

## **King, John Army**

[00:00:14.89] JOE GALLOWAY: How old were you when you went to Vietnam?

[00:00:18.23] JOHN KING: I was 18 years old. JOHN KING: I'm the oldest son of seven brothers and sisters, born and raised here in Seattle, Washington. Went to Catholic grade school. Went to the seminary. Studied to be a priest. Discovered I like girls, so I ended up at O'Dea High School, all-boys Catholic school here in Seattle. Being taught by the Christian Brothers, we were told that if we didn't study well and do well and go on to college, that we would find ourselves in Vietnam carrying an idiot stick.

[00:00:57.57] JOE GALLOWAY: That being a rifle.

[00:00:59.55] JOHN KING: Exactly. I came from a poor family. And as such, I couldn't afford to go to college. So I tried working at night and going to school during the day and I just wasn't old enough and mature enough to make that work. So I ended up volunteering for the draft to get the GI Bill.

[00:01:19.46] JOE GALLOWAY: This was what year?

[00:01:21.80] JOHN KING: 1967.

[00:01:23.72] JOE GALLOWAY: '67

[00:01:28.64] JOHN KING: I found myself at Fort Lewis for basic training. It was hard because the first time I had been really away from home for any extended time, yet it was right in my backyard. So that was challenging. And then went off to South Carolina, Fort Jackson, for advanced training. And had a few profound learnings there. One in particular, one young man, a sergeant back from Vietnam, looked at my military occupation status and said, you're an 11 Charlie. It means you're going to have two days of fire direction control training. And if you learn it well and you get to fire mortars, it may save your life. And indeed it did.

[00:02:20.54] JOHN KING: I went in August of 1967 something you never forget. When they opened the airplane, air conditioned commercial flight, the heat was just suffocating, but the stench of burning diesel and what they burned with it was unforgettable. I was in the 1st Cav Airmobile. Basic-- first few months was out of An Khe and the Bong Son Valley, which I didn't realize until later was somewhat of a vacation. Later, we were deployed up to Quang Tri area, Tet Offensive. And then other critical missions, including the assault on A Shau Valley.

[00:03:18.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Your initial duties?

[00:03:20.96] JOHN KING: I was a radio transmitter operator, RTO, and assigned to the lieutenant who was in charge of the mortar platoon. JOHN KING: We were a small platoon. We had between 12 and 15 people, line platoons had 30 or more. We carried between 80 and 120 pounds on our back every day.

[00:03:52.77] JOE GALLOWAY: How many mortars?

[00:03:55.10] JOHN KING: Every pack had two mortars-- two mortar rounds. And we'd carry-- when we were in the field, we'd carry one mortar, but all the requirements there of the base plate and a mortar tube. And so you had to be able to carry a lot of weight when you were in that platoon.

[00:04:16.14] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like when you were back at base camp and when you were out in the field?

[00:04:25.08] JOHN KING: Back at base camp always meant a shower. So that was a good thing. It usually meant a food line, hot food. That was a good thing. Out in the field, being part of the 1st Cav, it was really pretty privileged because they would-- for the most part, they would come pick up our packs and sling them out on a helicopter and bring them back at the end of the day after our mission along with hot food. So there was privileges that came along with being in the Airmobile, 1st Cav.

[00:04:57.04] JOE GALLOWAY: 435 helicopters are good at times.

[00:05:01.34] JOHN KING: Well, one thing we learned early is that they spared no expense to protect those helicopters.

[00:05:09.59] JOE GALLOWAY: True. True. What responsibilities consumed most of your days?

[00:05:18.35] JOHN KING: I was responsible for fire direction of our mortars initially. And then ultimately, I became the platoon sergeant for mortars. It involved getting coordinates, direction of fire, and having it cleared by the artillery folks. And then at night typically while the perimeter was guarded by the infantry, we would stay up during the night and fire harassment and interdiction to be able to keep the enemy movement to a minimum. And we were good at it.

[00:06:06.77] JOHN KING: It was always a privilege to be around the village people. They were humble. They were certainly living on the ground. The children were delightful. They really gave us a touch of home. Children are universal. We would share our C-rations with them and mama san would usually share their rice with us. So those were good memories.

[00:06:38.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your opinion of the Vietnamese folks that you had contact with change over your tour?

[00:06:47.67] JOHN KING: That's a tough question. I guess combat hardened my heart. Being shot at and considering Charlie the enemy, I became suspicious. The old saying, just because you're paranoid, doesn't mean they're not out to get you.

[00:07:07.62] JOE GALLOWAY: That's true.

[00:07:14.66] JOHN KING: Those friendships is truly what made it happen. I believe I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for those friendships. And the loyalties and the fact that you could depend on their friendships, that you could depend on them when things were thick and heavy, they're invaluable to this day.

[00:07:44.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial and social backgrounds during your time in Vietnam that you might not have had in civilian life?

[00:07:57.83] JOHN KING: I did. Being from the North, I really wasn't aware of the great divide. When I went to South Carolina to study infantry and get ready for Vietnam-- I made friends easily, but I was warned that-- especially my black friends, that on the weekends you go your way, we'll go ours. And to a certain extent, that's how it was in Vietnam. But when you're in a combat situation, all those differences were not recognized. You depended on each other no matter what.

[00:08:42.01] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for recreation off duty activities, if you had any?

[00:08:50.19] JOHN KING: Well, there's not a lot of memory of the time off. A few times, we'd go into the local town. And I can remember one of my favorite places by Landing Zone Dogpatch.

[00:09:05.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Dogpatch.

[00:09:07.11] JOHN KING: Right. I think it was the An Khe River.

[00:09:11.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:09:13.73] JOHN KING: I'd go to this one special place. They had learned to cook French bread. And so they had a specialty that was a hamburger bun, with French bread, and fries-- some kind of turnip that was close-- and hamburger. I really enjoyed that, and you can, of course, get a Coke to go with it. Until somebody told me that really wasn't hamburger I was eating.

[00:09:42.32] JOE GALLOWAY: Water buffalo if you were lucky.

[00:09:45.14] JOHN KING: They weren't so kind. They thought maybe it might be another four-legged critter. JOHN KING: I didn't have a lot of music that I listened to. But I remember our black brothers. They definitely listened to Motown. And that's when I first really began to enjoy that music.

[00:10:15.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:10:22.15] JOHN KING: We were one platoon out of a company of four platoons. There were three platoons of infantry and then heavy weapons.

[00:10:32.53] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were assigned to what battalion?

[00:10:36.76] JOHN KING: 2nd Battalion, 8th Cavalry.

[00:10:38.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. And that was all through your tour.

[00:10:43.48] JOHN KING: It was.

[00:10:46.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions that you witnessed and combat operations in which you participated?

[00:10:56.00] JOHN KING: Probably the most significant was the assault on A Shau Valley. By then, my mortar platoon had become fairly well known and had a good reputation for being highly effective. And so they trained us for a couple of days off the South China Sea to repel from helicopters. They had strafed the area with the B-52's, carpet bombing, and it was a-- just I remember a real hot assault when we came in. When we got there, they wanted us to set up our mortars right away. We were on top of a outlook point. And because the landing zone was so hot, incoming sniper fire, and what have you, they pushed us out of the helicopter instead of drop the ropes and that's when I became the platoon sergeant. My platoon sergeant sprained his ankle and he was gone. So that was three days without water. It was probably the most engaging and horrific battle that I had ever experienced.

[00:12:19.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Close quarters or you were firing at a distance?

[00:12:23.09] JOHN KING: Well, they were sniping right out of the trees. They were shooting Chinook helicopter pilots and it was close.

[00:12:33.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Was that the operation where the Cav lost 16, 18 helicopters in one day?

[00:12:40.28] JOHN KING: Well, could be.

[00:12:43.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Hard times. What were your emotions at the time?

[00:12:54.28] JOHN KING: There's an interesting phenomenon. When you're new, you're scared to death. You survive that. Once you've been there for a while, you don't really have fear, you've kind of surrendered your soul, and you become brave. And so you don't-- I mean, everybody's tense all the time. There's no question about that, but you don't worry about it so much until you become a short timer. And then you think you're going to survive so then you start worrying about it again. So that was kind of in the middle. And during that, I just did what I had to do. I took command. We were good at what we did.

[00:13:37.81] JOHN KING: Actually I have about four legend experiences. Probably the very first experience was when a young kid-- skinny little kid from Tennessee wanted to be the RTO. It was the first week of December. So when Pearl Harbor Day comes around, I always remember this. So the lieutenant let him have that RTO, and I carried the plotting board. And that day, my company got spread out across a rice paddy. And in about three minute bursts of fire, they killed our company commander, all of our lieutenants, our platoon sergeants. And this little RTO, first

day on the job, replaced me. Had a habit of pushing his helmet up, because the band was too big for his head, and he took a bullet right between the eyes just after he pushed it up. And I'm 10 feet from him, ready to step into the rice paddy. So that was a very profound memory. That would have been me.

[00:14:43.13] JOE GALLOWAY: The whole command group went down?

[00:14:45.40] JOHN KING: They did.

[00:14:47.54] JOE GALLOWAY: How about the other three?

[00:14:51.15] JOHN KING: In December of '67, my company had lost three company commanders. So they brought us in and they allowed us to be an outpost for LZ Dogpatch on Christmas Eve. The boys on LZ Dogpatch, celebrating Christmas, got on the quad .50s and strafed my company.

[00:15:17.86] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:15:19.06] JOHN KING: Not intentionally. And you can well appreciate half of the people we lost were by friendly fire, by accidents. So they brought us in the next day on Christmas Day, put brand new uniforms on us, new boots, broke out the Ballantine beer. I'm 19 years old. I had two beers. My platoon sergeant said, John, today you're going to run the platoon. We were going to board Chinook's and go to a Bob Hope Show in Phu Cat. I drank two beers and missed my flight, my first day of command.

[00:16:03.16] My flight involved the weapons platoon, 12 to 15 people, the company commander, the XO and all the other administration. They didn't make it.

[00:16:13.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, no.

[00:16:15.20] JOHN KING: It lost a blade 100 feet off the ground. The helicopter crashed, killed everybody on the back end of the helicopter. That was our third company commander. My platoon, for the most part, survived. They were on the front end. That blade stayed on in the front end. I would have been sitting in the back. So it was another one of those times. I believe I had a really powerful guardian angel. To this day, I still have a powerful guardian angel.

[00:16:46.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Guardian angel on your shoulder, yeah.

[00:16:47.32] JOHN KING: No question. Let's see, I gave you two. And then the third one was the guy that was in my bunk, in my place. The fourth one was earlier-- two guys in particular had kind of taken me under their wing. I remember one guy on my first field trip out there on a search and destroy mission. It got dark and I kept falling down. And he got a little frustrated with me and said, King, just put one foot in front of the other. I'll never forget this guy. He'd-- better than a slap in the face. We were getting ready for a combat assault. We were burning boxes and stuff, cooking our cocoa. One of the guys in the company had gone around and handed out grenades, threw the empty box on the fire.

[00:17:47.69] JOE GALLOWAY: It wasn't empty.

[00:17:48.91] JOHN KING: It wasn't empty. I had just taken my cocoa off. I turned my back to the fire. I had two friends that we're cooking something on that fire, the guys that had kind of shepherded me through the early days. The blast sent me 20, 30 feet in the air. I never got one piece of shrapnel. The one guy that guided me lost his sight. And the other young kid who had two daughters at home tore his lower part up. So yeah, that was pretty profound.

[00:18:27.85] And then the other incident that has affected the rest of my life was when we were on an LZ. I was stacking ammo. I just had a pair of cut-off fatigues on, no shirt. And there was an airplane flying by with ailerons spraying the forest. And it flew right over the top of us. About the same time my platoon sergeant said, hey, King, get out from under that stuff. It was too late. I got covered with Agent Orange. Two days later, I was in a field hospital with extreme temperature. I recovered from that. I probably lost about 30 pounds after that and I have had health issues ever since. I can't complain, I'm still here. And I know a whole lot of guys that aren't as a result of Agent Orange.

[00:19:43.70] JOHN KING: It's a funny memory. We had been packing all day long, hot burning sun. We were all exhausted. And I remember coming to this village. There was a black rock, been soaking up the sun all day long that was in the shape of a lounge. And I remember laying on that rock, feeling the warmth radiate through my body, and falling asleep on that rock. And it was probably the most sound sleep I'd had in a long time. And that's funny.

[00:20:19.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Simple pleasures. JOHN KING: Yeah.

[00:20:20.46] JOHN KING: Oh, it's probably right towards the end. As I'd mentioned, I'd had about four major incidences where, like that little RTO, could have been me. After I had been promoted to staff sergeant E-6, and I was in charge of-- they'd taken all of the mortar platoons out of the battalion and put them under me and given us four point deuce mortars. It was a lot of responsibility and my company that I had been a part of was maybe 100-- 1,000 meters away under fire, under attack. The North Vietnamese were coming through the perimeter. They had asked us to drop mortars right on gun target, which meant right on top of them. It was a horrific time. You could hear-- excuse me. You could hear critically injured individuals crying for their mother.

[00:21:45.10] It was my turn to take a break, and I told my second in charge, I said, you know what, I'm less than 30 days short. I'm a short timer. I can't leave my post. I'm going to stay here. You take a break. So he did. He went-- we had a hooch that we built. It was eight feet thick. We were all short timers. The artillery people had stripped off charges from their rounds and they brought them down by where our hooch was, and they were throwing them over the hill into a fire. And they'd flare up, one at a time. And a helicopter came in and blew the fire up on top of this big pile. And it lit up and it burned our hooch. And my buddy that was sleeping in my bunk, taking my place, was burned to death.

[00:22:45.26] So the interesting thing is the night before that happened he and I had talked about going home. He had been to Australia and fallen in love for the first time in his life. And he told

me-- he said-- if I survive this, I just want to go home and tell my adoptive parents how much I love them and appreciate them. Well, that was the end of my duty then. They relieved me of duty. I went home maybe two weeks later. And after I got home, I got a message from my company clerk that said my buddy made it all the way to Fort Hood. He lived in Texas. He got to see his parents and he died the next day. So that was it.

[00:23:39.47] JOHN KING: Just one memory-- a long lasting memory. It was with the North Korean ROK. And we knew they were disciplined, but they were close to us at this one stretch. And I remember the company commander having this young man stand before him. He pulled out his pistol and he shot the kid dead.

[00:24:06.42] JOE GALLOWAY: One of his own people?

[00:24:07.77] JOHN KING: One of his own people, because his soldier gone AWOL. He'd gone into town without permission.

[00:24:17.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Justice was delivered with a .45.

[00:24:20.02] JOHN KING: We were outraged. It took everything to contain us. But yeah, that just told you how brutal that war was. And we knew we respected their discipline, but you know, tough life.

[00:24:33.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Tough life. Tough life. Did you have any contact with the South Vietnamese army people, the ARVN?

[00:24:42.23] JOHN KING: Very little. Occasionally. There was one time I was assigned up on the DMZ close to where the Marines were to be a forward observer and fire direction control to protect a bridge. And it was a bridge that was manned by the ARVNs. And they were gracious. I remember the officer in charge had me over to his hooch, and we had dinner. And that's when I learned the word *từ* meant snail. We were eating toes.

[00:25:26.41] JOHN KING: Initially, we wrote back and forth and we sent cassette tapes, audio tapes. But then as time went on, I just fell off. They kept writing me. I know they worried about me a lot, but I don't know what it was. I just lost the will to write home.

[00:25:52.79] JOE GALLOWAY: It was mostly letters for you, and cassettes?

[00:25:55.46] JOHN KING: Letters and cassettes. And I remember all my letters I kept in that big pocket. And then one time a helicopter banked really hard and I almost fell out. I've got to thank the door gunner for grabbing my strap and pulling me back, but all my letters came out of my pocket and you could see them flying around.

[00:26:17.66] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war from home?

[00:26:21.71] JOHN KING: Little to none.

[00:26:23.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Very little.

[00:26:24.11] JOHN KING: Right. Probably a good thing.

[00:26:27.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Probably. Were you aware of any particular political or social events or movements going on back home?

[00:26:35.37] JOHN KING: No, not really. Not until I got home.

[00:26:37.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. So it didn't affect you one way or another?

[00:26:43.33] JOHN KING: No. I thank God it didn't. JOHN KING: It was in August of '68.

[00:26:55.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe what that trip was like.

[00:26:58.59] JOHN KING: Well, we came into Fort Lewis. And it had been a long flight, of course. And we were all just in a surrealistic world. And it was raining like the monsoons. I know my dad and mom came and picked me up, but I remember that they allowed us to get fitted in uniforms and get cleaned up. And then they took us into a big conference room and gave us a re-up talk.

[00:27:30.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Did they get many takers?

[00:27:32.74] JOHN KING: We weren't in a very good humor to listen to that.

[00:27:38.59] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your reception like from family and friends?

[00:27:43.00] JOHN KING: It was very loving, of course. They were gathered and eager to see me. And it's like I had been beamed down from another world. I hardly could communicate. I do remember a lot of curious uncles and others that wanted to know what it was like, wanted me to tell them what it was like. And I couldn't talk about it.

[00:28:06.48] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with fellow veterans over the years?

[00:28:11.79] JOHN KING: Well, that's a great question and I've got a fun story. I became the state director of veterans affairs here in Washington state. And as a result, I was privileged to finally make some sense out of Vietnam, get to serve veterans and their families. If you weren't there and you didn't experience, you can't hardly relate. I could relate. I went up to Bellingham one day with the governor, Governor Locke. He'd call it Governor-- Capital for a Day up in Bellingham. We were up there and I come in to one of the field offices that I'm responsible for. And this older gentleman says to me, can I help you, sir? I just smiled said, no, not likely. And then he laughed. That laugh was part of what sustained me through Vietnam. The guy's name was Wiggins, David Wiggins.

[00:29:17.50] JOE GALLOWAY: And he was someone you served with?

[00:29:19.16] JOHN KING: He lived in Bellingham. I served with him. He was in my platoon. We got-- we were within two or three days of each other coming and going. And I hadn't seen him since we got out, and--

[00:29:32.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Here he is working for you?

[00:29:33.86] JOHN KING: He wasn't. They had set it up. They had set it up. But his laugh-- I'll never forget that moment. We both started crying and-- good to be alive.

[00:29:50.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Pretty good. Pretty good. Was it difficult for you readjusting to life after the war? Did you have any trouble?

[00:30:02.70] JOHN KING: It truly was difficult. Came back. It was a dangerous time. Free love, everything was free.

[00:30:11.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Sex, drugs, and rock and roll.

[00:30:13.14] JOHN KING: Yeah. And a young guy like me had time to make up for. So I didn't cut any corners in that department. I thank God I met my wife when I did. She's been with me for 45 years, and you talk about a guardian angel. Yeah, I've been blessed in that regard.

[00:30:40.49] JOHN KING: The good stuff is I exercised my GI Bill. I got a bachelor of science degree in psychology and a master's degree in social work administration. And I had a terrific 30-year career with the State of Washington. The bad part is that for the first 10 years, I could remember every incident of every day. As time passed my memory faded, but I had a lot of deep anger. And I was angry at God. Took me a good 30 years. Actually getting into veterans affairs, it made me feel like the patriot I was before I went to 'Nam. And it helped me get back in touch with my Christianity and feel resolved in that regard. So it was dark there for a number of decades.

[00:31:45.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your time in Vietnam that has stayed with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life?

[00:31:59.58] JOHN KING: Well, certainly those four incidents that I shared with you, and being sprayed with Agent Orange had a lasting effect. Probably more importantly, to learn about, and know this about not just the impact it has on those that serve, but their families, and the price that families pay, it is not understood and it's really not appreciated. After I retired from the State of Washington, I had an opportunity to work for a consulting firm that was all about building integrated service networks for veterans and their families. And I have to tell you, that's probably some of the most meaningful thing I've ever done in my life, ever will do. Taking care of families.

[00:32:51.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, too easily forgotten that they serve as well. Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans returning from combat today?

[00:33:07.02] JOHN KING: Oh, most definitely. No disrespect to Second World War veterans they are truly the greatest generation. But this new generation of warriors, I think time will prove that they are the greatest. How many deployments they've had, the conditions that they fight under, divided nation over the righteousness of the war. The war isn't righteous. So this generation, I have so much respect for. And without exception when I've shared with them that I'm a Vietnam veteran, they are proud to appreciate me like no other generation of veterans. It is humbling. So yeah, you bet, this new generation of veterans is profound. It gives you faith and hope for the future of this country.

[00:34:12.00] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today, or is it?

[00:34:18.83] JOHN KING: I think it's easily forgotten than it is remembered. I've had friends over the years that when they found out that I was a Vietnam veteran decided that we weren't friends anymore, because of whatever pre-notion they had about it. And yet I'm not sure if they've ever served their country or appreciate what that means. So no, I don't resent that. I think this new generation of veterans and these new warriors have made up for all of those misgivings.

[00:34:54.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:35:05.35] JOHN KING: That's a great question. I think I have. I accomplished what I set out for. I got the GI Bill. I had a robust career. And in the end, I was able to make sense out of something that for so many years seemed so senseless. And that is serving those that served.

[00:35:26.39] JOE GALLOWAY: What did that war mean to you and your generation?

[00:35:31.11] JOHN KING: I remember at the time it was JFK saying, ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country. We were good patriots. I've been told that 75% of the draftees volunteered for the draft. I'm not sure the public understands that. I'm still proud of my generation. In spite of it all, I think we served our country and served it well.

[00:36:04.85] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans?

[00:36:17.86] JOHN KING: Diplomacy is certainly the option I would have any president or our country always consider. It's too easy for others to decide who's going to go to war and fight for our defense. I would say avoid war at all costs.

[00:36:47.13] JOHN KING: Well, certainly described as that deep scar. And I've described that myself in terms of the effect of war. It's a deep purple scar on your soul. And every once in a while something comes along to rip it open to see if it's healing. So that's what that memorial makes me think of, and I've got friends' names on that Wall, people I served with. And then just the survivor's guilt that comes along with it to say, why them and not me? So it's profound.

[00:37:31.72] JOHN KING: I think it's appropriate. It's certainly a sign that we're aging quickly. I was privileged to be a part of the celebration of World War II and Korean War and a lot of public appearances in my role. And those are proud moments, and I hadn't really thought about time sneaking up on the Vietnam veterans. All too quickly.

[00:37:59.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Mr. King.

[00:38:00.79] JOHN KING: Thank you, sir.

[00:38:01.57] JOE GALLOWAY: I appreciate your time and effort.

[00:38:04.57] JOHN KING: Thank you.