

Lakernick, Steven US Navy

[00:00:16.30] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in July 26, 1948.

[00:00:22.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were your family members?

[00:00:26.06] STEVEN LAKERNICK: My father was Isidore Lackernick. Everyone called him Fritz. And my mother was Rose. My dad was a B-24 pilot in World War II-- flew missions from North Africa and the China, Burma, India theater.

[00:00:49.69] When he got out, he went to work for Howard Hughes at TWA as a non-pilot. And he was recalled for Korea, flew B-29 missions in Korea. And then went back to work for TWA and worked for them until they went bankrupt and then retired.

[00:01:16.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Brothers and sisters?

[00:01:18.26] STEVEN LAKERNICK: One sister.

[00:01:21.31] JOE GALLOWAY: And you consider Allentown your hometown?

[00:01:25.69] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Now I do, yes. STEVEN LAKERNICK: When I turned 17, I went to the recruiter in Philadelphia-- Naval recruiter. And I told them I wanted to be a corpsman, and I wanted to go with the Marine Corps as a corpsman. And my parents signed the papers, and I went as a late-entry program.

[00:01:54.12] JOE GALLOWAY: All right. This was what year?

[00:01:58.95] STEVEN LAKERNICK: 1965.

[00:02:01.58] JOE GALLOWAY: So this is early days.

[00:02:03.03] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yes.

[00:02:03.36] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of what was going on in Vietnam at that time?

[00:02:07.11] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, I heard of Vietnam, but that was about it. But I always had an interest in medicine, and that's what I wanted to do. And he guaranteed me that's what I would become. And that's the only reason why I signed the papers.

[00:02:30.61] And nine days after I graduated high school, I went down to 401 North Broad Street, and they lined us up and they counted every 1, 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3, 4. And I was number 3. And then they said, everyone number 3, step forward. And he said, OK, you're drafted in the Marine Corps. And I said, whoa.

[00:03:00.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Whoa.

[00:03:02.35] STEVEN LAKERNICK: The Navy recruiter was there, and he says, wait a second. He's got a contract with the Navy. So they backed off of me, and they chose number 4. And he went to-- drafted in the Marine Corps. Back then, they said nobody was-- Marine Corps never drafted anybody, but they did.

[00:03:21.69] JOE GALLOWAY: Nonsense.

[00:03:23.81] STEVEN LAKERNICK: But they did.

[00:03:30.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did you go for basic?

[00:03:32.77] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Great Lakes, Illinois.

[00:03:33.85] JOE GALLOWAY: Great Lakes.

[00:03:35.05] STEVEN LAKERNICK: By train from North Philadelphia train station. And we went to Chicago, and then transferred to the other train up to Great Lakes. And then, after boot camp, I was playing music-- I was in the band in high school, so I was in the special-- in boot camp, I played in the band in boot camp.

[00:04:04.27] And then, I went under the railroad tracks to main side to the Hospital Corps School-- Basic Hospital Corps School at Great Lakes.

[00:04:15.31] JOE GALLOWAY: So your basic corpsman training was also at Great Lakes.

[00:04:19.21] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yes.

[00:04:21.76] JOE GALLOWAY: And advanced training?

[00:04:24.73] STEVEN LAKERNICK: From Great Lakes, I went to Fleet Marine Force training at Camp Pendleton. And that was advanced medical training. We had drill instructors that came up from San Diego. And there were corpsman, doctors, chaplains, all integrated into a training program--

[00:04:55.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Into the program.

[00:04:57.16] STEVEN LAKERNICK: --to prepare us for combat. And we had medical and Marine Corps-- they took our Navy sea bags away and issued us Marine Corps sea bags, except for dress blues-- the Marine Corps dress blues. Back then, we could wear Marine uniforms. From then on, we were permitted to wear Marine uniforms.

[00:05:28.06] JOE GALLOWAY: In your training, your medical training, how good was it? How much did it prepare you for what you needed on the battlefield?

[00:05:40.37] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, it prepared us pretty much to do anything that we needed to do. At least, I felt that it prepared me to do anything. I felt very confident that I could perform what I needed to perform.

[00:06:11.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Any further training before you deployed to Vietnam?

[00:06:16.42] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. I was asked if I would consider going to reconnaissance, Force Reconnaissance training with the Marine Corps. And I accepted, and they sent me to jump school at Fort Bragg. And I went to scuba school at Fort Pierce, Florida. And I went to jungle training in Panama with the Rangers, and then I went to Vietnam with Force Recon.

[00:06:55.27] JOE GALLOWAY: With Force Recon?

[00:06:56.68] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yes.

[00:06:57.46] JOE GALLOWAY: That's pretty high level of training and confidence in your abilities.

[00:07:04.87] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, it was jumping out of perfectly good airplanes.

[00:07:09.37] JOE GALLOWAY: That weren't on fire.

[00:07:10.89] STEVEN LAKERNICK: That's true. Or shot down. STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, the Marines always go through Okinawa. They never went directly, like the Army did. So I went back to Pendleton, and then we went to Norton Air Force Base, and we flew Continental Airlines to Okinawa.

[00:07:41.16] And I spent three days in Okinawa-- flew into Kadena Air Force Base. Three days at Camp Hansen, went back to Kadena, and then Flying Tigers over to Vietnam, to Da Nang.

[00:07:57.04] JOE GALLOWAY: To Da Nang.

[00:07:57.75] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah.

[00:07:58.44] JOE GALLOWAY: And the Marines had you stop in Okinawa so you can leave your sea bag, and they'd lose it for you.

[00:08:05.19] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah, and get our final shots there.

[00:08:08.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Your first impressions on landing in Da Nang?

[00:08:15.54] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, when we landed the engines were kept at full. They weren't shut down. And I was in, I guess, the fourth row. The door opened up I felt humidity slam me in the face.

[00:08:37.48] Got down, and we were hustled in. And they said-- I went, there was a Jeep took me to division headquarters-- the Hill 327 there at Da Nang. And I went to division headquarters there, and they assigned me to a grunt unit, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.

[00:09:06.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Not Fleet Marines?

[00:09:07.89] STEVEN LAKERNICK: No. They sent me to a line unit, not to a Recon unit. And then they put me on a chopper and sent me up to Quang Tri. And I ran patrols for 10 days. And we got hit.

[00:09:36.39] My first baptism of fire was the third day out. And nobody got hit, but I was scared. And then they needed a corpsman with 1st Recon. And I felt at home.

[00:10:02.88] JOE GALLOWAY: You finally got where you were supposed to be.

[00:10:05.11] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah.

[00:10:06.15] JOE GALLOWAY: And they were located where?

[00:10:08.79] STEVEN LAKERNICK: At the time, they were down at Chu Lai.

[00:10:11.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Chu Lai. This is, now, we're talking what? '66?

[00:10:16.83] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. It was mid '66.

[00:10:26.52] JOE GALLOWAY: Once you got to the Recon unit, did you stay there for the rest of your tour?

[00:10:31.56] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, yeah. And we were mostly running radio relays. We weren't doing-- it was mostly radio relays that we did. So it was not--

[00:10:50.85] JOE GALLOWAY: What did that entail? Going out and setting up antennas?

[00:10:54.63] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah, going up to-- into the hills and setting up relays for--

[00:11:00.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Units that were further out?

[00:11:02.07] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah, yeah.

[00:11:03.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. JOE GALLOWAY: What were your living conditions like? You're mostly in the field.

[00:11:13.32] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. We would go out five days, come back in. It wasn't all that terrible. We very rarely made contact.

[00:11:30.87] But then I got-- then I got assigned to Force Company, and that's when things got real interesting. Because we were going out in three- or four-man teams. And we would go out for four--

[00:11:57.75] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, were they taking you along as a medic?

[00:11:59.88] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Oh, I was trained. So I would go out as an active team member, not as a medic, but as part of the team. So I would be active.

[00:12:21.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, but I'd rather be on your team, a little medical help was handy.

[00:12:26.07] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, as a corpsman, my job was to teach the Marines as much medical training as I could give every Marine so if I went down, they could be able to treat the other Marines. That's a corpsman's duty. We just didn't sit there with our thumbs up our backsides.

[00:12:51.93] When we were in the rear, we're constantly training each Marine as a unit. We would hold our classes every day and give them as much training as we could. So our knowledge base was to train the Marines.

[00:13:13.99] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you remember the first time you treated a wounded Marine?

[00:13:18.63] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Absolutely.

[00:13:20.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe that for us.

[00:13:23.52] STEVEN LAKERNICK: He took a rocket to the head. And it took half of his skull, and brain matter was--

[00:13:40.68] JOE GALLOWAY: It exploded.

[00:13:41.70] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah.

[00:13:42.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, lord.

[00:13:43.11] STEVEN LAKERNICK: And he was talking and-- normal conversation. And we medevacked him, and from what I understand, he survived another six hours before he passed, back at 1st Med Battalion. They had him set to the side, but they had--

[00:14:15.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Triaged him.

[00:14:15.99] STEVEN LAKERNICK: They triaged him, but they set him to the side. And they had a corpsman assigned to him until he passed. He was talking, like we're having a conversation

now. That was the first. But that same day there was others that-- that's when I was hit the first time, too.

[00:14:39.81] JOE GALLOWAY: You were wounded?

[00:14:40.92] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah.

[00:14:42.15] JOE GALLOWAY: This is how much into your tour?

[00:14:48.24] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I was I guess about three and a half months into my tour.

[00:14:51.66] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you get wounded?

[00:14:54.64] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I was shot in the neck.

[00:14:58.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Hm. You treat yourself?

[00:15:00.36] STEVEN LAKERNICK: No, one of the Marines treated me. And I just continued on. It entered my neck and came out my knee.

[00:15:13.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Entered your neck and came out your knee?

[00:15:15.66] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah.

[00:15:16.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Whoa.

[00:15:17.34] STEVEN LAKERNICK: And it didn't hit anything major.

[00:15:21.39] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a lot of traveling.

[00:15:22.89] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah.

[00:15:23.94] JOE GALLOWAY: This an AK round?

[00:15:25.47] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah.

[00:15:29.04] JOE GALLOWAY: How long were you laid up?

[00:15:31.20] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I wasn't.

[00:15:31.80] JOE GALLOWAY: You weren't?

[00:15:32.52] STEVEN LAKERNICK: No.

[00:15:33.39] JOE GALLOWAY: You kept in the field.

[00:15:35.20] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Mm-hm.

[00:15:37.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Man.

[00:15:37.92] STEVEN LAKERNICK: In fact, I didn't want to report it, but the LT did-- the lieutenant. He reported it in the diary.

[00:15:50.55] JOE GALLOWAY: You get a Purple Heart?

[00:15:52.05] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. STEVEN LAKERNICK: I did not make a lot of friends. I tried to distance myself, because I didn't want to-- I learned early on that-- in my training stateside-- that you don't want to make friends.

[00:16:17.64] That's one thing the drill instructors we had at FMS school-- Fleet Marine School-- at Pendleton, the first thing they said was-- they were either Korea or Vietnam vets-- that you don't want to make friends. Because when-- and I'm not good with names, but faces I-- I remember faces, not names.

[00:16:48.45] But when a corpsman, Bob Buehl from Recon, back in '93 sent out letters to form 1st Recon Association in Columbus, Ohio, and at the Holiday Inn there, or the Crowne Plaza, and we all converged, that's when the 1st Recon Battalion Association formed up. And he got everybody on board.

[00:17:35.29] And I was tied in with the 1st Marine Division Association, and they knew I was Recon. So they asked me to go and ask them to join with us for the reunion. So that's why 1st Recon has, since '93, has come to their reunions with our reunions. Meeting-- every year, we come together. But that was my first of three tours in Vietnam.

[00:18:17.68] JOE GALLOWAY: Three tours.

[00:18:18.49] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yes.

[00:18:24.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Your subsequent tours, did you go back and then come back over, or just stayed there?

[00:18:33.44] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, I've been told by my psychiatrists and psychologists that I kept going back because I had a death wish. R&Rs, I took to Sydney, Australia. They wouldn't let me go to Hawaii, because my dad worked for TWA, and I flew for free. So they were afraid I was going to get on--

[00:19:04.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Just keep going.

[00:19:05.72] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Little did they know, I could have done that in Australia, too, because TWA flew to Australia. But I met a young lady, and we got married.

[00:19:17.69] JOE GALLOWAY: In Australia?

[00:19:18.56] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. And well--

[00:19:24.66] JOE GALLOWAY: How'd that work out?

[00:19:25.95] STEVEN LAKERNICK: It worked out well, to make a short story long. We were married-- got married in '67. And in '69, a helicopter landed and a chaplain and the first sergeant came out and told me that she was killed by a drunk driver.

[00:19:50.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, my god.

[00:19:51.03] STEVE LACKERNICK: And I took my .45 and I put it to the side of my head, and I pulled the trigger. And the first sergeant-- quick reaction. As I pulled it, he put his finger, and the hammer hit his finger.

[00:20:10.37] They flew me out to the funeral in Sydney. But yeah, then I was on suicide watch for 60 days in the rear. I said I was fine, and I went back out on patrols. But that was that.

[00:20:33.26] JOE GALLOWAY: That was sad. This was your second tour, or third?

[00:20:39.53] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Second. But the marriage was never recognized, because I never had her as a dependent or anything. And my parents never knew I was married. So it was-- I don't talk about it much.

[00:21:05.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Your third tour?

[00:21:10.14] STEVEN LAKERNICK: My third tour was a wind down. Things were--

[00:21:19.11] JOE GALLOWAY: '70, '71.

[00:21:20.46] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. And it was-- things were winding down then. And we were-- the patrols were less and less. And we were trying out new extraction methods. The SPIE training-- we were hooking up on the ropes and hanging off-- from the bottom of a 46, swinging. And we were trying that. And we lost a lieutenant because the chopper couldn't gain altitude enough, and he was being dragged.

[00:22:14.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Dragging through the trees?

[00:22:15.44] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. That was a sad day with that. And then they transferred me over to the Med Battalion.

[00:22:34.86] JOE GALLOWAY: That was a rear area job.

[00:22:37.29] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. That was over by 327, where division headquarters were, was on the hill. The Med Battalion was here. And Camp Reasoner was-- Recon-- was down off the LZ. They had their own LZ. Well, I just went over to Med Battalion.

[00:23:00.45] We would run-- Med Battalion would run patrols. They had Marine detachment. And they would take corpsman, and we would rotate on patrols outside the wire. And I was due-- I was scheduled for this patrol, but another corpsman, a first class, said he'd take the patrol, because we were expecting heavy casualties, and I also worked triage.

[00:23:31.14] And he said, 7th Marines got hit pretty good, and we were expecting heavy casualties. So he said, you go ahead and work triage. I'll go out and patrol. Well, apparently one of the Marines went a little berserk on the MEDCAP.

[00:23:55.89] That's a medical-- we go in, a MEDCAP is we'd go into a village, and the corpsmen would treat the villagers-- cuts, bruises, whatever-- the pregnant mama-sans and whatever. And well, this one Marine, he shot the corpsman that went in my place-- in the head-- and killed him.

[00:24:29.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Just went crazy.

[00:24:34.41] STEVEN LAKERNICK: So when he got choppered in in the body bag, and we checked the body for graves registration to come get him, and I saw who it was-- I didn't vomit much in Vietnam, but I did that day when I saw the body. And fast forward to four years ago, I'm on Facebook and scrolling through, and there's a picture of him. And his youngest daughter-- that she never met her father, asking if anybody knew him.

[00:25:23.58] And I-- Patty-- and I immediately got back to her. And she called me, and we spoke for 3 and 1/2 hours on the phone. And I told her what happened. And every time I go out to reunions and I pass-- she lives in northern West Virginia-- and coming across 70 from Pennsylvania, as soon as you cross into West Virginia, there's a Cabela's. And I call her, and we meet there. And I've met her four or five times now.

[00:26:10.78] And when I go down to the Wall, I make it a point to have her father's name sketched. And I reverse the phone and ask somebody to film when I'm talking to her live, and I send her the-- so we have-- and I told her exactly what happened and why her father got shot and killed, and what happened. The family was under the impression he committed suicide. And I told her that wasn't the fact.

[00:26:49.50] But it's strange how small the world is. And she knows how guilty I felt about her dad's death, and that should have been me. But it's strange how we met on Facebook.

[00:27:12.73] JOE GALLOWAY: If you had to estimate, how many wounded Marines did you treat in three tours?

[00:27:24.95] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I don't know.

[00:27:26.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Hundreds, thousand?

[00:27:28.20] STEVEN LAKERNICK: No, no, no. I think I treated more heat-related or ingrown toenails than actual combat wounded. I would have to say, combat wounded, 75 to 100 in actual gunshot, shrapnel-- shrapnel.

[00:27:59.92] I delivered 25 babies to Vietnamese women. I started three traches-- tracheotomies-- in two wounded Marines. I cracked one chest and did open heart massage. I had three sucking chest wounds that, after I reinflated the lung, I sealed with the battle dressing plastic, sewing it up on the chest to close it. I mean, these are things that, you know, kind of just came natural.

[00:28:54.91] It happened so fast that it was like everything just happened. Like in World War II, the corpsman that did an appendectomy on a submarine. Somebody opened up a book and read to him exactly--

[00:29:22.87] JOE GALLOWAY: How you do it.

[00:29:23.51] STEVEN LAKERNICK: --how you do it. And it's second nature.

[00:29:33.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe for us the quality of the leadership in your unit?

[00:29:39.92] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Oh, they were top-notch.

[00:29:41.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Good people.

[00:29:42.29] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Good people. We had some bad people that thought that they knew everything, but they didn't last. They were rotated out very quickly. But overall, our people were well-trained.

[00:30:14.81] JOE GALLOWAY: And you did three tours, and the war was changing itself. Did leadership change during that period, or did it remain uniformly high?

[00:30:28.28] STEVEN LAKERNICK: In recon, it was high, because they came over trained. And they didn't come over like they knew everything. They listened to the troops that were there. They didn't come over hard-charging, and we're going to do it my way. We didn't have anybody come over and want to be spit and polish.

[00:31:01.21] STEVEN LAKERNICK: The best day I had in Vietnam, I guess, it was Tet of '68 when the MACV compound at Hue called up called up the Force Recon unit at that Phu Bai. And they wanted the only bridge that was left over the Perfume River, that they needed it checked for explosives. And they needed two dive teams, because you always dive-- and they're frantically looking.

[00:31:50.66] They had three divers that were at the compound. And they're frantically looking for a fourth diver. And they're looking, and I'm sitting there, and I'm smiling. I says, yo, guys.

I'm right here. And they said, you're a corpsman. I says, look at my file. I said, I'm qualified. So they said, you are. OK. So, donned the shorts. No shirt, tool tags.

[00:32:31.25] And they get us over to the bridge. We go in. The water's cold. I mean, we got tool tags on. Couldn't see two inches in front of our face. We go. The bridge is clear of explosives.

[00:32:50.96] We come out, and the Special Forces that were the MACV compound, they-- blankets. They take us into the compound. Coffee with more brandy than coffee. And so we're there for two days until they can get us back to Phu Bai.

[00:33:18.58] So here I am at the Allentown-- that was the best day, because I'm sitting there, smile on my face. But fast-forward. I'm at the Allentown Outpatient Clinic at combat trauma group. And there is a guy sitting across from me-- he's Special Forces.

[00:33:48.23] And we're talking. I'm reading Leatherneck-- February of '18, Leatherneck magazine, and there is a story about the dive at-- and your name, and a Navy corpsman. That's all it says.

[00:34:10.94] And I'm describing this. And I told him, yeah, and I'm the Navy corpsman. And this Special Forces guy starts laughing. And he says, yeah, I was at the MACV compound. So it was a small world.

[00:34:31.46] So fast-forward. I was in Jerry Johs, the president of the association-- we were invited to the Women Marines 100th anniversary at the Crystal City Marriott last year in September. And so we were there. I'm sitting next to a retired colonel, WM-- Women Marine-- and found out she's the editor of Leatherneck magazine.

[00:35:04.85] So I'm saying, I said, do you know that story you did on the Navy corpsman? She said, yeah. I says, well, I'm that Navy corpsman. So she started laughing. She says, well, I'm going to have to rewrite that story.

[00:35:18.08] I says, no, you're not. I said, I don't want my name out there. So she started laughing. So I told-- well, that was my best day in Vietnam.

[00:35:34.22] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I guess my worst day is when we were on patrol along the Laotian border on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And we were working with a MACV-SOG and-- unit. And it was mixed-- it was a mixed unit. And we were counting just for the build up. And we were counting thousands of NVA troops coming down. And tanks.

[00:36:19.71] JOE GALLOWAY: What year?

[00:36:20.64] STEVEN LAKERNICK: This was '68.

[00:36:21.99] JOE GALLOWAY: '68. Pre-Tet?

[00:36:24.30] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Pre-Tet, Khe Sanh.

[00:36:28.02] JOE GALLOWAY: The big build up.

[00:36:28.96] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. And we reported into MACV headquarters in Saigon, and they discounted it. They don't have that many troops. They didn't have tanks. And then, when all hell broke loose-- they just didn't believe us.

[00:36:51.81] Westmoreland, he couldn't believe-- he didn't want to believe the numbers. It was-- being kind of a history buff myself, it was like MacArthur in Korea saying that the Chinese weren't there, and they were.

[00:37:17.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Just laundry money.

[00:37:18.78] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It was like, nothing ever changes. STEVEN LAKERNICK: The Korean-- ROK Marines were-- they were tenacious. I've never seen fighters that hated communists more than they did. They wouldn't let it go.

[00:37:50.30] We were attached to them for a while. They would want our C-rations, and we would take theirs. We would switch. That's where I got to love kimchi. But oh, they were tenacious. They were unbelievable. Didn't have too much contact with the Australians or the Thais, but we did have a lot of exposure to the Koreans.

[00:38:20.39] JOE GALLOWAY: The Koreans.

[00:38:26.68] STEVEN LAKERNICK: The Montagnards, we worked with a lot. And there were good people. The Vietnamese people, as a whole, they didn't know what was going on. They had the Viet Cong, where NVA would come in and take all their young men and threaten the elders and--

[00:39:01.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Take their rice.

[00:39:02.13] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Right. And we would go in. And the Recon units really didn't have a whole lot of contact with them. We would avoid the villages, unless there were known NVA that we had to go in to get-- to snatch and grab. But other than that, we avoided it. Not like line units.

[00:39:45.30] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, I know my sister wrote President Nixon-- why wasn't I writing home?

[00:39:54.14] JOE GALLOWAY: And did Dick Nixon get on you?

[00:39:57.17] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, let's just say I had the CO and the chaplain call me on the carpet and sat and watched me write a letter home.

[00:40:09.35] JOE GALLOWAY: Watched you write? [LAUGHS]

[00:40:10.85] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. And mail it. Yeah, so that was--

[00:40:16.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Is that the only letter you wrote home?

[00:40:19.15] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Oh, no, no, no. Then I had to write at least one letter a week after that.

[00:40:28.37] JOE GALLOWAY: And they checked up on you?

[00:40:30.62] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Mm-hm. Yep.

[00:40:34.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you ever tell your family what you were doing and what was going on?

[00:40:39.38] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, I told them as little as possible. No, I told them things were things were lovely in sunny, South Vietnam, even when the monsoons were.

[00:40:55.28] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you receive about the war you were fighting? Stars and Stripes, AFRS?

[00:41:08.90] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Didn't listen to much radio. Stars and Stripes we'd get occasionally. Not much. I was home in time for-- I made it to Woodstock.

[00:41:28.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, did you?

[00:41:29.42] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah. I made it to Woodstock. And in fact, there was a call out that they needed help in the medical tents, so I worked my way up there and was working the medical tents at Woodstock.

[00:41:52.46] JOE GALLOWAY: That's 50th Anniversary? STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yup. JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:41:54.72] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I got on a Continental airline jet in Da Nang. We took off. Everybody cheered. Landed at Okinawa, Kadena.

[00:42:19.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Marines told you they lost your sea bag?

[00:42:23.12] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, I had on my-- the same pair of jungle boots that I wore on my first tour that were literally white. And my jungle utilities-- my tiger stripe jungle utilities.

[00:42:49.37] And I got to Okinawa. And I was at the NCO chow hall. I was eating. I was just getting really into my meal, and they said, you got a flight back to the States. I was like-- I wasn't there three hours, three and a half hours.

[00:43:21.70] So they transferred me back to Kadena. And it was a World Airlines, DC-10. And I get on in my tiger utilities. And I'm sitting next to a general. I think it's a two-star or a three-star general. I can't remember.

[00:43:55.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Army or Marine?

[00:44:00.16] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Army, I think. I'm not sure. And he looks at me and he says, you smell. That's what he said to me. I looked at him, and I said, so do you. And he says, who do you think you're talking to? I said, I don't care.

[00:44:24.06] JOE GALLOWAY: I don't care.

[00:44:25.64] STEVEN LAKERNICK: And I'm on an aisle, so they bring me my meal and I eat it. So I said to the flight attendant, I said, do you have another meal? She said, sure. I hadn't eaten. So she brings me another meal. And the general says, eat your meal. I says, I haven't eaten in two days. And he says, well, why are you still in your-- I said, this is the only clothes I have.

[00:44:59.41] We landed at El Toro and get off the plane. And I'm taken to Long Beach to the Navy base at Long Beach. And I'm there, and they said, well, you can't be discharged in that uniform.

[00:45:28.14] This is the only uniform I got. So Marine barracks there, they take me in a staff car to Camp Pendleton to get me a set of Marine greens so I can be discharged. I said, I'm at a Navy base. Nope. Marine greens.

[00:45:51.78] JOE GALLOWAY: The Marines are going to take care of you.

[00:45:53.71] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yeah, yeah. So they got me a uniform, and I went back. And they wouldn't let me-- you had to be in class A's. You had to be in uniform to go to the chow hall. And I was in utilities, so I couldn't go to the chow-- I couldn't leave the barracks at night for the five-- for the 10 days I was there.

[00:46:15.84] It was a mess. They had to bring me my meals to me at the barracks. It was a real mess. That was my last 10 days in the service.

[00:46:26.73] Then, they said, do you want to re-enlist? I said, sure. They said, well, you can re-enlist for rank, or you can re-enlist for duty station. I says, I'll re-enlist for duty station.

[00:46:39.02] And they said, well, where do you want to go? I said, Naval Communications Station, Sydney, Australia. That was my first duty station. I said-- second duty station was Operation Deep Freeze, Antarctica. That was my second duty station.

[00:46:58.56] And the third choice was Marine Barracks, Pearl Harbor. And ten minutes later, he comes back and he says, sure you don't want rank? He goes, we can't give you any of those duty stations. I says, well, then I want a medical board to be medically retired.

[00:47:26.00] And he says, for what? And I said, well, I haven't had my physical yet. And I said, multiple sclerosis, because I had symptoms of it. I said, my traumatic arthritis, because of my three helicopter crashes I was in. I said, and my knees.

[00:47:50.48] So they said, well, we have to wait for the doctors. So I asked-- I went for my final physical, and I asked for a medical board. And the doctors refused my medical board. And I says, you can't refuse it. So I languished there for six months until the medical board. And the medical board said, well, we can't medically retire you.

[00:48:24.50] I said, why not? And they gave me some half-assed excuse. And I said, well, I said I'm just going to have to take it to Washington.

[00:48:39.60] So I said, give me orders to Bethesda Naval Hospital. I'll take it up there. So they did. They transported me to the East Coast into Bethesda.

[00:48:52.44] I languished for another eight months and got medical board there. And they retired me for my traumatic arthritis in my knees. So I took the medical retirement and chose to get my character VA, because the VA was going to give me more money than the Navy was. So I took the medical retirement.

[00:49:24.58] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do when you finally got out of the Navy?

[00:49:28.90] STEVE LACKERNICK: Became a Wisconsin State Trooper.

[00:49:31.87] JOE GALLOWAY: You did what?

[00:49:32.86] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I became a Wisconsin State Trooper. Went to college in Wisconsin. Went to University of Wisconsin, one of the extension campuses. Got my bachelor's and master's degree in hospitality administration with a minor in sociology and psychology and was a Wisconsin state patrolman for 22 years. Retired as a corporal. And my last job there for the last four years, I was a hostage negotiator.

[00:50:14.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any difficulty readjusting to civilian life after the war?

[00:50:23.52] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I guess everybody did. I did. Yeah, I see a psychologist and a psychiatrist on a regular basis.

[00:50:39.67] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with the people that you served with over the years?

[00:50:47.14] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Well, since '93 with Recon Association, I've reconnected with a few of the guys. And we get together. But I tend to have-- I don't make friends easily. But I'm more comfortable around veterans than I am around civilians.

[00:51:25.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Vietnam experience change you and affect your life afterward, do you think?

[00:51:30.89] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

[00:51:37.99] JOE GALLOWAY: What do you think that war meant to you and your generation?

[00:51:46.03] STEVEN LAKERNICK: For those of us who fought the war, if the politicians let us, we had the war won after Tet of '68. I mean, all the historians will tell you that, oh, you know that the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong were defeated. I mean, they were ready to give up, except we stopped the bombing and everything. If we continued it, it would have been over. But - the politicians. It was a political war.

[00:52:33.25] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today?

[00:52:39.86] STEVEN LAKERNICK: It depends on which side of the fence you're on. If you protested the war, you were against it. If you fought the war-- I think the majority of the Vietnam vets, if they had to do it over again, would. And history isn't taught in schools anymore. I think it's pretty much forgotten.

[00:53:25.27] JOE GALLOWAY: Are there lessons that you took from that war and your tours there that you would like to pass along?

[00:53:39.02] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I do pass it along, because I do go into schools and talk to the students on Veterans Day and Memorial Day. I get invited to various elementary schools and middle schools. And it helps that one of my daughters is a middle school teacher. In her middle school, her history teachers are veterans, so I'm welcome in the classroom to talk about Vietnam.

[00:54:26.72] STEVEN LAKERNICK: The first time was the hardest. Now, what I do is-- Vietnam vets who have never been there, if they want to go, I go down with them to support them for their first time. It was hard the first time.

[00:54:50.92] JOE GALLOWAY: You've heard about the 50th Anniversary of the Vietnam War Commemoration-- you're part of it today. What do you think of that?

[00:55:00.25] STEVEN LAKERNICK: I think it's a good thing that it's being recognized. It's something that it's-- it's a good thing.

[00:55:18.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you received your Vietnam veteran lapel pin?

[00:55:22.23] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Yes, many, many times over.

[00:55:24.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Many times.

[00:55:25.68] STEVEN LAKERNICK: Many times over.

[00:55:28.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, thank you for coming in and sharing your memories.

[00:55:31.53] STEVEN LAKERNICK: My pleasure. My pleasure.

[00:55:33.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Appreciate that.