

Hill, James US Army

[00:00:16.21] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:00:19.03] JAMES HILL: 22.

[00:00:20.32] JOE GALLOWAY: 22. Married?

[00:00:23.83] JAMES HILL: I was single. My mother and father-- my mother and stepfather were living in El Paso, and I graduated from Trinity University in San Antonio ROTC. After graduation, I stayed in San Antonio through the World's Fair for about six months and went on active duty in October of '69.

[00:00:47.90] JAMES HILL: Before I entered the military, when I went to Trinity, I had an appointment. My dad was killed coming out as a pilot in the Korean War. And a friend of his followed me through high school and wanted me to go to one of the academies.

[00:01:04.91] And he was a very influential guy, and he got me an appointment to the Naval Academy and the Air Force Academy. And at the last second I said, I'm not doing this. It was the smartest decision I ever made. I would have flunked out, I'm convinced. I didn't have the math skills.

[00:01:17.25] And so, I went to-- I came to Trinity. And that was 1964. By '66, the war was going pretty hot and heavy. So we said, maybe this ROTC thing is a pretty good deal because if you're going to have to go to war, you might as well go as a lieutenant.

[00:01:35.78] But my impression of the war by '68, '69 was I bought into the Domino Theory. I bought into the fact that it ought to be going on, that we ought to be doing something about it. I kept on my door at school a poster from some group in Dallas that said, Victory, then Peace.

[00:02:03.72] And I remember writing quotes on that thing about courage and all that kind of stuff. But that was my impression of the war. And as you know, I'm 22 years old. What the hell did I know about the war?

[00:02:18.95] JOE GALLOWAY: So you went to war as a second lieutenant?

[00:02:22.94] JAMES HILL: Second lieutenant.

[00:02:24.20] JOE GALLOWAY: You were commissioned out of ROTC.

[00:02:25.96] JAMES HILL: Out of ROTC.

[00:02:29.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you do officer basic?

[00:02:32.09] JAMES HILL: Benning.

[00:02:32.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Fort Benning. Describe the training you received before you deployed to Vietnam.

[00:02:42.08] JAMES HILL: This is an interesting question, an interesting thought. As I stayed through the Army for almost 37 years in the Army and did OPD's, Office of Professional Development course and stuff, I would talk about the Army of pre-Vietnam or Vietnam and the Army of today.

[00:03:01.17] And officer basic was mostly classroom, some out in the woods, rifle training and stuff. The only real hard training, and it was hard training, was Ranger School. And I thank God for Ranger School because it really did set me up for Vietnam.

[00:03:27.00] I never had a day in Vietnam that was as hard as some of those days in Ranger School. But the first live fire exercise I was ever on was my first firefight in Vietnam. Now, you got to put that in perspective. It was almost criminal, in my opinion, the lack of training that we had.

[00:03:55.56] I'll give you another example. When-- I had four months between leaving basic-- and I went to Fort Hood for four months. I was in one unit. And that's about the time that all lieutenants did. You went to a unit for about four months. And if you were an infantryman, almost to the day you went on leave and went to Vietnam

[00:04:13.49] And General Sid Berry was the one-star at the time at Benning. And he came out, and he was doing a fact-finding thing about how are we doing in officer basic training. And so, I interviewed with him at Fort Hood. And he said, how was training?

[00:04:32.42] I said, well, you didn't teach me a lot of stuff. I said, one of the things, for example, that you didn't teach me in the mech world is how do you read a map from a track vehicle because all we did was walk around and do-- and it's very different reading. And he looked at me, and he smiled.

[00:04:48.50] And he said, wait till you get to Vietnam, and you have to do it from a helicopter. And he was right as rain. And then he was my ADC in the 101st when I was in Vietnam. And he and I had a discussion of that same point one day on a firebase as he was coming around and doing some inspections.

[00:05:11.75] JAMES HILL: I think I had-- the first impression, as everybody else has, is you're coming off the airplane like this, all spiffy. And all these other guys are going on that airplane. And you're looking at each other. And we went-- at the time, we landed and went to the 101st or to the first replacement station at Tan Son Nhut.

[00:05:31.67] And I had been in San Francisco the day before with my best friend in the whole world. We were both coming to Vietnam one day apart. And I remember sitting in the officer's club, having a beer, and the door opens. And some guy screams out, Hill. And it was my friend.

[00:05:50.18] And we linked up together in that club in Vietnam. And then he went off into Special Ops somewhere, or Special Forces. And I went up to the 101st. And the other story is I was selected second lieutenant, and the 101st was moving from the Tan Son Nhut area up to Phu Bai.

[00:06:11.58] They were going to put their headquarters-- the headquarters was already up there, but they were going to the-- a whole bunch of other things up into the Phu Bai, in the I Corps area. And they said, Lieutenant, we want you to take 250 of these brand new people in Vietnam up and sit down with some Seabees in Phu Bai, work with them, and then take over their part of the perimeter at Phu Bai until we can put another unit in there.

[00:06:36.12] And I said, well, great. How do I get there? And they said, Lieutenant, do you have a problem? I had to go find my own C-130. I had to arrange for all of that stuff to get them up there. Not one soul helped me in any of that. And that's the way-- that's the way they did business back then. It was a strange-- it was different.

[00:06:52.23] I remember we landed in the middle of the night. And I think the best I recollect, they try to land everybody in the middle of the night at Tan Son Nhut. And I remember the heat, the oppressive heat as you walked off that airplane. Later on, I don't know, sights and smells.

[00:07:17.50] I don't have a whole lot of that. I remember they had one rocket drill. There were some rockets coming in to Bien Hoa, you know. And they came running, and everybody had to get underneath their bunks. And I remember thinking, this is stupid. What the hell are we doing underneath this cot? This cot is not stopping anything. But anyway, we all laid under our cots.

[00:07:43.53] JAMES HILL: I stayed with the Seabee unit for the better part of a month. Second lieutenant with a Naval Seabee unit. And I learned about wardrooms and Filipinos that starched my-- Filipino, what do they call them in the Navy?

[00:08:05.20] JOE GALLOWAY: Stewards.

[00:08:05.47] JAMES HILL: Stewards. Thank you very much. And he starched my jungle fatigues and shined my shoes. And every evening we had dinner in the wardroom. And you had to announce yourself going into the captain. And you had drinks and that kind of stuff. And I did that for about a month in Vietnam.

[00:08:19.66] And then, one day, they said Lieutenant Hill, go up to your unit in the 101st. And somebody-- some jeep came down and drove me up there. And I checked in with the battalion XO, a major, and I went down to the first sergeant, to see the first sergeant. It was late one afternoon.

[00:08:39.42] And the first sergeant hands me a rucksack and a case of C-rations, an M16, some ammo, says, pack up your rucksack. Tomorrow morning, go up there and get on that little hill right up there, and get on that helicopter. They're going to take-- it was resupply helicopter. They're going to take you to your platoon.

[00:08:53.41] I said, great. Go up there the next morning about six o'clock, six-thirty in the morning, and climb on this helicopter, fly out into the jungles. Helicopter lands in a little one ship LZ, way up in the mountains of northern I Corps out near A Chau. And I get out.

[00:09:10.32] And they're kicking out all this resupply because the helicopter wants to get off the ground as fast as it can. And I jumped off the helicopter. I'm the only guy. I get off the helicopter. And looking across maybe 150 feet, there's a lone figure walking across the LZ at me, and he walks up to me.

[00:09:28.35] And he says, hi. I'm Lieutenant Jim Hall. It's a good platoon. Good luck. He climbed in the helicopter and flew off. And I'm standing there in the middle of the jungle, looking around. And I see this other guy waving at me, and I walk over and meet my E5 platoon sergeant.

[00:09:49.15] And he walks me around and introduces me to my 20-something member platoon, maybe 25 people. And he says, Lieutenant, the first squad is going out on a patrol in about 20 minutes. Why don't you go with it? That was my introduction to my platoon in Vietnam.

[00:10:05.47] That was what now is called replacement-- RIP, replacement in place, which they do now for 2 or 3 weeks at a whack in Iraq and Afghanistan during the last war, but that was my RIP, that one-- it's a good platoon. Good luck. And go out on a patrol.

[00:10:23.02] JOE GALLOWAY: How was the patrol?

[00:10:25.52] JAMES HILL: Eerie. I don't remember being terrified, but I do remember thinking it was very eerie. It's very quiet in the jungle. And I just walked along and was really led by-- it was just-- as I recall it, it was a very strange thing, more than anything else.

[00:10:47.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Contact?

[00:10:47.90] JAMES HILL: No. No contact. I had contact about three days later.

[00:10:57.72] You lived out of your rucksack. I was with the 101st, and I had lots of helicopter support because we were an airmobile at that time-- airmobile division. And so, we got resupplied every fourth day. And you'd get a case of C-rations per Soldier.

[00:11:21.66] I smoked unfiltered cigarettes, so I got a full carton of Camels out of the sundry pack, as opposed to getting broken down and getting maybe one or two packs of something. A little bit of candy, some other stuff, and you put it-- and you sort it all out, and you put it in your pack and carried it.

[00:11:35.31] And you lived out of your rucksack. And the rule in the unit I was in Vietnam-- and anybody that talks about Vietnam, every unit was so different. There was no standard anything. Everybody had a 5.56 ammo can like that.

[00:11:59.03] And that was your-- if you could not put it in there, you had no personal effects. Anything you had personal was in that can. Other than that, it was all ammo, food, Claymores, all that kind of stuff. We put up-- sometimes, we would allow people to build little lean-to hooches at night time. But mostly, we didn't. Very different.

[00:12:28.90] JOE GALLOWAY: So you were sleeping in a foxhole basically?

[00:12:31.20] JAMES HILL: Sometimes we dug in. Sometimes we didn't. We did not dig in every night. It was depending upon the amount of contact we were having, whether or not-- we just did not dig in every night.

[00:12:42.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have a home base, some place you came back to?

[00:12:46.22] JAMES HILL: No. The battalion headquarters in the area we operated, that was on a firebase. And the battalion headquarters and one company would secure the firebase, and then companies would rotate into the fire base for stand down, for breaks.

[00:13:04.37] And at that-- very late in my tour, I operated at the company level. But then, I operated at the platoon level. For example, when I landed and met Jim Hall, and it was just my platoon, I did not see my company commander who was about, oh, 1,500 meters away with another platoon for 30-something days.

[00:13:33.95] I talked to him every night on the radio, but we all linked up for Thanksgiving as a company, had Thanksgiving, and then all split out again as platoons. And we operated at the platoon level.

[00:13:46.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Totally independent--

[00:13:47.63] JAMES HILL: Totally independent.

[00:13:48.86] JOE GALLOWAY: --out there with your 20 men?

[00:13:50.57] JAMES HILL: With my 20-something guys, yeah. And I'm really glad that it happened to me that way, that I wasn't with the company commander and the first get-go because it really did-- was able to establish myself with my guys, my way of doing things, and my operation.

[00:14:12.52] But that's how we operated. And then very late in my tenure, because of where we were, we did get together as a company. In fact, we would like to have been together as a battalion. Very unlike the Ia Drang operation, for example. Very different from like the Ia Drang operation.

[00:14:32.76] JOE GALLOWAY: When you had the downtime and got to go back to the firebase, what was living like there?

[00:14:41.89] JAMES HILL: You wanted to be back out in the jungle. Because you got back to the firebase, and it was-- the firebase was, literally, it was just a big hill, which was denuded to put the guns-- the howitzers on it. Everybody lived in these really nasty bunkers that nobody kept clean.

[00:15:02.43] It was very dusty, and there was too much supervision by senior guys. They wanted you in the right uniform. They wanted the hats on. And you couldn't sleep at night because they kept firing all the goddamned artillery. I mean-- so it was better in the jungle. The first couple of days was nice because you got a hot meal.

[00:15:21.88] But no shower because there weren't any shower facilities on the firebase. You got to use some kind of a porta potty, the 55-gallon drum with the diesel, and it wasn't a cat hole, but that was about it. I remember thinking, I'd rather be out in the jungle.

[00:15:37.99] The one good thing that happened the first time I was on a firebase, I got to listen to the Texas-Arkansas football game, when Texas won the national championship. And I would not have been able to do that, had I been in the jungle.

[00:15:53.28] JOE GALLOWAY: So I have a question here. What did you do for recreation and off-duty activities?

[00:16:03.11] JAMES HILL: We read. We read, and we talked to each other in the jungles, especially the officers. We shared books. And then there were several books that went around. Everybody read or reread Catch-22. Everybody read Stranger in a Strange Land by-- Heinlein's book.

[00:16:25.68] Everybody read Anton Myrer's book-- I just went brain dead-- Once an Eagle and discussed it. And at night time, we had discussions, sitting around before it got dark, as you ate your last meal. The sergeants and the RTOs, we talked about things. But I did a lot of reading.

[00:16:55.70] JOE GALLOWAY: What issues, events, or responsibilities consumed most of your time?

[00:17:05.97] JAMES HILL: A daily operation with my platoon was everybody woke up before you had stand to, before the sun came up. Once the sun came up and we knew that we were-- nothing had happened, then we had coffee and breakfast.

[00:17:26.47] And we would sit down with-- I'd get the platoon sergeants together or the sergeants together. We'd pick the order of the squad that was going to be the point squad, and we would say, OK, we're going to move from here over to here. And then we would walk from A to B, looking, trying to made contact.

[00:17:49.57] Stop periodically for a cigarette break. Everybody sit down and rest. And we did that, depending upon the terrain. Because it was hard walking where we were. We're way up in the mountains. We were all carrying 50, 60, 70 pounds on our backs, at least that. It's hot as hell in the triple canopy jungle we were in, humidity.

[00:18:18.38] And my time was consumed to making sure I knew where we were, which was hard, keeping everybody quiet and moving, talking with the company commander who wanted to know what the hell was going on all the time. Generally, keeping discipline and control. And then when the firefight would happen, when contact was made, then you-- then that was a different world.

[00:18:48.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Who was the enemy you were pursuing?

[00:18:52.43] JAMES HILL: North Vietnamese regulars. I never saw anything but a North Vietnamese regular. They were-- again, in certain areas, we knew that they were living in little clumps of people, and they would try to gather together for activities. And we tried to interdict them going into their supply routes.

[00:19:17.49] That's what we were trying to do, was catch their guys walking in for supply routes, mostly. So most of our contacts were with two or three people at a time in the early days. And then later on, we had some pretty good fights with bigger crowds of folks. But North Vietnamese regulars-- and they were exceptionally good soldiers.

[00:19:36.20] JOE GALLOWAY: That was my next question. What was the character of your enemy?

[00:19:39.86] JAMES HILL: Exceptionally good soldiers. I've said to many people, I never looked down at a dead Vietnamese soldier that I didn't see one of my own. I saw a good soldier, who was doing what he thought was right.

[00:19:55.40] And I was glad he was dead, and I wasn't. But they were good soldiers, and they lived under some incredibly difficult conditions. If I thought-- when I had helicopters coming in and bringing me resupply.

[00:20:10.01] And these guys would have to walk into the vils to try to find something, had to walk back, and try not to get killed coming back or eating their meager things of rice. It was a-- if you didn't have respect for that, you just were, I think, missing something. Soldiers have respect for other soldiers. And they were good soldiers.

[00:20:34.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe your area of operations. I know that to be very vertical terrain.

[00:20:41.64] JAMES HILL: Very vertical, very mountainous, triple canopy, really steep, hard terrain to walk through. I've talked to people that said, we cut our way through everything. And I just have listened to that, and I say bullshit.

[00:20:59.03] Anybody who's ever tried to cut their way through a bamboo field with a machete only does that once or twice, unless you just have to, because that is incredibly hard work. It's noisy. You're just asking someone to start shooting at you.

[00:21:15.77] We walked on-- because, again, we were trying to find people. So where do you find people? You don't find them in bamboo groves. You find them on trails. Because they're using the trails to get to where they are. So you had these chance meeting engagements on these trail networks.

[00:21:31.88] But you went down steep hills and through little river-- creek beds, and then you went back up and sideways, and it was very difficult in northern I Corps, very difficult terrain.

[00:21:52.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe any significant actions that you participated in? Even later in your tour, you said you got into some bigger fights.

[00:22:04.12] JAMES HILL: Yeah. After my initial platoon, I became the recon platoon leader for the 2d of the O Deuce. And at that point, I had never more than about 18 or 19 guys. And our job was always to go out by ourselves.

[00:22:21.66] And I would usually land and establish a small CP with me and RTO and maybe the artillery FO. And then I would send out four or five-man teams, and we just tried to find, establish action. And battalion commander sent us out one time, and we were trying to-- they were trying to find a regiment.

[00:22:43.93] And we were out for three or four days. And as we were getting picked up, we took a lot of fire out of the pickup zone. And battalion commander then decided-- I loved this battalion commander, who was a great man. He's now dead. He was a great man.

[00:23:04.44] In fact, both my battalion commanders were great men, and I stay in touch with one of them, the one that survived, obviously. Chuck Shea is the guy that lived, and the other guy was Roy Young. Roy Young went and died in a plane crash in D.C. several years later.

[00:23:20.64] But Chuck Shea and I stay in contact. He's in Colorado Springs. I saw him a couple of months ago. But they decided that there really was this regiment. So it was the first time I ever went on an operation where there were lines of advance, and we had a map with stuff on it.

[00:23:41.01] And we were going to put one company here and one company here, and we were all going to come together trying to find this regiment. It was a battalion operation. I'd never seen one before. I mean, I'd been there nine months, I think, I hadn't seen one.

[00:23:51.96] And I had the recon platoon that-- and we put us in. And we moved. My first group of four guys went out. And within 200 yards, we hit a lot of people. And the battalion commander was able to send in the better part of a company on top of me to reinforce me.

[00:24:22.69] We had a big firefight that night, and then we got up to move out the next morning and ran into this huge bunker complex. And I was in the lead-- no, his platoon was in the lead. And in fact, I can remember, they got hit maybe 300 yards down this trail.

[00:24:39.53] And I remember laying in my foxhole. I was above them on the hill, laying in the bottom of a foxhole and saying, don't call me. Thinking to myself, please, don't call my platoon. Because there was more bullets flying around I'd ever heard. And I remember thinking that, don't call me. And about that time, I heard my call sign.

[00:24:58.42] So I climbed out of the hill, and I scooted down on my belly down this hill and got down to where they were firing. And there was a platoon leader of this company-- I didn't know this guy. And he was hit. And I came down there, and I said, I'm here to help, whatever.

[00:25:19.24] And he says, yeah, I'm hit. And he says, you got it. And he jumped up and ran up the hill. So I'm down there with his guys, my guys intermingled. And I looked, and everybody was just chaos. And I remember sitting over. I leaned against a tree.

[00:25:37.87] I sat up and leaned against a tree and lit a cigarette. And everybody starts staring at me like I was a nut. And I said, can you shoot anything from over there? There's a machine gun team, M60 team. And the kid says, well, I can't. I said, I bet you if you move from that tree to that one, you'll probably get a pretty good field of fire.

[00:25:57.79] He said, well, yes, sir, I could probably do that. I said, why don't you do that? He went over there. And I started doing a couple of-- and smoking my cigarette, and got everything rearranged, put down a nice base of fire. And we fought it out like that for about an hour and a half.

[00:26:14.77] And then, I said, OK, guys, we're not getting anywhere. So we decided we'd go up the trail. Me and that machine gun team took off up the trail and got into this bunker complex-- huge bunker complex. It was the first time I was wounded.

[00:26:34.07] A grenade took me out, barely, ended up getting in the fight, got everybody out of there. I medevacked myself out for about five days, came back to my platoon, went down with another company. And then, we found this huge bunker complex, got hit really hard one night, hit the next morning.

[00:26:55.19] We knew we were in some really deep stuff. Company commander and I sat around one night and we said, if we were in this piece of terrain, where would we put a regiment? And we looked and we decided, OK, we're going to fire a bunch of artillery here.

[00:27:10.33] We're going to fire-- and we fired artillery all night long on different places. And we figured out and got up the next morning and walked down. And we got into this-- and had we drawn-- had we been there and drawn it out ourselves, then we could not have been more right about where all the bunkers were.

[00:27:29.77] And we killed a lot of people with artillery that night, in that bunker complex. And I would hate to have wandered down into it the next morning because we would have, had we not sat back and said, maybe we have better ought to shoot some--

[00:27:43.18] maybe we ought to shoot some artillery down in there. That is the one operation-- because I got wounded twice in that operation in a 30-day time frame. And I got one time with a grenade and the second time with a Claymore.

[00:27:57.25] JOE GALLOWAY: What was it like being medevacked and what was the treatment like?

[00:28:02.38] JAMES HILL: I didn't get medevacked the second time. I stayed. The first time, I got on the last helicopter. I kept putting people on it. And there was a wonderful helicopter pilot, and there were all these medevac guys were incredible. And it was late.

[00:28:15.58] And this was going to be the last bird in because it was turning dark. And I'd bring a guy out, and I'd put him on the helicopter. And the pilot would lift it up a couple of feet, hover, set it down, signal out one more. We added about five or six guys.

[00:28:31.82] We were all just really crammed in there because I was trying to get all the wounded out we could. And I climbed on last and flew back and landed at the brigade aid station at Camp Eagle. And the brigade surgeon was a guy named Doc Borek. He was a New York Jew, with little bitty glasses.

[00:29:02.33] And I'm describing him the way he described himself. I'm not being any pejorative sense. And he had the New York accent. He received a Silver Star, as a doc, in a firefight one night on a firebase by running around and treating people as a combat medic, as a doctor.

[00:29:22.09] And I remember Doc Borek saying-- as I got off the helicopter, he said, well, I've been expecting you here one of these days, Hill. And he came in and treated me. And I went back to my-- I stayed there one night, went down to my unit because I had just some superficial stuff.

[00:29:39.62] I didn't know it was superficial because it had holes. But you just know if it was in you or it had gone past you. In my case, it mostly had gone past me, except one piece that's still in my hand. I went back down to my unit and stayed drunk for about three days.

[00:29:56.02] And then my unit came back in for a stand down-- my recon platoon. We stood down for one day, and they called us back. I went back into the fight. And, in fact, rappelled in-- rappelled in-- to a hot LZ. Never forget it.

[00:30:21.48] JAMES HILL: My most vivid memory was giving mouth to mouth resuscitation to a kid named Beau Cain and having him die on my lips. We'd kept him alive with a sucking chest wound for about two days. That's my most vivid memory.

[00:30:39.03] JOE GALLOWAY: Medevac was not available?

[00:30:40.92] JAMES HILL: The weather-- soaked in. We could not get him out. He had been in that platoon for about three days.

[00:30:54.74] JAMES HILL: The very best day I had in Vietnam was we came back in on that stand down. They came back in, and I joined them when I was wounded. And we got a call from the battalion commander, this guy Chuck Shea, who had just come into the battalion.

[00:31:08.32] I didn't know him from Adam. Never seen him. And he called me on the radio. I was back in the fire-- he was out on the firebase, and I was back at the base camp. And he said, I want you to bring your platoon-- get your platoon tomorrow morning, and I want you to rappel in with an engineer squad up on top of this mountain.

[00:31:25.30] He had two companies fighting their way up this mountain. They were getting their butts kicked. And he said, I want to put a company in at the top and send them down. So I want you to cut an LZ up there with this engineer squad. And I said to him on the radio, I said, this is stupid.

[00:31:40.28] I said, you know, I've been here for about nine months now. And this just doesn't make a lick of sense to me. And he and I talked about it. To his credit, he let me talk for about-- and we've had this-- he and I have had this follow-on discussion-- about 45 minutes.

[00:31:54.05] And finally, I said to him-- I said, are you telling me that this mission is so important to you, Colonel, that you would sacrifice a bunch of my people? Because a bunch of my people are going to get killed tomorrow morning? And he said, yes, it is. I said, OK, then I'll do it.

[00:32:11.50] And we rappelled in the next morning to this hot LZ. But what was great about it was-- why I remember it so-- is I came out that morning to go up to the LZ and the pickup zone, up on the helicopter landing pad by the battalion headquarters.

[00:32:32.38] And all of my platoon members were all sitting there, dressed, and had their rucksacks. And I walked up. And one of them said, we've talked this out, and we're not going. This is stupid, and we're not going. And we talked a few minutes. And I finally looked at him and I said, OK, here's the deal.

[00:32:53.94] If I have to go by myself, I'm going. And you know that I will go. And if you think that you don't owe me and that I've been a bad platoon leader, then you just sit here on your sorry asses, and I'll go do it. But otherwise, you can come with me.

[00:33:15.40] And I turned around and walked off, and it was all I could do-- not to look back to see if they were coming, but they came. And what it said to me was that I had been a pretty good leader to those guys. And I still talk to some of those guys to this day. They'll call me. They followed, and they went--

[00:33:42.11] JOE GALLOWAY: How did that operation go?

[00:33:43.61] JAMES HILL: It was nearly a disaster. We got hung up in the ropes. I had to talk my radio operator who had never rappelled in his life. I talked to him about how to do it. And we

went out of these ropes together, out of these helicopters, and got all tangled up. We had to cut ourselves out of the ropes. JP4 was coming on us.

[00:34:06.90] The pilot that was flying lost an eye, but they didn't drag us into the trees. They didn't cut us out. They held it till we got on the ground. I blew the fastest LZ that you can blow, I know that much, to bring in a company on top of us. And then we had another-- we had a pretty good fight after that.

[00:34:27.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you lose any of your men?

[00:34:29.40] JAMES HILL: We did. We didn't lose anybody that first day. That night, I moved away from the company and down a hillside. That company got hit really hard, and they lost seven or eight people that night. And then the next day was the day we got hit. I linked back up-- got hit in an ambush. I lost one, two, three, four-- I lost about four guys in about 30 seconds, Beau Cain being one of them, with some Claymores.

[00:35:02.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Most of your Soldiers that year were draftees?

[00:35:06.57] JAMES HILL: Almost all of them. Yeah.

[00:35:08.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe that Soldier-- the average Soldier in your platoon. Describe him to me.

[00:35:16.42] JAMES HILL: A young kid, 19, 20 years old, draftee out of high school, some with high school education. Some of them drafted out of college-- not many. Did not want to be there, but were prepared to do their duty if they were properly led, and they fought for themselves.

[00:35:46.78] That's-- Hal Moore's line is exactly right. Soldiers fight for each other. That's what it's all about. They wanted to get home. All they could do was talk about getting back to the world. And then they would do some of the dumbest things in the world, trying to get themselves killed, so they wouldn't get back to the world.

[00:36:11.97] But they had family that loved them. They had people that they wanted to return to. They were just good human beings under some incredibly difficult-- living under some incredibly difficult conditions. JAMES HILL: Letters. I wrote a letter to my future wife every day at least once.

[00:36:41.23] And when I went to Vietnam, I remember telling her, I'm going to use you as a sounding board. I'm going to record my feelings to you. And she kept all of those letters. And one Christmas-- I was a three-star at Fort Lewis--

[00:36:58.12] my Christmas present was all of those letters in chronological order in archival protection. And I can go back and read that, and it's just incredible to read those letters about every day that I spent in Vietnam. You'd send a letter out, and you'd get a reply in 10 to 14 days, so much unlike today.

[00:37:25.92] And there was some goodness in that. Family problems got solved by families at home, as opposed to you getting on the cell phone and trying to do the war and be the father of kids that you're not anywhere near or near, like they're doing today. I don't know how they do that today.

[00:37:46.06] I think it causes as many problems as it helps. I'm convinced of it. Although, it was really nice to talk to my son in Afghanistan. He would call me periodically. It was nice to know what he was doing and to hear his voice.

[00:38:01.48] JOE GALLOWAY: But where you were, it was mail call.

[00:38:03.79] JAMES HILL: Mail was it. Mail was it. One time, as I remember, we went to a MARS station and did the, hello, I love you, over, that kind of stuff. But I remember doing that once, I think. Yeah.

[00:38:19.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have an R&R during your tour?

[00:38:21.52] JAMES HILL: I did. I went to Hawaii on R&R and met my future wife. Yeah. She had lied to her parents about where she was going, and we linked up. And it was wonderful. We had a great time.

[00:38:35.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Was it hard going back after an R&R?

[00:38:43.56] JAMES HILL: I don't remember that being a hard thing to do. I don't remember that as being a particularly difficult thing.

[00:38:51.93] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you get any news about what was going on back home?

[00:38:57.21] JAMES HILL: Stars and Stripes, that was it. And then letters from home. That was it.

[00:39:02.94] JOE GALLOWAY: How did that news affect you?

[00:39:06.09] JAMES HILL: I don't remember it affecting anything at all. I remember us, as we discussed the war. And we knew where the war was going, and we knew that it was probably going to be to no end-- to no good end anyway. And the only contact I had with that at all was-- I wish I could remember the guy's name, Joe.

[00:39:28.50] And you may remember it. He was the young Soldier E-4, who broke the My Lai story. JOE GALLOWAY: Ron Ridenhour. JAMES HILL: Ridenhour. That's exactly right. Very good. He came to my battalion and specifically asked to walk with my platoon, my recon platoon because we had the highest body count in the division.

[00:39:52.92] And so he was convinced that what my guys were doing was either wrong or lying. One or the other. And he walked with us for about three days and then said to me one time, he said, all your guys, you told them to shut up.

[00:40:09.84] And I said, I haven't told my guys squat. And I said, I'll bring in every one of my Soldiers, and you can ask him anything you want. I don't care what-- they don't have anything to hide out here. And then he went away.

[00:40:22.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your troops have anything much to say about the demonstrations back home by their peers?

[00:40:29.84] JAMES HILL: I don't remember ever discussing it. Probably did, but I just don't remember discussing it. It just wasn't an issue. We were there, and we were doing what we had to do.

[00:40:42.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Where you were, with the people you were with, any drug problem at all?

[00:40:49.06] JAMES HILL: Oh, sure. I never, never saw or thought of a drug problem in the field. We all knew that there were parts of the base camp you didn't go at night with the Soldiers. When we came back on a stand down, back in the base camp area, the officers had what we call juicer's jungle, a bar-- a battalion bar, and we went there. And the Soldiers went there.

[00:41:19.40] And did we all look the other way? The answer is probably yes. But I am convinced that I had no issues in the field. I only had one time in the year I was there, where I had a Soldier smoke a cigarette at night after dark. And he was a brand new Soldier.

[00:41:42.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Plain cigarette?

[00:41:43.89] JAMES HILL: A plain cigarette. And in fact, I remember, I was laying there. I was sleeping. And the platoon sergeant was an E4 by the name of Kilby-- Killer Kilby, we called him. And Kilby, he says, you smell that? And I said, cigarette smoke. So he crawled off. And I heard this, ugh.

[00:42:06.26] He came back in. He says, it's the new guy. And smoking a cigarette. He said, but he's not smoking it now. And I said, what'd you do? He said, I put it out with my fist. I said, well, good for you, Kilby. But that's the only time I even remember a cigarette being smoked.

[00:42:30.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any exposure to service alongside South Vietnamese troops?

[00:42:39.56] JAMES HILL: Once. Only one time. We were linked up with-- and I never can remember what the acronym-- Ruff Puffs-- the civilian-- because it was the only time I ever operated in the lowlands. Every time else, I was way out in the mountains.

[00:42:58.01] And they linked my platoon up with about 70 or 80 Vietnamese soldiers. We were supposed to cordon a village. And then they were going to conduct a search down in one of the towns. But that was my only exposure to them.

[00:43:13.81] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you have you have an opinion?

[00:43:16.54] JAMES HILL: They were awful.

[00:43:17.63] JOE GALLOWAY: They were dreadful?

[00:43:18.31] JAMES HILL: I mean, I wish I could say-- I wish I could say, yeah, they were great. They were awful. I mean, we didn't have an interpreter. I'm talking to Lieutenant-- I've forgotten-- the lieutenant was a đại úy, lieutenant. I'm saying, đại úy, five of my guys, five of your guys together.

[00:43:38.94] And then as soon as we got there, they all went off to a couple of brothels and a couple of bars. And all my guys are sitting there. It was my-- it was my only exposure to-- close exposure to Vietnamese people. Because I was sitting in a farmers yard in the middle of his rice paddy.

[00:43:59.82] At about three o'clock in the morning, a woman came out-- the wife came out. And she said, who's the honcho? Honcho. And I said, I am. She brought me tea. And the next morning, she asked me to come in and have breakfast with them. And we ate vegetables and stuff and a little nuoc mam and-- with the water they had taken right out of the rice paddy. Oh, it was wonderful.

[00:44:31.90] JAMES HILL: I was very proud of what I did. And I think all of us in the unit that I was with, the lieutenants, really were. And a lot of us have stayed in contact all these years. We were very proud of what we had done. And we were in greens, and we had double eagles on.

[00:44:54.87] We had a 101st patch on our right shoulder and 101st patch on our left shoulder. And we had an eagle looking both ways. And at the time, we called it wearing double eagles. And it was a very proud moment. I was very-- I was very satisfied with what I'd done that year, as we were happy to be going home. But I was very satisfied with what I'd done.

[00:45:18.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Obviously, you remained in the Army. You've seen other combat tours. But any of them match up with that first one?

[00:45:30.89] JAMES HILL: No. No. And in fact, after I retired and I began doing some-- the battle command training program, mentoring generals and senior officers in the army during the last ten years-- ten, twelve years. And I remember talking with early on battalion commanders in particular and saying to them, you know, you guys think you understand the dynamics that take place in a platoon or company when someone's killed in it, particularly a platoon, but you really don't.

[00:46:14.81] Because none of you lieutenant colonels have ever been company-grade officers in combat-- lieutenants, captains in combat. When I talk to lieutenants and captains, they know that I know what I'm talking about in terms of being in combat as a platoon leader.

[00:46:36.66] My son and I have these conversations-- First Lieutenant Griffin Hill. We have an understanding that other people cannot have. Because the dynamic that takes place in an infantry platoon in combat is unlike anything else imaginable.

[00:47:01.89] And unless you've done it, you simply-- you can have some-- try to have some understanding and some empathy for it or whatever. But the reality is, unless you've done it, you don't know. And the dynamic when someone's killed in it, in your platoon, when you're looking at that body bag, and everybody in that platoon looks at it and sees himself in that bag.

[00:47:23.97] And then you say, put that bag on that helicopter. And it's going to fly away. And we're going to put on our rucksack, and we're going to walk down that trail. And we may all have the same encounter. I look back on that with tremendous pride in what I do.

[00:47:42.90] When I retired, retired as a four-star general, I had the secretary of defense, the chairman of the joint chiefs of staff, the chief of staff of the Army, all of them there to pin medals on me and tell me what a great career I'd had in 37 years. And I said that day that my single greatest privilege in life was as an infantry rifle company commander in Vietnam. And I believe that deeply.

[00:48:11.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Coming home, describe what that was like.

[00:48:16.69] JAMES HILL: We left Tan Son Nhut-- we left Tan Son Nhut-- Bien Hoa-- and flew-- forgotten where we-- we refueled, for sure, in Honolulu and landed at McGuire, San Francisco. Isn't that right? McGuire. Yeah, it's McChord in Lewis-- McGuire.

[00:48:38.59] And they out-processed us. The officers out-processed and were sent on their way. The enlisted Soldiers were all taken to do whatever they did. But we were handed a plane ticket and said, go off. That was it. And in uniform, wearing my double eagles, and I remember going to the San Francisco airport.

[00:48:59.52] Found the first bar I could sit down-- find and sat down. And the guy next to me was a 101st guy from World War II. Got me drunk as a skunk. Got on an airplane and flew to LA to catch a flight to El Paso. It's like five thirty in the morning. And I'm wandering through the LA airport.

[00:49:22.13] And I encountered three or four young people, and they spit on me. I've read lots of stories about what people said, that's all myth, that nobody-- it happened than me. So I know it's not a myth. Maybe it only happened one time in the whole time. It happened to me.

[00:49:42.58] I didn't say anything. I just kept moving and got home. My parents didn't know I was coming. I hadn't called them. I landed in El Paso, got a cab, went to my parents' home, and walked in the door. It's what what I remember about it.

[00:50:03.68] JOE GALLOWAY: What was that like?

[00:50:04.64] JAMES HILL: That was a nice feeling. It was a nice feeling. And I stayed home for about two days and said, I got to go to San Antonio and see Toni. My mother was incredibly upset. But I said, I got other women to see, and it's not you, Mom. I'm out of here.

[00:50:28.94] JOE GALLOWAY: You said you stay in touch with a lot of these guys. And that's the question, how much contact have you had with fellow veterans?

[00:50:39.11] JAMES HILL: There were three or four of us who made careers of the Army. To the best of my knowledge, I'm the only one that made general officer out of it. Almost all retired as O-6s, that I know that stayed.

[00:51:02.28] I've kept up with this battalion commander, who's now close to 90 and 80-something in Colorado Springs. And then some of the enlisted folk that were there, a guy named Jim Brinker who wrote a book, I talked to him every six or seven months.

[00:51:27.16] There is one guy, a recovering-- sort of-- alcoholic, who every time he falls off the wagon, he calls me. And I'll talk to him for a couple of hours sometimes. And he called--

[00:51:46.57] JOE GALLOWAY: In the middle night?

[00:51:47.74] JAMES HILL: Usually the middle of the night. He wants to talk. It's always, I'm just calling because you saved my life, And there's a niceness in that. And there's a sense to be needed. But I've talked to him for years, two or three times a year. And I went to one reunion of the recon guys. Still on active duty I went to one reunion.

[00:52:22.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Was there any difficulty for you in readjusting to life after combat?

[00:52:34.23] JAMES HILL: Pretty much none. Because I kept my support group. I stayed in the Army. So I came home for three weeks, four weeks of leave, and then reported to Fort Benning and went right back to work with my support group.

[00:52:50.54] The one thing that I recall was I had captured-- I had found a pistol-- a Russian pistol, Russian-made pistol, and I kept it. And I brought it home with me. And I had this pistol when I first got back to the States, and I carried it with me everywhere.

[00:53:14.06] And I remember driving on leave, driving over to Fort Benning, and I had a flat tire. And back then was before some of the big freeways. I was on a two-lane road, and I pulled off the side. And I remember taking out the-- and I changed the tire and stuff, and I put the pistol down beside me.

[00:53:32.58] And I'm changing my tires. I have my pistol there. And I remember thinking, as I put the tire on, this is stupid. What are you doing with this pistol? And I unloaded it, and I took the magazine out, and I put it in the trunk. And I've never kept a pistol around me since.

[00:53:52.04] I don't have one in my house today. That's the one thing-- an adjustment period that I remember thinking my way through. But I was lucky. I had my support group. Other people didn't. I can't imagine what it was like to be simply mustered out.

[00:54:11.95] You land in Oakland. You're E-4 Hill. You've been drafted. You've been through the basic training and AIT. You've gone to your year in Vietnam. You come back. They take you to Oakland. They muster you out over a couple of days, and they hand you a bus ticket, which is what they did, and send you home.

[00:54:33.60] I don't know what that was like. In your book, the one thing I remember about your book was in one of the epilogue pieces, the daughter who sees her father go off in the deuce-and-a-half and then she sees him being rolled down with the gurney at the train station.

[00:55:02.99] And she says, that's my daddy. I can't imagine what that was like. I've read that. In so many OPDs, I've taken that out. And I've read that to officers and said, if you don't understand war, this is war. That's a human being. And you've got to maintain your humanity in all of this. But that's a vivid part of your book to me.

[00:55:40.22] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about the veterans who are coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan?

[00:55:49.19] JAMES HILL: Yes.

[00:55:50.62] JOE GALLOWAY: And how so?

[00:55:52.64] JAMES HILL: One is how much-- the fact that the country is respecting these people, the veterans. Some respect in an otherwise not so good respect in terms of long-term care. But at least there's an artificial respect, which was not given to the guys coming home from Vietnam.

[00:56:21.12] It's a vastly different world, a vastly different Army, a vastly different war. I'll go back to my understanding of when I looked down at a North Vietnamese soldier, I saw a good soldier. The kids today capture a guy who's just used an IED to blow up five of them.

[00:56:45.06] And they capture him, and he wets his pants. And he spills the beans on all his buddies. And that's not a guy that they have any respect for. That's not-- there's just no respect.

[00:56:58.18] JOE GALLOWAY: He kills with a cell phone.

[00:56:59.65] JAMES HILL: Yeah, and kills for money in terms of getting paid to do it or-- very different. So their experience is so different from mine. And talking to my son, his experience in Afghanistan versus mine, I have tremendous respect for these kids. And the fact that they're doing it year after year after year.

[00:57:31.76] Some people in the Vietnam thing might have had two tours. Almost nobody that I know of had three. I mean, there may have been some. Yeah, but different issue-- different issue.

But it's a-- no, I have tremendous respect for these kids doing it and the families that are having to put up with it.

[00:57:58.30] JOE GALLOWAY: They are getting the welcome home.

[00:58:01.06] JAMES HILL: Oh, I think they are. I mean, it's wonderful to go-- I mean, I was standing in an airport in Dallas several years ago, in the Delta term-- the D Terminal, and that's where all the international flights come in. And I watched a couple of Soldiers walk up in the glass above me and where they were going through customs.

[00:58:17.38] And there was a couple walking along. And all of a sudden, there was more of them. And it was clear, it was a plane coming from somewhere. And everybody started clapping. And they stood there and clapped until the last young person walked by. And I thought, isn't that cool? Isn't that cool?

[00:58:34.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Very cool.

[00:58:35.71] JAMES HILL: And I remembered my homecoming, and I was spit on. It's a different world.

[00:58:43.12] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think that war of our youth in Vietnam is remembered by the country today?

[00:58:52.09] JAMES HILL: Not at all. Very little. And certainly not with any realism. What they know of that war, they know from a few books-- yours, the movie *We Were Soldiers*. That it happened, yeah. There is no recollection of the divisiveness of it, in my view.

[00:59:32.10] Very few people truly understand that. 1968 was as close as this country coming apart at the seams from the Civil War. I mean, you really think about 1968 and what happened. Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, all of the demonstrations--

[00:59:54.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Riots.

[00:59:54.92] JAMES HILL: --the riots. It was just an incredible-- the fact that we stayed together as a country, pretty remarkable, able to work our way through that. And the divisiveness of that time has stayed in many ways, the polarization of it. But the real recollection of it doesn't happen. And it's romanticized at best.

[01:00:25.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[01:00:33.40] JAMES HILL: Absolutely, without question-- without question. I mean, I said earlier, the single greatest privilege was leading that rifle company. And that was just a small part of the year. The growth I experienced-- the personal growth, overcoming, knowing, finding out who I really was.

[01:01:00.61] The fact that I could do the things that I did, the people that I led. You know when someone said to me, why did I stay in the Army, when I went off to ROTC summer camp, I found out that this was-- I liked it. I liked the camaraderie.

[01:01:30.81] And I remember thinking, I might just stay in the Army. This is kind of cool. And in the jungles of Vietnam, I found out a couple of things about myself and the Army. I found out I really liked it. I liked what I was doing, and I was good at it. I was very good at it. And so, I stayed.

[01:02:00.25] And I would not-- again, at my retirement ceremony, with lots of people there and the SecDef and all that. I said, if I had my life to live over again, I'd do two things the same. I'd marry the same woman, and I'd join the Army. That's a good feeling at the end of your productive life.