that helped me was I would speak to myself, and sometimes I would go in my bedroom and I would cry, and what not. And I'd say, well, I could go to war and these two little innocent children-- I say that I love them, and I'm going, and I'm not-- I had no-- there's no way I could abandon them.

[01:11:13.48] I had some options. I could have sent them off to a great aunt that lived in southern Virginia, and so on. But those options were something I just know-- I can do Vietnam. I can do Parris Island, and some of my old staff NCOs would speak to me in my head, and so on. And leadership, responsibility, those kinds of things. But that was a very tough time. That was the toughest aspect of coming back from Vietnam, to find myself suddenly as a single parent and still trying to maintain my Marine Corps duties.

[01:12:01.34] Well, to me, it was an awakening of social responsibility, political responsibility. Now, this is to me. I've often heard that we were in Vietnam to help to preserve freedom and all the other things that we speak about as Americans from a political perspective. I can't say that I bought that, but what I guess, and maybe I'm not answering the question directly. What I can say is that I felt that whatever we were doing here, and I still feel that way, our right to protest was something that I, as an American fighting man, I could not in my soul go against.

[01:13:19.96] I know that I will say something that is a little different than many, but the whole thing with Jane Fonda and so on, it never bothered me. Why? She's acting as an American citizen. She might not do what I would do, but--

[01:13:37.12] JOE GALLOWAY: But she has the right.

[01:13:38.50] JAMES FAIRFAX: She has the right, and I would never condemn anyone who is exercising their right. Again, I go back to my role as an artist, I'm looking at the world somewhat differently, and I realize that a lot of these young men that are older men who are still hating. Not that I give them a pass, but this was a segment of their life that they will-- that their whole sense of who they are was maybe wrapped up in Vietnam, and they don't--

[01:14:25.31] JOE GALLOWAY: One year, 13 months.

[01:14:26.60] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yeah. They don't-- it's hard to go beyond that. Me, I think I'm rather fortunate. God has given me, or my angels have given me the opportunity to see and to touch and to smell and view the world and our people in the world in somewhat of a different way. I think I'm very fortunate of that. I don't feel that I'm absolute or that I'm right. I just speak of it how I feel about it and the depth of feeling and the sacrifice that people make. Like I was talking about From a Grateful Nation. So the Jane Fondas and all like that, I support.

[01:15:20.51] JOE GALLOWAY: You visited the Vietnam Veterans Memorial?

[01:15:24.05] JAMES FAIRFAX: Yes, once. And I had the opportunity to lay a wreath there. I was invited. I still cannot go back to it.

[01:15:39.33] I think it's warranted. I think any time we send our troops forward that it's not too much to honor their service. I think it's-- I truly support it.