

Owens, Thomas US Army

[00:00:18.95] THOMAS OWENS: I was born May 6, 1952, in Rock Hill, South Carolina. I was number two out of four brothers. I'm the only one in my family that went to Vietnam, and my other brothers, they kind of hated and resented me and laughed at me. And when I came home, they wanted to take my money from me and put-- but it's-- you know, I'm glad-- I survived. I came home.

[00:00:44.21] JOE GALLOWAY: There you go. And your hometown is Rock Hill?

[00:00:47.18] THOMAS OWENS: I was born there in Rock Hill, and I-- that's where my roots are. But I moved here to Georgia when I was eight years old and been living here in Georgia since 1960. THOMAS OWENS: I entered the military-- I'll always remember this, it's the month that we landed on the moon-- July, 1969. And I went and took my basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, at 17 years old.

[00:01:15.17] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of the Vietnam War when you decided to go into the military?

[00:01:19.88] THOMAS OWENS: Well, with my education, what my history teachers taught me in school, and being in Boy Scouts, and you know, it's a sense of duty and honor to serve your country and to do the right thing. And you know, there were decisions or choices to be made back then, but I didn't want to be a groupie person. I said, I'm an individual, and I'm not going to do what everybody else does. And I said, I love my country, my family. What my ancestors did allowed me to be where I'm at today. I have to honor that and to go there. I enlisted at 17 years old. I enlisted for three years, served a year in combat in Vietnam, and was discharged before I turned 20 years old.

[00:01:59.32] JOE GALLOWAY: I'll be.

[00:01:59.99] THOMAS OWENS: And when I came home, they told me I wasn't old enough to get a job.

[00:02:03.26] [LAUGHTER]

[00:02:09.83] THOMAS OWENS: I took my basic training at Fort Benning, Georgia, at Sand Hill.

[00:02:15.50] JOE GALLOWAY: Sand Hill.

[00:02:16.13] THOMAS OWENS: A-41.

[00:02:18.08] JOE GALLOWAY: And any other training before you went?

[00:02:21.38] THOMAS OWENS: I went to Fort Jackson for AIT, and just-- because I was 17 years old, they wouldn't send you to Vietnam at 17--

[00:02:32.99] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:02:33.44] THOMAS OWENS: --back then. But I know when I got off the plane in Vietnam, they had me and a couple of guys that looked real young, and they would make sure we were 18 years old or they were going to send you back home.

[00:02:42.65] [LAUGHTER]

[00:02:43.55] JOE GALLOWAY: You had turned 18 by then?

[00:02:45.98] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah. THOMAS OWENS: October the fifth 1971.

[00:02:55.04] JOE GALLOWAY: Late in the war.

[00:02:56.27] THOMAS OWENS: Late in the war, and when people think it was over with. But they were having an invasion into Laos, and I was sent all the way up on the DMZ. And looking back over it, I made somebody mad. They were trying to kill me, and they didn't. And I'm an old country boy. I outfoxed them. [LAUGHS]

[00:03:14.76] JOE GALLOWAY: You know, that was my second tour in Vietnam, was Lam Son 719 into Laos.

[00:03:20.63] THOMAS OWENS: Well, I was there. I witnessed all of that, and I was there at Charlie 2. And see them there at Dong Ha, and just see-- I mean that was--

[00:03:29.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, that was a real goat rope.

[00:03:31.52] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, it was a goat rope. And they studied that in West Point and other things, about how dysfunctional that was and how things were not done. Yeah, it was a mess, and I witnessed to that.

[00:03:44.66] And it's kind of sad. And there's a couple of helicopter pilots that flew that mission that are in my Vietnam veterans' group. And I always ask them, I said, why didn't you ever come pick me up? I said, well-- they said I popped too much red smoke, and they didn't want to come and pick me up.

[00:03:59.39] [LAUGHTER]

[00:04:01.07] Those are real American heroes, the Soldiers that do that, what they did.

[00:04:04.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Whoa, just crazy as outhouse rats. [LAUGHS]

[00:04:07.50] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah. And I was right there, Leatherneck Square, Con Thien and Charlie 2, Cam Lo village, I literally lived there. And that's--

[00:04:17.70] JOE GALLOWAY: A mean place to live. That's a bad neighborhood.

[00:04:20.48] THOMAS OWENS: And I survived there. And the greatest honor I had was the commandant of the Marine Corps, when he first met me, thought I was a Marine. I said, no, I'm just an old grunt. They made me an honorary Marine, you know, and God bless the Marine Corps.

[00:04:35.05] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What were your first impressions when you landed in Vietnam?

[00:04:40.61] THOMAS OWENS: Well, I have pictures. I flew to Vietnam on United Airlines, the friendly skies. It was-- I left out of Travis, and it was kind of a fiasco, where people-- it's amazing how they took us on tours through San Francisco while we were waiting to get deployed or manifest. And the bus broke down on Haight-Ashbury Street, and half the people deserted and didn't get back on the bus.

[00:05:07.01] [LAUGHTER]

[00:05:08.75] But I stayed on the bus and eventually was deployed to Vietnam, and flew to Hawaii, Wake Island, Okinawa. But as soon as-- it was delayed in Okinawa. I don't know what for. But as soon as we got off at Bien Hoa, it was-- you could smell the gunpowder, and just the heat, you're just-- something-- you're walking in a different time warp. It was just something different, you know? That's the way I experienced it. I went through Long Binh. We drove by the Long Binh Jail, and when I think I knew I was in a bad place is when the buses had chain-link bars on it so they wouldn't throw hand grenades in.

[00:05:51.64] JOE GALLOWAY: So you couldn't get a grenade through the window.

[00:05:52.79] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah.

[00:05:55.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, when you came in, were you assigned already to some division, or--

[00:06:00.47] THOMAS OWENS: No, I was just a replacement.

[00:06:02.18] JOE GALLOWAY: You were a repo.

[00:06:03.35] THOMAS OWENS: And I volunteered to go to Vietnam, and they thought I was crazy. And they sent me to a psychiatrist, and they said, he's good to go. But it's amazing how they'd send you to a psychiatrist because you want to go to Vietnam, but when you come back, they didn't-- the psychiatrists didn't want to talk to you.

[00:06:20.08] JOE GALLOWAY: They didn't want you to do that. [LAUGHS]

[00:06:21.41] THOMAS OWENS: Yes, sir.

[00:06:21.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did they assign you to?

[00:06:22.26] THOMAS OWENS: I went through Long Binh Replacement, then I got on a C-130 and flew all the way up to Quang Tri and got off the plane at night. And you being an 18-year-old at night in October, you don't know where you're going to.

[00:06:37.43] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:06:38.27] THOMAS OWENS: And they had a replacement thing there at Quang Tri, and you stayed there a couple of days. And then the company commander and the first sergeant said, Owens, grab your steel pot and weapon. I'm taking you up to Charlie 2. And we got on a little Jeep and drove all the way up from Quang Tri to Cam Lo village up to Charlie 2, and he put me in a TOC.

[00:06:59.06] And I was-- after a couple of days of trying to type, the-- Sergeant Moore is a good friend of mine. He says, Owens, son, you just get your rifle and get out there. You're better at shooting at people than using that typewriter. And-- but it was a good experience, ground surveillance, and I liked that better there. And when you're around people with spit-shined boots giving out orders, it's very dangerous, and you want to stay away from people like that.

[00:07:33.99] THOMAS OWENS: Well, we was in a ground-surveillance radar section, and we had different-- there was about 20 of us. And some of us went to Con Thien. Some of us went to Cam Lo and other firebases and stuff, and I witnessed when they overran Firebase Fuller. I was just about a klick or two on the outside. You remember when they overran Firebase Fuller?

[00:07:55.68] JOE GALLOWAY: No, it doesn't strike a bell.

[00:07:57.36] THOMAS OWENS: They had so many-- there were so many that over run them, they had to have the lights with the Hueys on them just going down. It was very, very dangerous times. They thought, well, they're going to overrun Charlie 2 and Con Thien, but that was--

[00:08:13.47] JOE GALLOWAY: That was '71.

[00:08:14.25] THOMAS OWENS: '71. But what-- I think the leadership failed in Vietnam-- we were withdrawing, retrograde operations, but the soldiers in the rear and the higher echelon, they didn't keep people-- readiness to survive. So I was up there with Charlie 2. I knew till I got on that plane it was a dangerous place, and there were people that just thought the war was over with and not to keep the readiness up. And that's very sad, that people had to take that position. That's why 30 people got killed up at the-- I don't know if you remember that rocket attack at Charlie 2. I was a part of that.

[00:08:49.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:08:50.58] THOMAS OWENS: And the sergeant major, Crawford, come up there, and a lot of them said, well the war is over with, we're going home. And 15 minutes later, he was dead. You know, he came from the rear. He didn't have a clue.

[00:09:03.81] Me and my operations sergeant, Moore, said, you don't come up here and do that stuff. This is dangerous up here. And for senior leadership in the rear to have that kind of mindset, to come up there, it's just kind of-- I witnessed-- I don't mean to say bad things about my Army leadership, but just because you have a-- hold a position, don't mean that you're smart or take care of people.

[00:09:26.58] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your living conditions like?

[00:09:28.86] THOMAS OWENS: It was terrible. When you'd sleep-- I would never sleep with my boots off, hardly. I would take off my-- it was just very nasty, dirty conditions. Rats would crawl up under your T-shirt and gnaw at you.

[00:09:42.90] You know, all-- whether you were at Charlie 2 or Con Thien, the rats were just terrible. While you're eating C rations, the rats are so big, they'd be there begging like a dog. They'd be looking at you.

[00:09:54.54] [LAUGHTER]

[00:09:55.92] And that's not an exaggeration. And they had mongooses, and the cobras were real bad up there.

[00:10:03.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Ugh.

[00:10:03.90] THOMAS OWENS: And you never slept in a sleeping bag. And I didn't get malaria. I was real good. I always, when I was out laying bush, I rolled that down and had that T-shirt. You know, when people look at that towel around you, they don't understand that that's at night when you put that thing around your ears to keep those Texas-sized mosquitoes from flying into your ears.

[00:10:23.76] [LAUGHTER]

[00:10:29.81] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your job?

[00:10:31.19] THOMAS OWENS: Ground surveillance. I was-- I would go out with the other infantry units and be attached to them. They would fly me out in the chopper some days, stay out there for a couple of days, and then come back. And they'd give me a--

[00:10:42.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you operating some kind of equipment?

[00:10:45.02] THOMAS OWENS: Radar equipment for ground surveillance.

[00:10:47.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Looking for people?

[00:10:47.84] THOMAS OWENS: And they put me ahead of the-- looking for people.

[00:10:50.63] JOE GALLOWAY: They made you a scout dog.

[00:10:51.92] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, and I was good at it. I was good.
[LAUGHS]

[00:10:55.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, you'd better get good at it--

[00:10:58.10] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, but when I tell you--

[00:10:59.21] JOE GALLOWAY: You're the one that knows the trip wire.

[00:11:00.35] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah. And you heard of the McNamara Line, where they put all those mines in there at Con Thien? I was there when the nine people walked-- you know, the inexperienced NCO walked them in there, and a lot of them were killed. I witnessed that. And leadership is about-- it's about operational awareness, just to be aware of things.

[00:11:20.90] And see, what I learned in Vietnam-- and to never pick anything up and just be aware of who's around. I apply that to my civilian jobs today. And that's why people look at me and think I'm a crazy Vietnam veteran, but I'm a survivor.

[00:11:35.63] JOE GALLOWAY: (LAUGHING) You're still here.

[00:11:37.46] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, I'm still here, and I will stay here for a long time.

[00:11:45.21] THOMAS OWENS: Well, I like the Vietnamese. You know, I used to go down to Cam Lo village and run-- me and two other people would run security for them and stay there at night. And one time, they had a big typhoon up there. And we couldn't get water or food for five days, and they took care of us.

[00:12:00.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:12:00.87] THOMAS OWENS: I'm very grateful for that. And I'll always remember Sergeant Van Ness coming up with APC to get us out. You know, we-- wherever we sat, we stayed there till we got relieved.

[00:12:09.96] And-- but, see, up there, there was not-- very little civilian population to interact with. Most of the people at Cam Lo village were VC and NVA, and you couldn't really trust them. And rockets got really bad in my-- Sergeant Moore, the operations sergeant, quit allowing the Vietnamese workers to come on the firebase.

[00:12:36.93] You could always tell when it's going to get a lot of rockets when those Korean workers didn't show up. They knew something, and that's really sad. And-- but when you'd get them up there and they'd be walking out and casing-- getting things--

[00:12:51.18] JOE GALLOWAY: Passing off your positions.

[00:12:52.47] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah. You hate to-- that's-- but you got to stop it, got to control it.

[00:12:57.60] JOE GALLOWAY: You got to control it.

[00:13:03.68] THOMAS OWENS: A lot of them I still know today. We fought a lot, and we drank a lot. And we'd lie on the field at Con Thien at night, dreaming about what we going to do when we get out of this mess and look up at the stars at night. You know, the stars are just wonderful at night in Vietnam, compared to here.

[00:13:25.29] And a lot of them-- I'm very grateful I got all the drinking and drugs-- I never used drugs, but I'm very blessed that I didn't allow that stuff to take me over and use it as anything. But we all had our dreams and ambitions, and my fellow Vietnam veterans, we talk about, at reunions, about how these young veterans, 18 to 19 years old, that were killed, they never had a chance to get married or have a girlfriend. I didn't have no girlfriend in Vietnam. I was afraid I was going to die a virgin.

[00:13:55.39] [LAUGHTER]

[00:13:55.81] I was so young. [LAUGHS] And a lot of them probably did.

[00:14:00.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, sadly.

[00:14:01.38] THOMAS OWENS: It is.

[00:14:01.79] JOE GALLOWAY: It is.

[00:14:02.55] THOMAS OWENS: It is. And when you came home, the women didn't have anything to do with you. I've written a-- the guy-- a few of them we like. But when I go to my Vietnam veterans reunion, I'm afraid I'm going to run into somebody I whipped their ass pretty bad and they don't forget.

[00:14:20.61] [LAUGHTER]

[00:14:21.45] But my sergeant major that was operations sergeant, we were very good friends. And he lives up in Kentucky, and he said I was the best Soldier he ever had. And that's the best compliment I've ever had. He said, I always-- when I needed something, you always did it, and you never left your post or position, and I always counted on you. To-- for a sergeant major that old to tell you that, that's an honor.

[00:14:43.20] JOE GALLOWAY: That's pretty good. That don't-- it doesn't get any better than that.

[00:14:46.02] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah. And everything we went through, and to go - but I don't go to my Vietnam veterans reunions much anymore. And I talked to other veterans-- when we go, when we leave, we feel bitter and angry about going to them because there are some-- seems like there are certain people there that just spoil the environment. You want to go there and have good times and hug each other. This might be the last time you ever see them.

[00:15:10.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Exactly.

[00:15:11.58] THOMAS OWENS: And there's some people that come there with their agenda, and they're whining and boo-hooing. And I don't care for that.

[00:15:17.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Don't need that.

[00:15:18.12] THOMAS OWENS: No. And we're proud, professional, and patriotic, and--

[00:15:22.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial or social backgrounds during your time in Vietnam--

[00:15:29.46] THOMAS OWENS: Yes, sir.

[00:15:29.84] JOE GALLOWAY: --that you might never have had in civilian life?

[00:15:32.10] THOMAS OWENS: I have somebody that lives in your neck of the woods named Samuel Dozier. He's an African-American. I brought a picture of him to show you. I am the real Forrest Gump.

[00:15:43.77] [LAUGHTER]

[00:15:45.18] JOE GALLOWAY: You're it, huh?

[00:15:46.11] THOMAS OWENS: I was Forrest Gump before the movie was made, and a lot of my sergeant majors called me the real Forrest Gump. And you know, they laughed at Forrest Gump, but he was a morally good man.

[00:15:56.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Yup.

[00:15:56.88] THOMAS OWENS: He did the right thing.

[00:15:58.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Smart-- smarter than he looked, yeah.

[00:16:00.69] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, that's right. And I made-- I've been trying to locate him for the last 40 years, and I can't find him. We wrote a few times afterwards, and I would like to find him and locate him and say, hello, Samuel.

[00:16:13.41] We talked about our-- what we were going to do and all that. And it's just, you try. Some people don't want to get in-- a lot of people that are dead already, and just, they want to move on and stuff. And-- but I had a good-- Samuel Dozier and-

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[00:16:32.82] JOE GALLOWAY: Where does he live?

[00:16:34.00] THOMAS OWENS: In North Carolina.

[00:16:36.30] JOE GALLOWAY: Whereabouts?

[00:16:37.23] THOMAS OWENS: It's on the back of the-- he wrote the name of the town, Edgefield or Edenfield, North Carolina.

[00:16:42.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Ah. Well, maybe we can find him.

[00:16:44.64] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, I would just-- but we-- you know, just the memories of that, and-- there's another guy, several of them, a guy named-- from Buffalo, New York, we used to have. But I've contacted him, but he didn't want to talk or communicate.

[00:17:02.23] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for recreation or off-duty activities, or did you have any?

[00:17:07.92] THOMAS OWENS: Very-- none whatsoever. You couldn't play basketball because, see, there at Charlie 2 or Con Thien. If you went out for more than a minute there, they'd drop a rocket in on you. They shot you.

[00:17:17.45] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, my.

[00:17:17.81] THOMAS OWENS: You couldn't, because you-- you were really safer to be outside the wire out there than, being at the firebase, you were literally a target.

[00:17:25.86] JOE GALLOWAY: And so you didn't go out from under cover.

[00:17:28.82] THOMAS OWENS: Well, you just didn't hang around trying to act stupid. You know, you had your business and your purpose and stuff. But one thing I can never understand is, when they'd drop a couple hundred rockets in on you, and then they'd call all clear. I says, did our side know when they're going to quit shooting at us, when they'd blow the siren?

[00:17:47.25] [LAUGHTER]

[00:17:51.66] Military intelligence is a contradiction in terms.

[00:17:54.51] JOE GALLOWAY: It is a contradiction in terms, yeah.

[00:17:56.82] [LAUGHTER]

[00:17:58.17] JOE GALLOWAY: What-- do you have any specific memories of the popular culture at that time, music, books, films?

[00:18:06.39] THOMAS OWENS: Well, I liked country music, and my friend Samuel Dozier called me Buck Owens.

[00:18:12.18] JOE GALLOWAY: (LAUGHING) Buck Owens.

[00:18:13.05] THOMAS OWENS: Buck Owens, and I look like him. I got a nose like Buck Owens and listened to-- I like country music and this white man's soul music, in a certain respect. And I like country-- I like the radio, and listened to Good Morning, Vietnam.

[00:18:31.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah, yeah, far as Saigon.

[00:18:34.62] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, and it's amazing how today, with all the young people with all the technology, and what we went through, it was like going to jail or prison. And you just wrote and put "free" on there, and that's the only contact you had with home. And nowadays, you got all these fancy stuff. And recreation, it was just counting the days and getting out of there.

[00:19:08.22] JOE GALLOWAY: So your area of operations, where you served, was all that upper tier of northern I Corps.

[00:19:15.37] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, I lived there. I stayed there.

[00:19:17.40] JOE GALLOWAY: Right on the Vietnam border.

[00:19:19.02] THOMAS OWENS: I wasn't going anywhere. Only way I was going to leave was in a body bag, until they told me I went. But we left-- they stood down in July of '71, and they pulled out.

[00:19:28.77] And you could see before we left, for a couple of months, the NVA were building up forces to invade down there for Easter invasion, because the Easter invasion, they come down there. They literally killed everybody in Cam Lo village and all those civilian people. They literally wiped them out. It's really sad. And that was-- we were just-- sad day in history.

[00:19:53.25] But I liked the-- but one of the good things about when I run into Vietnamese people here in America, they look at me, and I-- you know, I'm trying to find somebody that's from somewhere besides Saigon. Everybody says Saigon. I said, I want to tell them I served in Quang Tri. But a lot of them, I said, you're-- the reason

you're here free today is because of people like me and other veterans. And they know that, and they appreciate it.

[00:20:18.45] And they've taken advantage of the American dream and done quite well. I've got ladies, Vietnamese ladies, nice, quality people that do my nails, and you know, Vietnamese people like Americans. They like the American dream. They're not confused. They're a success story. I thought about going back, but if--

[00:20:40.38] JOE GALLOWAY: You'd love it.

[00:20:41.35] THOMAS OWENS: I'd love it?

[00:20:41.69] JOE GALLOWAY: You'd love it. I've been back five times.

[00:20:43.38] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, when you go next time, let me know, and I'll go with you.

[00:20:46.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Well, I probably won't go again. I'm too old for that flight.

[00:20:50.76] THOMAS OWENS: But I had friends of mine that went back there to Quang Tri, and they threw him in jail when he got there, the communists did, and when he--

[00:20:58.53] JOE GALLOWAY: When was that?

[00:20:59.19] THOMAS OWENS: This was couple years ago. He was there. He--

[00:21:01.91] JOE GALLOWAY: He had to have been going somewhere he wasn't supposed to.

[00:21:04.27] THOMAS OWENS: Well, what he did--

[00:21:05.14] JOE GALLOWAY: They really welcome you up there.

[00:21:06.63] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, well, he looked up his South Vietnamese counterpart that was helping him out during the war, and that's what got him thrown in.

[00:21:13.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, that's what got him in trouble.

[00:21:15.39] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah.

[00:21:16.68] JOE GALLOWAY: But if you mind your P's and Q's, it's a beautiful country, and--

[00:21:22.20] THOMAS OWENS: But you know, when you look back over it, Joe, we won the war, really. We won. Because they're a capitalist country. They want to be like us. Oh, yeah. I've seen a lot of them. I see them in Chamblee and a lot of them in-- I see that they don't sit around and complain about being--

[00:21:38.94] JOE GALLOWAY: They're hardworking.

[00:21:39.63] THOMAS OWENS: They're hardworking, they stick together, and they're tight as pine bark.

[00:21:43.60] [LAUGHTER]

[00:21:50.42] THOMAS OWENS: It is seeing the 30 bodies on the-- in the body bags there at the helipad at Charlie 2, and the choppers were just coming in. And we were putting them in the body bags. And the wounded. That's-- that sticks with me for the rest of my life and-- to see that.

[00:22:07.94] JOE GALLOWAY: A bad day.

[00:22:08.50] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah. And till somebody's putting some bodies in a body bag, then you can't tell me anything about life or freedom or anything.

[00:22:16.67] JOE GALLOWAY: Nuh-uh.

[00:22:17.56] THOMAS OWENS: No. It stick with you the rest your life. It makes you appreciate life a lot more.

[00:22:26.87] THOMAS OWENS: I guess when the Donut Dollies come up there to visit me after the rocket attack, and they come up there. And I'm on the Donut Dolly website. They have a picture of me, 90 pounds, skinny, and--

[00:22:39.50] [LAUGHTER]

[00:22:39.74] --and you see, you ain't seen a round eye in a year, hardly, you know, up there. But they'd just kind of, you know, just come up there and just for a brief moment, you know--

[00:22:51.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Talk to you.

[00:22:52.50] THOMAS OWENS: --talk to you. And name is, oh, Susie, and I brought a picture of that to share with you. And that was a fond memory. Those Donut Dollies, they deserve veteran status and to be recognized for a lot of things.

[00:23:05.99] JOE GALLOWAY: They really do.

[00:23:06.20] THOMAS OWENS: And they-- and the nurses are the real heroes, and the doctors. And I was so run down. I hadn't had a hot meal in probably four months. You know, they had a thing in the VFW magazine about how we went for months without a change uniform or hot meals. I mean, we were constantly just surviving.

[00:23:28.13] I almost lost my right arm in Vietnam. I had cellulitis. I was in the hospital for a month and had IVs. You know, I was down at the Chu Lai hospital. After they pulled us off the DMZ, they put me in the infantry unit down near--

[00:23:43.86] JOE GALLOWAY: That was from what, just a bad diet?

[00:23:46.55] THOMAS OWENS: Cellulitis, hadn't had a hot meal. I was digging a foxhole on the side of a mountain in Chu Lai, and it got infected there. And it just went up, and I almost-- the doctors said we-- they wanted to medevac me out. And I says, I walked into Vietnam, I'm going to walk out, and get me well.

[00:24:03.02] JOE GALLOWAY: Just get me well.

[00:24:04.34] THOMAS OWENS: And-- but that was-- I was pretty sick there. You know, when I went in to the emergency room and the doctor stuck a needle under my armpit, I passed out, and I just-- you don't-- I mean, for somebody to actually go through-- I mean, I'm not the only one, but I hadn't had hot meals or rest or sleep, and it-- you know, it takes its toll on you, when I show you pictures, you know? And--

[00:24:27.40] JOE GALLOWAY: You were 90 pounds.

[00:24:28.67] THOMAS OWENS: 90 pounds. I looked 90 pounds. I wasn't-- barely shaving. And I enjoyed the care packages and stuff. And--

[00:24:43.30] THOMAS OWENS: In addition to the rocket attack, standing at the helipad there at Charlie 2, and they dropped a rocket on me-- I had a 122 land within six feet of me at the helipad there at Charlie 2.

[00:24:55.30] JOE GALLOWAY: God, I hope it was a dud.

[00:24:57.04] THOMAS OWENS: It was a live one.

[00:24:58.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Huh.

[00:24:59.47] THOMAS OWENS: And I got a picture. So, I mean, I was in a foxhole when they did it, but the shrapnel was real bad. I mean, they were-- you know, you standing around. I was on the chopper pad to be choppered out to the field, and they dropped a-- that's the closest I ever had a 122-- when they say that you don't hear them if they land on top of you, you do hear them when they land on top of you. I mean, I was--

[00:25:19.81] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were in a hole, so you--

[00:25:20.80] THOMAS OWENS: In a hole. But when I was in the hole and after it hit, everybody else started running. And there was a few, I said, don't run, just stay put. [LAUGHS] Yeah, because, I mean, that was the closest I've come to--

[00:25:32.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh.

[00:25:33.11] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah.

[00:25:40.87] THOMAS OWENS: I didn't see any of those. I was just an E4, 18-year-old private that, when you-- during that period of time, you didn't-- officers and senior NCOs, they hollered and screamed at you. You just stayed away. They were in their area, and we were in our area, and we just survived.

[00:25:57.43] [LAUGHTER]

[00:26:01.33] But, you know, the thing, you can always tell when you was getting overrun, is when the senior officers, NCOs, they'd be on the choppers flying out and leaving it to us old grunts to do it.

[00:26:09.91] [LAUGHTER]

[00:26:10.72] It's sad, but there is a lot truth to that.

[00:26:18.54] THOMAS OWENS: I wrote. My mother wrote me a lot, and I had a lot of letters. I wish I still had those letters that I wrote home, but my brothers threw them away. It kind of hurt, but a lot of them, you know, I-- there's a lot of people that like me. And-- but the sad thing is, after I got those letters, and we were always so afraid of getting overrun, and we burned our addresses of our mail there, because if you got killed or captured and they'd get your address, and the NVA would write home and say bad things about you. And you know, it was for a matter of security, and that's kind of sad that you'd have to do that.

[00:26:56.53] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. How much news did you get about the war from home or from the radio or Stars and Stripes?

[00:27:06.30] THOMAS OWENS: Well, they had Stars and Stripes on that, but my mother would write and hear about stuff going on on the DMZ and people getting killed. And let me tell you, when the rocket attack happened and people were killed, my sergeant, Moore, his wife, you know, we talk about at reunions, she thought he was killed. And talk about love and devotion to her husband, she got on the MARS phone and called all the way to Vietnam to make sure she heard his voice, to make sure he was still alive.

[00:27:37.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:27:37.48] THOMAS OWENS: That's some woman that loved her husband, and she's a fine woman.

[00:27:45.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Were you aware of the political and antiwar movement back home?

[00:27:51.95] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, I was kind of-- I wasn't into that. I was in San-- I was stationed in San Francisco for a couple months before I went to Vietnam, and it didn't faze me much. I walked around in my uniform.

[00:28:04.00] You know what we called the peace sign, don't you? It's a footprint of an American chicken. That's somebody that won't fight.

[00:28:11.15] [LAUGHTER]

[00:28:14.07] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, I tell you, Thomas.

[00:28:16.01] THOMAS OWENS: I hope. But God bless them, they'd get-- you know.

[00:28:18.47] [LAUGHTER]

[00:28:21.80] JOE GALLOWAY: So you didn't pay no attention to it.

[00:28:24.46] THOMAS OWENS: Mm-mm.

[00:28:24.69] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:28:25.61] THOMAS OWENS: No, I didn't.

[00:28:31.31] THOMAS OWENS: After I got out of the hospital, I was just-- my last-- to the day I left, I was in the hospital, and you know, just grace of God, I just recovered from that, because that doctor wanted to medevac me out of Vietnam. I said, no, stay here, and I want to--

[00:28:47.96] JOE GALLOWAY: Finish it up.

[00:28:48.23] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, and I wanted to walk home with my head up proud. I have pictures where, you know, I was at the-- I flew from Japan to Seattle, and it was cold. And I just wanted to get home, and all I do is wanting to get a Whopper, fry, a Coke, just eat some food.

[00:29:10.64] [LAUGHTER]

[00:29:13.13] And you know, you could tell, people that'd been to Vietnam. I got back in October, and people that had been in the field in Vietnam, you could-- your skin, my whole skin was like a suntan for a year or two afterwards, baked-in, the dirt, the filth, and everything. It was, you know, when you came home, whether you were in uniform or not, people knew you had been to Vietnam.

[00:29:36.56] And I always-- it kind of hurt my feelings when my brother was at the airport to pick me up and he says, we know you're crazy, Tom, you went to Vietnam, and you're not going to be crazy when you come back. And that kind of hurt my feelings for him to-- you know, he was a glorified draft dodger. I'm the smartest one of-- all of the-- my women-- my female cousins say I turned out better than any of them.

[00:29:59.93] You know, you can gain the whole world, but you don't lose your soul. More-- the most important thing in the world is, to me, knowing that I served in Vietnam with my buddies, and they know I was there for them and with them. And when I walk into my Vietnam veterans reunion, I get a standing ovation because they like me, and you can't buy that.

[00:30:19.19] BMW can't buy that, status can't. That is something. I earned that right. And they know who I am, and they can always count on me.

[00:30:28.28] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with your fellow veterans over the years?

[00:30:32.31] THOMAS OWENS: I'm on speed dial. I do a service that I realized I wasn't doing. I find out things, but all my-- the wives, spouses, of my Vietnam veterans said Tom, I says, thank you for calling up my husband and talking to him,

because every time you call, you kind of cheer him up, make him feel good. I mean, you know, I didn't realize I was doing that. They like to hear my voice and hear my cantankerism, my BS and all.

[00:31:00.01] [LAUGHTER]

[00:31:00.83] And they like it. It kind of cheer them up. And I enjoy doing that, and they help me out.

[00:31:08.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have difficulty readjusting to life?

[00:31:10.80] THOMAS OWENS: Oh, yeah, I'm still readjusting now. It's difficult. But I'm not-- my Vietnam friends, in the land of Vietnam, has always told me, when you ever get in trouble and they accuse you of anything, you stand tall and proud and don't use post-traumatic stress an excuse for anything.

[00:31:26.70] I've been-- they've throwed a lot of stuff at me because I stand for what's right and I know the difference between right and wrong, and I'm proud of that. And you know, it's a sad thing in this day and age, is when the politicians that never served in the military has the audacity to berate somebody like me, says I'm not qualified to speak in public forums about policy issues and stuff. And it really hurt. You know, you have no-- I earned the right.

[00:31:57.24] JOE GALLOWAY: You earned the right.

[00:31:58.08] THOMAS OWENS: But they don't understand that. And you know, every-- and that really hurts. The political process, I mean, my mayor of the town I live in, she hates me.

[00:32:09.21] She tells everybody I'm a crazy Vietnam veteran with weapons. And you know, when they say false things about you, they'll label you as not true. And that-- and you know, these are people in political power, and how do you defend yourself?

[00:32:21.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Jackasses.

[00:32:22.59] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah. And they sent in a SWAT team out there, wanting to confiscate my weapons. They never did. They said, well, you're a Vietnam veteran, you have weapons.

[00:32:30.62] I said, I have a concealed weapon permit. I know the rules of engagement. And break in my house, and you'll find out what I have.

[00:32:37.29] JOE GALLOWAY: (LAUGHING) Yeah, the hard way.

[00:32:39.15] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah, and-- but having to deal with that-- but there's several-- you know, I'm-- there's several people that berated me for the last 20 years, but I-- the satisfaction that I have that a lot of them have been convicted in federal crimes-- and I stand up to them. My fellow veterans call me Paul Revere. My job is to tell the public what's going on, what the politicians are doing to them, straighten it out.

[00:33:10.86] I don't like anybody that lies, cheats, or steals. And I've been around Marines and all that. We don't tolerate any lying, cheating, or stealing, and one thing I learned, if you're going to cheat on your spouse and you're in the Army, then you're going to cheat on everything else you do in life. And you'd better be loyal to everything you do, and it's just-- I live by that rule.

[00:33:39.38] THOMAS OWENS: It's kind of developed my attitude toward authority. I don't-- I respect authority if it's the right authority, but when there's a-- when you're bureaucrats and you don't care, I don't have no use for you. I hate bureaucrats. I call them ineffective micromanagers. If you're going to micromanage, get it right.

[00:33:58.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:33:58.87] [LAUGHTER]

[00:34:00.20] THOMAS OWENS: And we-- I think of what I experienced in Vietnam and the lack of support that we had for what we were doing and the bureaucrats that-- you know, that didn't give us clean uniforms and the food, and I've resented that I've-- when I go to the VA, when I see them not giving-- you know, the VA is like reliving Vietnam over again. You're not getting the stuff you need. And that's a corruption. That's a bad thing. And I see that and I hate that.

[00:34:30.35] And how do you deal with that? They hate me because I can always tell a crook and a thief. When they see me coming, they get nervous because they know I'm going to figure them out.

[00:34:39.83] [LAUGHTER]

[00:34:43.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat duty?

[00:34:49.25] THOMAS OWENS: Oh, yeah. A lot of-- I volunteer at the USO. I went to Afghanistan and worked at the Tillman, and all the veterans today need to thank Vietnam veterans.

[00:34:59.18] You know, we're over it. We don't care about us, but the future veterans and the current veterans are going to get treated a lot better than the way we were treated. They don't understand how good they've got it. Every veteran today needs to say the reason you're treated better is because of us.

[00:35:15.83] JOE GALLOWAY: And because you weren't.

[00:35:17.33] THOMAS OWENS: Yeah. But, you know, we got on with life and didn't let it affect us.

[00:35:23.63] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today, or is it?

[00:35:29.72] THOMAS OWENS: I think certain people are giving a bad history of it, and they like to-- when you-- whether you're a Vietnam veteran or a current veteran, when a veteran does something wrong, they always highlight it on the news: well, there's a Vietnam veteran that killed a bunch of people, and they don't-- but they don't-- there's good stories where Vietnam veterans have saved people's lives and done some great and wonderful things. It needs to be said and talked about.

[00:36:01.28] I just hate it when people-- but, you know, I've run into young veterans, they want to use their veteran status to get out of something. You did something wrong, man up, say, yes, I did it. And be it who you are, don't apologize for anything you do, just be right in what you do.

[00:36:17.42] JOE GALLOWAY: What lessons did you take from Vietnam that you would like to pass on to future generations of Americans?

[00:36:25.43] THOMAS OWENS: Oh, just honor your veterans. Don't go into war unless you're going in there to win it, like a football game. Blood-- you know, a lot of people's lives are destroyed because-- by wars and politicians that can't get along. You know, we can solve problems without killing each other and slaughtering people. It's really sad, and I see the-- when I read about my ancestors and the sufferings they went through and-- you know, it's just horrible.

[00:37:02.34] JOE GALLOWAY: What are your thoughts when you go there?

[00:37:03.96] THOMAS OWENS: I like it. I like it. And let me tell you another thing that I did a couple of years ago.

[00:37:08.82] They had the Gathering of Eagles. We had all them war protesters going to go up there and desecrate all those monuments up there. Well, I got on a plane and flew up there with one of my Vietnam buddies, and we were up there. We outnumbered all them protesters going to desecrate our memorials, and I'm honored that I flew up and stood my ground.

[00:37:34.86] THOMAS OWENS: That's good. They need to honor it and remember it, and it's long overdue. But there's going to be more years to commemorate it. I just hope they write good stories about it.

[00:37:50.25] We didn't lose the war. You didn't lose it. I didn't lose it, and we didn't lose it. We were there for each other. And you can't blame-- the fault-- blame failures that the politicians make on the Soldiers that go there and do it. And that's just about as deplorable as you get.

[00:38:07.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Thomas.

[00:38:08.79] THOMAS OWENS: I hope I made a good interview with you.