

Ferguson, Bill Navy

[00:00:19.58] BILL FERGUSON: I was on my second tour of Vietnam. First one I was on an aircraft carrier, the Enterprise, and I didn't count that as being in Vietnam. But I was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, May 13, 1941. When I went to Vietnam on a river patrol force I was married and had three children.

[00:00:37.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Married and three kids.

[00:00:38.75] BILL FERGUSON: Yes.

[00:00:40.50] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your hometown, or what you considered your hometown?

[00:00:44.18] BILL FERGUSON: At that time it was Lynn, Massachusetts.

[00:00:51.11] I joined the Navy to avoid combat. I figured it would be an easier way to go than the Army or the Marine Corps. And when I enlisted the draft was still in place, so if you hadn't obligated yourself with a service some way and another before, you had to go to do your time. So I chose the Navy, enlisted in the Navy at 17. At that time, it was a distant drum beating.

[00:01:20.42] A fellow that I knew was one of the first killed in Vietnam. He was a helicopter mechanic. He was killed in South Vietnam, sometime in the late-- early 60s, rather. Excuse me. I said, it couldn't possibly involve me. I'm a sailor. I'm going to go to sea, and that's that.

[00:01:49.02] The first place I went to for training was up at Naval Inshore Operation Training Command, or Center, in Vallejo, California inside the submarine shipyard up there. We started the first week we were there was mostly administrative work. Second week, they put us at a place for survival training-- survival, escape, resistance, evade.

[00:02:12.06] That was five days of-- four days of running through the woods trying to find something to eat and land navigation. And there wasn't a self-respecting bunny within a hundred miles of that place. Then we went to Whidbey Island, Washington in January of 1969. Snow up to our knees, and the instructor said, pretend you're in Southeast Asia. And I said, what's this? Pretend rice?

[00:02:37.44] He said, you're the class clown. I said, I guess so. Anyway, went through survival school, and several people didn't make it through the training. The educational experience of being subjected to just a slight bit of harsh treatment. They slapped us around a little bit, because we'd get caught, and it was all part of the game. We knew at every step, though, that we were being observed and evaluated, and three or four people just disappeared. Went to jobs someplace other than the front line force in Vietnam.

[00:03:16.40] I recall distinctly looking down while we were making a steep approach. You know, the combat approach they make, looking down out the window and seeing all these craters. And I said, this is real. Well, we hit the ground, and of course they wanted to get us off

the plane as soon as possible. The engines were still running. The expression, move it, move it, move it! got us off the plane rapidly. And it was really-- the smells were alien to me. Totally alien.

[00:03:47.21] Of course it was a mixture of fuel oil, and gasoline, and gunpowder, and death, and campfires, and latrines, and stray dogs. And the occasional breath of fresh air would come from someplace, and it'd be like a little oasis, and then back to the grind. It was a shock.

[00:04:11.36] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your initial duties?

[00:04:14.85] BILL FERGUSON: When I first went there, I was put on a Mark 1 river patrol boat. It was 31 feet long, about eight, nine feet wide. And I spent about a week learning the local tactics and procedures for River Division 533, one of about 25 river divisions in the country at the time. I spent my time on the river, or in that particular case it was the Vam Co River, which is close to Saigon.

[00:04:50.84] It's what I'd call the handle on the slingshot. From the Cambodian border, two rivers come out, the Vam Co Tay and the Vam Co Dong. The Vam Co Dong was the original River of Death. And we would go right up to the confluence of the Tay and the Dong, and back down to the-- I forget the name of the river. It comes out of Saigon. But I was there about two weeks, and they took me up to Saigon and to Nha Be-- naval support activity by the Rung Sat Special Zone-- and I got a PBR, 109.

[00:05:29.21] As I told you before, at the time I was a Massachusetts guy, and I took that 109 to be significant, something special. And it was. That was a good boat, and I had a great crew.

[00:05:45.00] River Division 533 had a schedule that we'd run two day patrols, from 6:00 AM to 6:00 PM, then two night patrols-- 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM. And in the middle we'd have a day off-- 24 hours off. And by day we'd check traffic. By checking traffic I mean people used the rivers as a way of trade and commerce. And you want to see Uncle Ho. There were very few roads in the country, so most of the transportation was by water.

[00:06:20.91] And you'd be surprised how many people you could cram into a 20-foot sampan going to market. People and pigs and snakes, and anything else. But we were charged with keeping the flow of munitions and medicine, troops, from crossing the rivers. That was our job. And we had to go on board those boats and poke around, see if we could find anything that was contraband.

[00:06:45.99] We looked for young men that were obviously not who they said they were, and they would be fidgeting around. And we'd put the arm on him and say, let's investigate this fellow a little bit further. And we'd take him and turn him in to the National Police. So that was by day. By night, you had your choice. If you're on a narrow river, you were either going north or south. You didn't have an east or west option.

[00:07:17.16] So the enemy could do one of two things-- many things, but primarily what they could do was wait for us to go past, if we kept the boats moving all night, wait for us to go past,

and then go right behind us and carry a truckload of stuff across the water. And so we had to park our boats at night in the bushes, at a place where we could see down river and up river, if we found a good spot, and wait and watch.

[00:07:48.42] And sometimes you had to duke it out with the guys that had decided they wanted to set up an ambush there for the boats. All we were doing then is waiting for somebody to come by, and if they were armed, take them out.

[00:08:05.41] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your chow like?

[00:08:10.27] BILL FERGUSON: The C-rations were, circa 1944, they were pretty good if you were really starving to death. The cooks tried. But if you went to the chow line and the cook was eating a C-ration or an MRE-- they wouldn't call them MREs, I think they were called LRRPs, long-range reconnaissance support-- you knew your dinner was not going to be a culinary delight.

[00:08:36.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Your living conditions? Your quarters? You were on the boat.

[00:08:44.27] BILL FERGUSON: One spell, we were up in Tay Ninh-- close the Cambodian border, in July of '69. It was called Operation DOUBLE SHIFT. You may have heard of it. It's where the North Vietnamese said they were going to liberate Tay Ninh, declare it a province of North Vietnam or something. And we tripled the number of boats on that river. So there wasn't any place to put us, so we slept on the boats.

[00:09:11.46] And it was right on the edge of the monsoon season, and of course the monsoon over there is a-- you're going to get wet. If you stand still, you'll get rusty. So we stayed on the boats for a month or so. The quarters in My Tho were-- it was an old hotel, and we had taken it over. And it was adequate. The water was in a bladder on the roof, and occasionally we'd get mortared, and they'd blow the bladder up, and everybody's stuff would get washed.

[00:09:42.24] But we couldn't get any more water to drink. Oh no, I mean, for being on the pointy end of the spear, we didn't do too bad. I didn't expect that. I expected to have worse.

[00:10:05.71] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your impressions of the Vietnamese people initially?

[00:10:18.52] BILL FERGUSON: I think my initial impression was that I suspected everybody of being a Viet Cong, or NVA. Somebody negative. I didn't see any good people at all, I just saw opposition and targets. After I was there about maybe three or four months, it slowly dawned on me that all of the locals that we were dealing with, that lived in and around those op areas, all they wanted to do, in my opinion, was to till the farm that their parents had tilled-- and their parents, and their parents' parents-- had tilled for generations. They just wanted to be left alone.

[00:10:58.76] What happened in Saigon was like you and I talking about what was going on on the moon today. It's that far away. So I got new respect for those people. They were very patient and very vocal in their communications. Once we got an area secured, they started telling us

where the bad guys were hiding, and point them out to us. They wouldn't do that when we first got there.

[00:11:27.08] So I was proud to serve my country, and I tried to treat those people the way I'd want to be treated if I had an occupying force my backyard.

[00:11:43.66] BILL FERGUSON: My crew. The boat that I had, the 109, all river patrol boats had a four man crew. A boat captain, an engine man, a gunner, and a seaman.

[00:12:02.82] JOE GALLOWAY: Four guys only?

[00:12:04.61] BILL FERGUSON: Four guys only for a crew, but then each patrol had-- as a minimum-- two boats, with one extra party being the patrol officer who ran the patrol. I ran into all kinds of people. I ran into people that would exemplify the current Navy, core values of honor, courage, and commitment. These folks were committed to getting the task done.

[00:12:44.78] I also saw some people that would tell you how to do it, but they wouldn't go on the river if you dragged them onto a boat. They'd be back in headquarters and tell you how to run a patrol, but they would do anything to avoid getting on a river and taking the same chances we went out and did every day. But overall, I was very happy with the majority of the troops that I met.

[00:13:13.37] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for recreation? Off-duty activities? BILL FERGUSON: Well, we pitched horseshoes, and we cleaned our weapons, and we drank a lot of beer, and wrote letters. And most of the time we were-- I'd talk about being on the pointy end of the spear. That's where I never thought I'd be. That's why I joined the Navy. I'd look around and say, what am I doing here?

[00:13:44.75] We just took advantage of the downtime, but most of the time we were also on standby. One or two places. We were practically on the river 7/24. One experience was on the coast of the South China Sea, where I had a couple of boats out in the ocean. That was different. JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:14:02.93]

[00:14:08.31] JOE GALLOWAY: What issues, events, or responsibilities consumed most of your time during this tour?

[00:14:15.79] BILL FERGUSON: Issues or events-- ? We set an ambush one night up in the Vam Co Dong-- Vam Co Tay River. And there were about six boats in the ambush scattered up down the river. And we got this cryptic message from the tactical operations center, said, the eagle has landed. So I asked a patrol officer, and I said, what's this eagle has landed stuff?

[00:14:42.65] I don't know, they didn't mention it at the briefing. Well I made a habit of always taking one of my crew with me to the briefs so if something happened to me, they'd know what we were supposed to be doing. It was also a morale boost for them. So pretty soon, every boat on

the river said, I don't know what this is. It could have meant, there's going to be a B-52 strike in your area in about five minutes, get out of there. Or it could be that the USO show will be delayed.

[00:15:08.76] So we went back to TOC and we're wondering, what the heck's going on? Oh, the eagle has landed. What does that mean? They landed on the moon. Oh? What's that got to do with me? We were so intense and focused on the mission, that we didn't have time for superfluous stuff like news.

[00:15:29.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah

[00:15:34.39] BILL FERGUSON: That was just one event.

[00:15:36.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions you witnessed in combat operations in which you participated? The ones that stick in your mind.

[00:15:49.47] BILL FERGUSON: There was Operation DOUBLE SHIFT. It was right up on the Cambodian border, and I was about five kilometers from that border. And we beached the boat in a spot. And we were in a free fire zone. This meant-- you know what it means-- if it twitches, shoot it. I had a gunner that was a pick-up gunner because my-- the fellow you see in the pictures-- had appendicitis.

[00:16:21.34] And he didn't ride the boat up that far, so I had a pick-up gunner. And he said, what are the rules of engagement? I said, if it moves, shoot it. So this young man, he said, I've heard that before. And I said, well, that's the way it is. We were parked there about 15 minutes and this, you know, NVA or VC came right up to the bank with an AK-47. This guy is loaded for bear. Hey, gunner. What do you want me to do? I said, shoot the son of a gun.

[00:16:52.61] So he finally got one off. And as we backed off of the bank, it turns out we'd been parked on a command-detonated mine. And a whole lot of mud and stuff came flying down on the boat. I got some shrapnel in the back of my neck. Anyway, we took off. We started taking fire from the opposite bank, and we ran into one of those famous five kilometer ambushes.

[00:17:17.08] They had a battalion of NVA ready to cross the stream to get to the-- well, I know I was gone two hours. And I had 5,000 rounds of .50 on that boat when I left, and I had 200 rounds when I got back. And burned up two barrels on a .50, and at least four barrels on M60s. That was an exciting night.

[00:17:37.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, I'll bet. Did your pick-up crewman learn to shoot first and ask later?

[00:17:45.28] BILL FERGUSON: Yes. It helped to prod him with a boot in his butt. The first fire fight I was in was just over so quick I didn't realize what was happening. What was that? There was one where we took a rocket, several rockets, RPGs, actually. And there was one that went over my lead boat's head, right over his canopy. And we were sitting the next morning

having breakfast, and we were evaluating the previous night's experience, and I said, you know, that was an awfully loud RPG. I said that's the loudest one I ever heard.

[00:18:29.04] And he said, which one are you talking about, Bill? I said, well, the one that went over your boat. He said, the one you saw isn't the one you heard. The one you heard was the one that went over the splinter shield, over my left shoulder, behind my neck, under the canopy, and out the other side. Box about this big. I said, well that explains why I'm bleeding back there. That was kind of a--

[00:18:55.88] I think that one of the funniest things that happened to me over there was the first night patrol I went on. I was a trainee, and there was a master chief who was in charge of patrol. Passed now. Name was Yates. Good man. We parked the boats up in the river-- the canal, actually-- and waited. We were there about half an hour, and pretty soon they get a line of Vietnamese GIs. They're doing like the GIs do. They're griping about the situation.

[00:19:23.64] Blah-blah-blah-bah, I'm out here doing this, argh, argh, argh. So I asked the chief-- oh, what happened that so funny was that when we tied up the boat to the bush, the bush lit up like a Christmas tree. I said, what the hell was that? He said, fireflies. Nobody had ever told me about fireflies in Vietnam, but it was something to consider, because I thought, (gasp) I'm coming home! You know, one of those things.

[00:19:52.66] I have a picture of several guys with four, five, six boats tied up. That particular photo was on the on the Song Dak. And we decided-- I was a patrol officer then in River Division 572-- we decided to go outside the usual area of operations. There was an area just north of us that wasn't well patrolled. So we said, let's go. A very democratic society in that if the majority of the crew wanted to go do something, we'd go do it, provided it was relatively safe.

[00:20:31.26] Well, we went up the river. As we were going up the river, where not too many people go, the sign says-- something. I don't know what it says, but I notice my Vietnamese crewman is putting on his flak jacket. And I said, what does th sign say? It says we're all going to die. Oh, cool. We went up river about another couple of kilometers, and we made a simultaneous turn.

[00:20:52.54] So now I'm standing on the engine covers of the cover boat, and I get a call from an OV-10 pilot or navigator. "This is Black Pony, you got any targets or intel for me?" As he was saying it, I noticed a big pink bow on a little platform on the bank. And I said, now that wasn't there five minutes ago. They said, yeah, stand by. Well, right about that time, 3 rockets came out.

[00:21:20.65] And I was standing right on the engine cover, and I turned to look. And it-- I swear to God it said William E. Ferguson, MM1, US Navy, deceased, on the nose cone of that sucker. But it hit in the wake of the boat and exploded. The other two went off into the woods on the other side of the bank. Well, then they opened up with a .50. And they-- pop, pop, pop-- walked it up to the boat. Then he just quit. And we made another pass and-- pop, pop, pop-- if he'd just get us where he had another couple of shots, he would have taken out our engines.

[00:21:53.36] Well, the OV-10 came straight down out of the clouds-- they didn't know he was up there-- and took him out with a 5 inch rocket. And when he came out with a prisoner, it was this kid about 14 years old. And he had a .50 machine gun with no tripod. He was up on the riverbank, and he'd fire about three rounds, four rounds, it'd blow him back into the bushes. He had to wrestle it back up on--

[00:22:22.12] BILL FERGUSON: The one I wish I didn't. There's one in particular that still bothers me. And that is in an indirect manner, I caused this woman to be killed. And there's nothing I can do about it, and I was doing the right thing at the time, but it still comes back and haunts me, and that-- We were parked in a place called Dong Son Dak. I was in a different river division, 572, and we were down at the end of this place called the VC Canal. And it was a canal about six, eight, 10 kilometers long. And it was straight as a die, dug by the French.

[00:23:07.40] And there was a big body of water down there, so we decided to penetrate. I had one of the soft support patrol boats parked on the corner of the canal facing north. I was in the middle, and another patrol boat to my starboard side. And we heard a boat starting at about 4:00 AM, They would run it a couple of minutes, and then they'd stop. They'd run a couple of minutes, and they'd stop.

[00:23:37.52] So we thought it was somebody trying to evade, because they'd do that. They'd want to see if they could hear engines, and if they heard engines they wouldn't start up again. This sampan came out with several people in it, and I told the gunner on the alpha boat to fire a warning shot, which he did. Well, they turned around and tried to get back in the canal. They're evading.

[00:23:58.84] And this officer or ensign I was breaking in as a patrol officer said, what do I do? I said, I would shoot them. And the kid in the alpha boat said, shoot them. All right, bam! He got off the round. Well the boat stopped and turned and brought the sampan alongside our boat. And there was a young woman shot right between the eyes, still a baby at her breast. That has stayed with me.

[00:24:31.73] The curfew down there was 6:00. Somebody in Saigon decided the curfew should be 6:00 PM to 6:00 AM. OK, I can live with that, because I've got a watch. Most of those folks down there were going on the sunrise and sunset. And that's just the kind of slack I give them. They're playing by the rules.

[00:24:56.00] BILL FERGUSON: When my gunner and I parted ways, we were in Australia. When River Division 533 split up in September of '69, we gave our boats over to the Vietnamese, and he went up to a river boat squad up in I Corps, and I went down to a place called Song Ong Doc down on the Ca Mau peninsula. I was in-- we had spent-- the day after we turned the boats over, we went to Australia for six days R&R.

[00:25:37.55] What happens in Australia stays there, right? So he and I split up then. He went up north and I went down south, as I said. Well, he got in trouble because he was throwing ammunition over the side. You know the corrosive effects of that salt water on ammo isn't good.

If it's in the drink too long, it gets corroded and it'll foul your guns. And it electrified cartridges, and it may set off a weapon, a round.

[00:26:13.37] So it's common practice to throw the stuff over the side. Well the XO was sort of a mindless prig, told him, he said, you have to wire brush that ammo. He said, XO, that would cause a spark, and the wires from the brush will caught in the links of the.50, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. He relieved him and said, go to Binh Thuy, which was the PBR headquarters down in the south of Vietnam.

[00:26:40.52] They sent him there for further transfer back to the States because he was unfit, or whatever. About the same time that was going on, I had made my bones down at 572 they made me a patrol officer. I was standing in the chow line waiting for some of the wonderful food they were feeding us. And the CO-- and the new CO and the new XO came to me and said, Petty Officer Ferguson, we're taking away your boat.

[00:27:05.51] And I went off on the guy. I said, the boat was screwed up when I got it, I had a crew I had to straighten up. I finally got the boat running. You're going to take it away from me? What the hell is this all about? He said, oh, well, we're going to make you a patrol officer. I said, well that's a different story. So they said, take a week off and go down to Binh Thuy. So I went up to Binh Thuy. And here's Bill Huckens up in the gun lookout station outside the gate, and I'm walking across the street. And we're both there at the same time.

[00:27:33.65] That was during Tet-- of '69, not '68-- and Binh Thuy town was still off limits to everybody, so we decided that's the place to go. And we went down to Binh Thuy and had a pretty good time, until about 5 o'clock. And then we crawled up in a high spot in this bar. And took some beer and some babes and went up there and waited for the MPs to leave, and we commenced playing slap and tickle.

[00:28:02.18] And the MP left, and we drank a few. Well I went off to go to the head. I was carrying this old M3 grease gun. One of the rooms down the passageway just a little bit, out comes this guy carrying an AK-47 wearing black pajamas. So he looked at me, and I looked at him, and we both hauled ass in different directions. We didn't want to screw up a good liberty port.

[00:28:29.09] We got back to the base just in time to get inside before it was curfew. And that's when we found out that I could drink a beer in my club, but he couldn't come into my club and vice versa. So I went down-- kind of funny-- I'd had a few, so I was not too judicious in what I had to say, but I kicked the door open to the CO'S office and said, I can die on a roof with this guy, but I can't drink a beer in your club? What's this all about?

[00:28:59.32] He said, What? And I said, I can't drink a beer. They won't let a first class petty officer in the enlisted men's club, and they're not going to allow him in the acey-deucey club. He fixed it right away. Fast forward a few years, I'm applying for a job. My first job out of the Navy. The interviewing guy was this officer that had opened the club for me. He says, you look familiar. And I said, well, I have a familiar face.

[00:29:24.25] And about a year later I told him. I said, I'm the guy that kicked the door in your office, had you open the club. So that was kind of a fun day. I think the best day was the day I left.

[00:29:38.44] BILL FERGUSON: I used to think a good day was when you didn't get shot. I never got shot. That's a good day. I think-- I don't know. Seeing the-- I had a terrible reputation in one of the river divisions, 572. It started before I got to the river division in My Tho, and it was carried over by a chief petty officer who was a person that was afraid to go on the river.

[00:30:25.56] And if he did go on the river, he would have the people clear a big path all around the boats so he could look for snakes. And he put me on report Christmas Day because I mouthed off to him the night before. We were having a Christmas party. There was a truce-- 48-hour truce, or a 24-hour truce-- so we were relaxed to a degree. And we were having a party down in a petty officer's hooch.

[00:30:56.37] And this-- our senior chief came in and said, your boat crews are out there popping flares and firing parachute flares, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. Get out there and stop it. So I got up, went out, and checked it out. I saw three or four guys in SEAL Team 2 having some fun. If you want to tell them, you tell them. So I just went back in and checked the crews, and they're all in their bunk rooms singing Christmas carols. They were all happy as a clam. Everything's good.

[00:31:24.62] I went back to my room, and I told the people there. The CO, the XO was there and anybody who was anybody was there. And I told them it was the SEALs and it wasn't our guys, they were singing Christmas carols. The door burst open and this irate senior chief comes in and says, the party's over. And I looked him in the eye and dropped the F-bomb on him,

[00:31:54.86] and told him that he was a senior chief in title only, that he wasn't helpful at all, and if he'd stay off the damn boats and leave the heavy lifting to us, things would get done around here. And he didn't like that at all. So he put me on report for disrespect. And so the next day, I told him. I said, you know, you can put me on report all you want, but I'm in for a decoration for this action that we had a few nights before, and you're just a pimple on the ass of progress down here, and I said, you'll be gone before long.

[00:32:33.92] And it turned out he was bounced out of the division because a master chief came along and knew that he had troubles, this new chief had troubles, and he tried to fix him, but he couldn't. He couldn't fix him. So he got rid of him.

[00:32:58.31] BILL FERGUSON: I went to a North-- [CHUCKLES] North Korean-- a Korean artillery base over in the Rung Sat. That's about the only foreign person I met over there. We used to carry the regional forces up the river, they're like the national guard guys. I was commenting the other day to one of my friends about I never saw anybody smoke pot in Vietnam. I didn't know anybody who took drugs.

[00:33:37.46] However, there were those evenings when we'd carry the Ruff Puffs up the river, and they'd be up in the bow smoking dope. Because it would waft through the conscious,

standing after-- After a while I said, you know, this isn't too bad. How about getting into the C-rations to get the chocolate out. But it dawned on me finally what it was doing, so I had to put the smoke lamp out when we were going up river.

[00:34:04.94] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact did you have with your family back home during this tour?

[00:34:10.58] BILL FERGUSON: Well, occasionally we'd get a liberty and get up to Saigon, and go to the Red Cross and make a phone call. And I'd get two or three letters a week, and I'd send two or three letters back.

[00:34:29.14] JOE GALLOWAY: So mostly mail?

[00:34:30.90] BILL FERGUSON: Yes, snail mail.

[00:34:34.58] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you get from home about the war?

[00:34:38.78] BILL FERGUSON: None.

[00:34:39.41] JOE GALLOWAY: None.

[00:34:40.09] BILL FERGUSON: None.

[00:34:41.58] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you get your news about the war?

[00:34:44.39] BILL FERGUSON: The Stars and Stripes. We didn't have internet then. It's kind of hard to believe.

[00:34:51.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. How did that news affect you, or did it?

[00:35:00.02] BILL FERGUSON: I really didn't notice because I was so busy in the here and now that I didn't pay much attention to what was going on in the world. I would read the headlines. Oh yeah, they're back in Paris talking again. Good. But as far as keeping track of how the Yankees were doing in the World Series, didn't have a clue.

[00:35:24.64] JOE GALLOWAY: When did you return home?

[00:35:27.53] BILL FERGUSON: The end of March 1970.

[00:35:30.39] JOE GALLOWAY: What was that like?

[00:35:33.45] BILL FERGUSON: Well, I finished my last patrol and I had the day off-- 24 hours off-- before I went on patrol again, but I was scheduled to be on a flight before that happened. So when I finished my night patrol, I went and saw the CO. And I said, my patrol obligations are over, can I leave today? He said, sure, but I don't know how you're going to get there. I said, somehow or other, I'll make it. He said, yeah, get out of here.

[00:36:03.54] About half an hour later, Sea Wolf guy said, I'm taking a run up to Binh Thuy, anybody want to go along? I said, Here I am. And we went up. On the way up we put in a strike. It was interesting, we ended up--getting shot at in a helicopter is not very much fun, I'm sure you know that. But we landed at Binh Thuy and I stumbled out of the helicopter and walking across the tarmac towards an office of sorts.

[00:36:34.75] And it looked official, so I walked over there, and they said, we got a Caribou twin prop, short takeoff and landing thing, going up to Saigon in about an hour. So I got to Saigon by lunch, and I went to the travel office and said, hey, I'm, you know, a day or two early, can you get me out of here? Well, we just had a vacancy. You're on the next flight.

[00:37:04.11] So I went from being in the field keeping my head down to being in San Francisco airport in about two days. That was a shocker. Because all I had-- I didn't have any Navy uniforms at all. All I had was my two or three pairs of greens, and the beret, and my orders, my service record. That's all I had. And when I got to San Francisco airport from wherever it was, we landed up in Fairfield, Travis Air Force Base.

[00:37:42.51] The MPs saw me wandering the hallways of San Francisco Airport. They said, what are you doing? I said, I'm looking for United Airlines flight blah blah blah. And they said, well you're in the wrong spot, we'll take you to a safe place. What do you mean safe?

[00:38:00.91] Well, there were people that would be in the airport and harassing troops coming back from Vietnam. So they took me to the USO, which I thought was very convenient, and they said, what time's your flight? And I told him. They came back and picked me up took me to the bar right next to the ticket counter, and put me in a chair, and said, stay there until they call your flight.

[00:38:31.86] That was kind of a shock. Welcome home. And so I arrived the next morning in Boston, where my mother and father and my sister and my wife and kids all gathered at the end of the walkway. Billy's coming home from war. And there was two Vietnamese guys between me and them, and they saw me and they saw that national police hat, and they were gone.

[00:39:03.13] And I said something like, you see those little bastards run? They thought I was going to catch them as draft dodgers and send them back or something, I don't know. But they didn't want to hear anything about my experiences. They didn't want to hear anything, like it never existed. My sister called me a baby killer, and I said, how do you know we did that? Well, I read the newspaper.

[00:39:28.18] I said, you may have read the newspaper, but none of that happened around where I was. We didn't kill any kids on purpose. We managed to make our amends before she passed away, but it was kind of a shock.

[00:39:41.93] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow veterans over the years?

[00:39:51.53] BILL FERGUSON: I stopped going to reunions of the SEALs and river boat guys because there was a lot of drinking. And August 12, 1976, I had my last drink. And I couldn't go to those places for a few years because I was-- they say if you go to a barber shop often enough, you're going to get a haircut. So if I keep going to these open bars, I'm going to get a haircut.

[00:40:24.52] And when I drink, I'm not the slow, easygoing guy you see sitting in front of you. I'm a mean drunk. So I stopped going to those for a long time. And I guess about seven or eight years ago, maybe a little bit longer, I started going again. I go to the reunion for SEAL 2, a SEAL team reunion over at the Willow Creek every year. And we have quarterly meetings of the Game Wardens of Vietnam Association, quarterly up here at the VFW in Lynn Haven.

[00:41:04.39] So I see folks all the time. Plus a couple of neighbors down in Carolina are veterans of Vietnam, the SEAL team. And that gunner, I'll tell you a story about him. When I was at-- I got hooked into getting stationed at Little Creek, but serendipitously I walked into the club at Puerto Rico. I was on an ammunition ship. When I came back from Vietnam, I went to an ammunition ship. It was brand new. The Santa Barbara.

[00:41:39.21] And they didn't have a clue as to how to handle these guys who just come out of Vietnam, we were all crazy as loons. I went from having life and death decisions who lives, who dies, essentially, to making sure that this guy was in the right chow line on the Santa Barbara. And they couldn't understand why I was like that.

[00:42:04.95] Anyway, to make a long story short, we were down in Puerto Rico, and I bumped into some guys I served with in South Vietnam, and they said, you want to come work with us? I said, doing what? They said, do you care? I said, no, get me out of this damn ship. Well they get me off the ship two weeks later. They sent orders to Little Creek.

[00:42:21.07] Because they told the officer in charge of Coastal River Squadron 2 that Bill Ferguson had run an engine overhaul shop in the Subic Bay, and I had run black ops out of Da Nang or wherever, Cam Rahn Bay. I checked in, he said, well I'm going to put you in charge of the Napier Deltic Program. I said, what's a Napier Deltic? He says, ha, ha, you've got a sense of humor.

[00:42:47.47] And then he found out he'd been had, that I knew nothing about PT boats. I didn't even know we had them. Anyway, Bill had just finished BUD/S training, and he was watching my pattern of drinking. I was in a steep dive. And he came to me and said, Bill, I don't like the way you treat your family. You're not supporting us in the team. You're doing a lousy job as a petty officer, as a human being. You're out of my life.

[00:43:21.65] And he turned around and walked away. About a week later, my youngest daughter said, Dad, you stink. That pushed me over the edge to get help. I asked for it, and it was there, and I haven't had a drink since. So that's a big part of my story about me, is then and now. I don't see how I could have possibly done that. I couldn't do it again.

[00:43:56.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Was it difficult readjusting to life after the war?

[00:44:00.78] BILL FERGUSON: Very. I remember sitting at a traffic light with my wife and kids in the car, and a car backfired and I floored it. Right through the intersection, like there wasn't any other traffic on the road. There were several people that got a little bit upset with me because I went across about four lanes of traffic. That kind of thing gets your attention.

[00:44:29.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your service in Vietnam that's stayed with you through all these years and had a lasting influence on your life?

[00:44:45.97] BILL FERGUSON: I don't know how to say it. I know that certain things will set me off. When I say set me off, I mean I don't go bonkers, I just flashback once in a while. Gunfire doesn't bother me anymore. I think what comes back to haunt me is that woman I told you about, with the baby. I was talking with a guy, a reporter for the local paper here in Norfolk a few years back, and he was asking me about the riverine starting up again.

[00:45:24.89] And I gave him some answers and I threw a couple of my experiences in there. And then he said, you know, that was funny. You ought to write a book. I said, OK. I will. I found it to be very helpful and allowed me to straighten my mind.

[00:45:41.65] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

[00:45:54.73] BILL FERGUSON: I was around the Navy for-- 1958 until I retired in 2005. And I saw the changes go through. The Z-grams and all the changes that made. All the equipment that a Sailor has today, and the support system they have today are far superior to anything we had. And they deserve it. And like everything else, we did the best we could with what we had in the '60s.

[00:46:25.28] It wasn't much, but I have nothing but respect for these guys. Yes, I wanted to join Navy. I wasn't drafted. But I knew if I didn't volunteer to do something, I was going to get drafted. And the idea of running through the woods with a gun didn't appeal to me. So I feel these guys get treated well. I don't have any resentments about that either.

[00:46:50.81] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today in our society?

[00:46:59.79] BILL FERGUSON: Mistake. A mistake. Mistake being if we're going to get into a war, finish it. If you're not going to finish it, don't get into it. I think that's what a lot of my friends feel, and I think the same way.

[00:47:21.08] JOE GALLOWAY: But we've had at least two or three wars since then that we didn't finish either.

[00:47:27.68] BILL FERGUSON: That's right. Not saying that any one in Washington is listening to me, why should they? They're just my elected representative. I hope you recognize snide comments, by the way.

[00:47:40.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:47:51.03] BILL FERGUSON: I think so. I have a greater respect for life, and people of different colors, and shapes, and sizes. I was, and I don't harp on this, but being an alcoholic I would act out in ways that were just strange. I had a lot of beliefs that were way out in left field. And I went to the Navy's human resource management school down in Memphis, Tennessee. My last tour of duty was as a human resource management guy teaching leadership and management.

[00:48:34.55] And I was the kind of guy that when students come in from my old division, I said, what are you here for? A bad example? I learned about people in the Navy. I learned the first day of that school down in Tennessee, I found out I was A, a racist; B, a sexist; C, an alcoholic, and I couldn't wait for the afternoon session. But then I had to do something about it.

[00:48:59.69] And so I carried that away with me. It's all today-- I'm a different guy altogether.

[00:49:12.53] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from your Vietnam tour that you would like to pass along to future generations of American?

[00:49:25.28] BILL FERGUSON: A GI is a tool. Yes, a human, they breathe. And they care about people, same as I do. They should be respected for doing a dirty, thankless job. I don't think-- not everybody wants to march down Main Street when they come back, but a pat on the back, a little recognition is good, I think. When I came back, people just didn't care. They didn't want to hear it.

[00:50:07.06] JOE GALLOWAY: What prompted you to write your book, *Laughter on the Rivers of Death*?

[00:50:13.36] BILL FERGUSON: I was-- excuse me. I was talking to a reporter, a local news reporter. They had a commissioning ceremony for one of the river patrol squadrons here in the Norfolk area. And I told a couple of stories. One was that story about the fireflies. A couple of stories that I told him. He said, you're funny. You ought to write a book. And I said, I'm retired. I got time. I think I will. So I did.

[00:50:43.69] My first attempt at writing. I got some good reviews, and I'm on the bestseller list. 254,000 something down on that list, but I'm on it. And I found that the more I wrote, the more came to fore. And it was a cathartic process. In other words, I learned from it. I learned about myself, it was like a giant-- what do you call it? What's called an inventory.

[00:51:23.22] I did an inventory of what I had done in Vietnam, and was able to put a lot of stuff behind me.

[00:51:32.75] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you heard about the Vietnam War 50th Anniversary Commemoration project?

[00:51:38.99] BILL FERGUSON: Yes.

[00:51:39.89] JOE GALLOWAY: What are your feelings about that?

[00:51:43.57] BILL FERGUSON: Well, I really haven't examined my feelings. It's 50 years after the fact, a lot of us are dying off. I'm sure they-- I'm not sure. I think it's a nice gesture, because we got treated rather roughly.

[00:52:10.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Better late than never.

[00:52:12.71] BILL FERGUSON: Yeah, and I believe folks are sincere. I do believe this is sincere. I was at the screening of a film done by the National Geographic about the 9th Infantry Division down in Dong Tam. Some of us were privileged to attend that premiere up at the National Geographic headquarters. And it's very informative, and it's right on. I thought it was right on the spot. Spot on about feelings that GIs had over there, and back here.

[00:52:50.28] So I think it's a good thing. It'll bring a lot of us together again. Especially the idea-- when you say Vietnam veteran, a lot of people have the picture of a guy in their minds of an unkempt, unsavory character saying, I'm a Vietnam vet.

[00:53:08.55] Unfortunately, there are people that fit that description, through no fault of their own, that are incapable of living in society. Polite society. But unfortunately, a lot of people see that as the symbol of Vietnam. That we're all drug addled and alcoholics and wife beaters, that kind of thing.

[00:53:31.61] JOE GALLOWAY: Well thank you, Chief Ferguson. Thank you for your service.

[00:53:38.21] BILL FERGUSON: Thank you, Mr Galloway. Appreciate it.