

## Puckett, Ralph US Army

[00:00:13.37] I'm from Tifton, Georgia, a small agricultural town at that time, in particular, South Central Georgia, mainly farming community. I grew up there, went to school there up through the tenth grade. I was always interested in flying. In fact, I started taking flying lessons before I ever got behind the wheel of a car. When the war started, I was just 15 years old. I was 16 the next day. I wanted to go into the service as soon as I could, and I wanted to do something for my country.

[00:00:45.96] I really had no idea about what it was all about, but I felt that I owed something to my country. So I volunteered for the Army Air Corps Enlisted Reserve as soon as I was 17. And I was in that for 18 months before I was discharged to go to West Point. My early years, I had a strict mother and father who had high expectations of the three of us, children, how we should behave and what we should accomplish. They were very loving and very supportive.

[00:01:22.24] But there was no doubt in our minds as to what was expected of us and that performances outside of those parameters would not be acceptable. That's the way I grew up. It was just strictly a normal small South Georgia town upbringing before I came into the service.

[00:01:42.80] Yes, sir. So it was the World War II experience that kind of led you and get you first interested in serving your country and calling-- and making a call to arms?

[00:01:52.21] It was. Of course, it was the biggest thing going on at the time. I remember exactly where I was when I heard the word that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. And then of course, World War II became the all-consuming activity in our country after that time for the four years in which we were engaged in the war. Everything that happened affected everything in the country. And it certainly affected me and had a big impact on me because all the males, whom I knew who were a few years older than I were going into the service and doing their part.

[00:02:26.98] And I just felt that I had some responsibility to give back to my country. That was the reason that I wanted to go into the service. I also wanted to continue my flying education. I wanted to be a pilot. I went to West Point, like I said, with the idea of becoming a cadet aviator which was part of the program when I entered. It was changed before I graduated. I had the opportunity to and had the grades and standing to go into the Air Force pilot training. But I changed my mind

[00:03:04.33] my last year at West Point based on a couple of things. One was the visit that second classmen (that's juniors) made before their second class year to installations throughout the Army, trying to give us a better idea of what went on in the service. And this was at a time when the Air Force was Army Air Force, still part of the Army. And I saw-- we spent ten days at the 82nd Airborne Division. And we really went through ten days of preparation for Jump School. Of course, we knew we would not be allowed to jump.

[00:03:41.95] The person who was in charge of the flying was-- charge of the training was Colonel Westmoreland who was chief of staff of the division. And we could see him supervising or observing the training that we did. I noticed and it really struck home with me, everything

those paratroopers, all non-commissioned officers, almost entirely, did was perfect. If it was supposed to start at 8:03, it started at 8:03. There was no question about it. Everything was perfect.

[00:04:16.24] After that, we toured the five Air Force installations. And the administration of our training there was not at the same high caliber. So based on that-- and then I saw a film, as all of us did in the senior class. We saw these films on the different branches of what they did. And the one that they showed for the infantry was the Battle of the Liri Valley in Italy, which is one of the toughest campaigns, the toughest battles.

[00:04:47.80] And I remember observing, it was made or directed by John Huston, the director from Hollywood. And I think that was his first film. And he had been told to make it realistic. Well, I understand that it was so realistic that it could not be shown to civilian audiences. But I saw that thing, and I could see the infantry going through the olive orchard and see the leaves being clipped off of the trees above them and Soldiers falling from being hit by machine gun bullets.

[00:05:21.85] And I wondered, do I have the guts and brains to be a combat infantryman? And so those two things: the effectiveness of the 82nd Airborne training, and that film and doing a lot of thinking caused me to change my branch request to infantry. And I've never regretted it. I'd still like to fly one of those fighter aircraft. But I've never regretted being an infantryman. It gives you an opportunity to work directly with people, Soldiers. And that's the most enjoyable part of the military as far as I'm concerned.

[00:05:57.85] Yes, sir. When you graduated West Point then you went to your officer basic course, I guess here at Fort Benning, or where did you do that?

[00:06:03.67] In the first one, there was something that the Army had been doing for several years. But they cut it off after I was there because of the Korean War which started six months later. Right after graduation, all new second lieutenants, Army, went to the Ground General School at Fort Riley. So we had from every branch except medical and dental and legal branches. They were all new second lieutenants regardless of our source of commissioning. And it gave us a good idea about how the Army worked to do its job on the battlefield.

[00:06:41.56] It was very good training, something that most of us needed because most of us were without prior service. We were ROTC, West Point. But there were quite a few combat veterans in there. So that was completed in December of 1949. We left for Christmas leave and then went to our branch school. I came to Benning in January and graduated in June of that year, six months Basic Course.

[00:07:10.33] I graduated on a Friday, went to Jump School on Monday. And during the middle of Jump School, the war in Korea started, June the 25th, 1950. And I remember I was sitting on my bunk, spit shining my jump boots. And it was a great program. I really enjoyed that. One of the reasons was it was strictly physical. And at the end of the day, all I had to do was spit shining my jump boots and lay out my uniform for the next day. And I was ready to go. It was great.

[00:07:42.23] And so I went from there to-- I was supposed to go to Okinawa. And I was able to get my orders changed to send me to Japan and on to Korea.

[00:07:51.79] Do you think the-- talk about your training at Fort Benning for the Basic Course.

[00:07:54.85] Fort Benning was good training. And I've given that the-- most of the credit for their capability that we had in developing and training the 73 enlisted Soldiers who volunteered for the first Ranger unit established after World War II. The basic course was an outstanding program to prepare me who knew little or nothing about being the second lieutenant in the infantry.

[00:08:23.92] I have quite a bit of connection with it today. It's a better course today, but it's still good to do its job in preparing new second lieutenants to be an infantry platoon leader. It had a lot of practical work. It has more-- it's improved today. Anything that we did, which was good-- and it was all good-- is better today than it was then, more practical work, more field time, and placing greater demands on the lieutenants. It was a perfect course.

[00:08:58.74] We talked about you're actually two-war veteran. You served in the Korean War and the Vietnam.

[00:09:03.24] Right.

[00:09:03.57] And we really want to focus on your Vietnam experiences. But we can't let it go without you talking about your experiences with the Ranger company in Korea.

[00:09:11.23] ay. The war started, as I stated, on June the 25th, 1950. Two months later, or a little-- about two months later, August, I was in Japan. And you spent three days in Japan being processed and then on to Korea. I had been selected for assignment to the 24th Infantry Division when I heard over the PA set: Second Lieutenant Ralph Puckett report to such and such office.

[00:09:39.48] I reported there. And gave a very formal salute to a very distinguished lieutenant colonel sitting behind a field folding table. He gave me at ease, and I'm sure I still stood at a rigid parade rest. But he said, I'm selecting volunteers for an extremely dangerous mission behind enemy lines. I said, sir, I volunteer. He said, don't you want to know what the job is? I said, yes, sir. But I volunteer.

[00:10:06.09] He said, I'm selecting volunteers for a Ranger company that we're going to form and train and have a specific mission. He talked to me for quite some length. I had no background except my West Point and the Basic Course at Riley and Benning. But one of the things that I found out later from one of his officers that impressed him was that he had been on the boxing team at West Point when he was a cadet.

[00:10:33.32] I was a captain of the boxing team when I was at West Point, so that probably was our only connection. But anyway, he made the statement, he said, I've already selected the lieutenants for the company. And I said, sir, I want to be a Ranger so badly, I volunteer to take a

job as a squad leader or a rifleman, knowing full well, I probably didn't have the experience to even do that.

[00:11:04.54] And he said, Well, come back tomorrow morning. I'll tell you my decision. When I came back the next morning, he said, I've accepted you into the company. And you will be the company commander. The words that went through my mind was: Dear God, don't let me get a bunch of good guys killed. Because like I say, I didn't have any, any experience.

[00:11:25.83] The significance of that to me has always been it shows what a poor state of readiness that the Eighth Army-- I don't know about the rest of the Army-- that the Eighth Army in Japan was when they select a brand-new second lieutenant just out of the Basic Course and Jump School, not one day of troop duty whatsoever, to form, train, and command the first Ranger unit established after World War II.

[00:11:55.02] It was a very small unit, 3 officers, 74 enlisted men. The other two officers, classmates, second lieutenants, green, no experience whatsoever. Soldiers. We couldn't take infantrymen from the divisions because they were too short. One of the divisions was 7,000 Soldiers showing. That again, shows you the sort of shape that we were in during that time. The Army had been cut back to two regiments per division, two battalions, two companies.

[00:12:27.69] There were eight rifle companies in the division when it should have been 27 because of the cutback. That's a big difference. The enlisted Soldiers were good Soldiers, but they were service troops. They came from Adjutant General Corps. We had some engineers, we some ordinance, transportation, what have you. Good Soldiers, volunteers, not infantry. And I've often thought and remarked that if there was ever a group of Soldiers cut out to be a failure, it was the Eighth Army Ranger Company because nobody had the requisite experience to do what we were being asked to do.

[00:13:05.37] And none of these had combat experience, previous combat experience?

[00:13:11.79] There were two or three-- we had one Marine, who had some combat experience from World War II. We had one-- my first sergeant was a staff sergeant. And he had some combat experience. There were a couple of infantrymen that had come up through the replacement stream. That's the reason we were able to get them. But I would suppose that they were not a half a dozen Soldiers with World War II experience. The oldest Soldier in the unit was 26 years old. I was just 23.

[00:13:43.38] Most of the Soldiers were on their first enlistment. They were 19 years old. So like I say, that we, the United States of America, that the United States Army had to depend on our group, good individuals, but our group for a special unit is an indication of the poor state of readiness. And I've always thought of that, that that's unacceptable that our Army should ever get in that situation. It should have been easy to get the experienced people that they needed for that organization.

[00:14:18.95] Yes, sir. Talk about then-- how long were you with that company?

[00:14:22.91] I was with that company until I was evacuated for wounds in November of 1950. So I was there about five months.

[00:14:31.83] And evacuated back to the States, or-- ?

[00:14:33.32] Back to the States. I came to Fort Benning, the Martin Army Hospital. Not the one that we have now but the predecessor of it. I was in that hospital for 11 months at-- yeah.

[00:14:44.99] Talk about what led to you being assigned to Vietnam, how that came about.

[00:14:49.53] All right. Well, my-- the-- I guess we normally talk about the Vietnam War starting with significant Army, US Army involvement in 1965. I was in the 10th Special Forces Group from 1963 to '65. I heard about it. I came back from there. And I was in the OPO, Office of Personnel Operations, for 18 months then to the-- no, I was there 11 months. And then I went to Des Ops Special Operations and then to the War College.

[00:15:23.57] I asked for an assignment to Vietnam, which I got right after I graduated from the War College. So I was on my way to Vietnam in July of 1967. The war had been going better during the few months prior to my movement overseas. And several of us who were in that group thought that the war real combat experience would be over by the time we got there. But of course, Tet came along in 1968, January-February.

[00:15:53.81] So there were still a lot of action out that-- I went to the 1st Brigade, 101st, which was a separate brigade. The division minus was still at Fort Campbell. I immediately or two weeks later was assigned to command the 2nd of the 502nd Battalion. Something very significant, when I came out of the War College, I came to Fort Benning with about 50 other primarily lieutenant colonels.

[00:16:19.78] I think we had one or two colonels from the War College. Almost all of us were in a pre-command course, and this was going to set us up for our assignments. All of us expected to get battalions or maybe some of them expected to get brigades. The training was programmed for major armor movement, attacks, defenses in Europe. Totally inappropriate for what we were going to do.

[00:16:49.52] All of us were beginning to complain about it the first or second day. I said, I happen to know and be a personal friend of the commanding general. Why don't I go talk to him? So I went to see Major General Sidney Berry who was the commanding general. And I said, sir, this is good training, but it's not good for us. We need to be talking to rifle company commanders, artillery FOs, sergeants who are running platoons (platoon sergeants), squad leaders.

[00:17:17.51] We need to be talking to battalion commanders because that's what we're going to do. We don't have any experience doing that. He said, what do you want? I said, we just want to have those people tell us what we need to do. He called in his director of training, personal friend. Bill, listen to Colonel Puckett. Then we had another officer with him, give them what

they want. We got the best training course I've ever seen because we could say, we want to talk to some rifle company commander.

[00:17:44.36] They'd get some captain just back from Vietnam, and he was a little shaky there talking to us. We'd say, look, we don't know anything. You're the experienced Soldier. Tell us what you-- how do you do an air assault? What did you plan on? How did you prep the landing zone? What happens right after you land? We got them to tell us what we needed to know. Some of them were, we did not-- we're not always in the same group.

[00:18:12.41] If one of them wanted to go listen to so-and-so or talk to so-and-so and somebody else wanted to talk, we got it. General Berry and Bill Lobo, Colonel Lobo, could not have done a better job. But that's what we needed to hear because we had no experience. I arrived in Vietnam in July 1967. It reminded me of the jungle experience that I'd had in Colombia, South America

[00:18:43.10] when I went down there to establish the Escuela de Lanceros. It was hot, humid; they were speaking a language that I didn't understand. When I went to Columbia, South America, I didn't go to the language school. I knew nothing about what was going on. It was just a lot of milling around. We were well taken care of. We were herded into this place and that place and briefed. But it reminded me much of that situation.

[00:19:10.28] I had been told that I was going to the 1st Brigade. I knew the brigade commander. He had been my boss when I was in Special Forces. So I expected to go there. But it was three days before we passed through the processing center there at Tan Son Nhut. But everything went smoothly. And I really was glad, and I had a good friend of mine, my best friend.

[00:19:37.08] He was in the same situation. He'd been with me at the War College, classmate of mine at West Point. And we had three days of getting acclimated, meaning just getting our jet lag and everything, which I thought was good. We didn't do anything, but it was a good three days. Before I took battalion command, I went to the 1st Brigade, and I had two weeks. The battalions-- the brigade was in the field. And had been there for weeks.

[00:20:06.68] And I asked the brigade commander if I could go out and spend a couple of days and nights with my battalion, with the companies in the-- . He looked at me in his inimitable way, and said, yeah, but don't get yourself killed. I said, sir, that's my number one priority. So I had a great orientation. I spent at least one day, sometimes as much as three days and a couple of nights, with each of the companies except one company where I spent a day with it and didn't get the night-time;

[00:20:41.08] what they were doing on combat operations. So I got to see, meet-- and that's all it was-- meet the company commander, all of the platoon leaders, all of first sergeants, all of platoon sergeants, and a lot of the troopers who just-- they didn't know who I was. But they were told, that's Colonel Puckett. He's going to be in command of this battalion in a couple of weeks.

[00:21:01.20] So I had a great grounding-- just a couple of days, ten days total-- with the battalion before I took over. But I thought it was great that I had that opportunity, as little as it was. Then they came back in for a stand down of about three or four days. And then we started

our togetherness, so to speak, our command, after the change of command and back into the bush for another six or eight weeks.

[00:21:36.85] The 1st Brigade moved around a lot while I was there. It had been doing a lot. And it was after I left also. We were in the first, second, and third corps that we went to. When I joined it, it was in the second corps area. Our battalion, the brigade's mission was search and destroy. You know what that means: Insert you somewhere and go through the jungle, patrolling, and kill the bad guys. Find them and kill them. Capture them if you can.

[00:22:08.59] But that's what we did. I was very fortunate. As I stated, I had no experience. They knew I had no experience. I'm sure they knew what my background was, nothing for that job. But I had good people. I had got the company commanders and the staff together. And I said, I see my job as primarily seeing to it that you, the company commander, never have to look over your shoulder for support. That's my job.

[00:22:40.75] I will always see that you get all the gunships, all the medevac, all the artillery, all the flares, everything that you need. That's my job. You don't have to worry. You focus on what you're doing. They had seen me in the field, again, just tagging along. But I had already established some contact with them. And that was the best thing to prepare me for that situation that it could happen. And so that's what-- . The air insertion was typical.

[00:23:13.90] I really relied on the S3. I said, you've been doing this for eight, ten, twelve months. I'm new. You tell me what I have to order, what I have to say. I will take responsibility for it. But you have to tell me. You're the expert. I'm brand new. So right away I let-- and the artillery FO (fire direction officer), I said, look, you know how to do this, I don't. I've never received any training in this. You tell me what I'm supposed to do, I will do it. I take full responsibility, but you have to tell me what to do. Everything went like clockwork.

[00:23:56.72] And for the audience that might not be familiar, describe a little bit the duties of the fire direction officer.

[00:24:01.09] Okay. He and I and the S3 and a radio operator rode in my CC (command and control) chopper. The fire direction officer had planned and then he orchestrated all the fire support. It started with fighter bombers bombing the landing zones that had been selected by my predecessor (in the future, the battalion commander and S3 selected them), bombing those too around the perimeter to hit any probable or possible VC or NVA defensive positions

[00:24:41.95] on the LZ to set off (we would hope) all the land mines that might have been put on the LZ. That was done by Daisy Cutters. These were 500-pound high explosive bombs that had an extension on the nose, which caused the bomb to explode above the ground and spray the pieces of steel throughout the area. And we would hope (and it was fairly effective, but not 100% effective) of setting off all the landmines.

[00:25:12.88] And the booby traps-- .

[00:25:14.05] And then we had the-- the fighter bombers came in. Then the gunships came-- no, the-- yeah, the gunships came in. They were choppers with machine guns and rockets firing right around the perimeter in the same places that 500-pounders had been dropped around the perimeter of the LZ. Then the automatic weapons, the gunships came in and they were flying immediately before-- no, excuse me,

[00:25:42.43] I left out the most important-- one most important-- high explosive. HE artillery came in. Then the helicopters with the rockets. And then the gunships. And the troopships (the slicks, as we call them because they were unarmed except by the door gunners on the aircraft) came in within seconds after the automatic weapons from the gunships had been firing. And all of that was orchestrated by the fire direction officer, the captain, artillery.

[00:26:14.65] I'm responsible. He did the work. And I saw to it that he got the credit for a perfect job. He was like an orchestra leader, had all of these individual players out there which are just a cacophony of sound until the orchestra-- the director gets up and directs the music. He did a great job.

[00:26:41.30] This happened very-- this happened in August, so I'd been in command a month or less. But this was the most-- this was the start of another operation. I put in the three rifle companies. The battalion had three rifle companies, a headquarters company. Each of the rifle companies had their own area of operation. We, the battalion command and the regimental-- or the brigade command and everybody, had seen to it that the companies from my battalion and the other two battalions were inserted more or less at the same time.

[00:27:19.40] Everything went smoothly, except on one of my three landing zones, Bravo company, the 2nd of the 502nd. I was checking with each one of the company commanders, the same thing that all the battalion, how things going? We're flying right over 'em. We can see a lot. And Captain Odom, great young man, who was in his 18th month of his time in Vietnam-- he had volunteered for six months extension to get command.

[00:27:51.56] He said, sir, we're on a hot LZ. And hot LZ in this case meant hot from two things. He was being fired on by the enemy. All of that preparation had not knocked out all the enemy. So they were still there. And the LZ was on fire. It was burning because of all the high explosive and the gunships and the rockets and everything that had been fired had set it on fire. And he said, one of my platoon leaders-- he called him by name and I knew who he was, I'd met him--

[00:28:22.56] has been seriously wounded. I said, I'm coming in. You can use my aircraft to haul out that lieutenant. So I came in and Ron Odom, the company commander, comes running across the open area up to me to report. And he repeated what he had told me. But he added one thing. He said, sir, the LZ is mined. So that didn't make things any better. That made it worse. We got the lieutenant evacuated.

[00:28:52.61] He was a fine young man. He unfortunately died a couple of days later, three days later. But anyway, Ron briefed me on the situation. And I was walking around talking to the troopers. And really all I was doing was giving them, attaboy, attaboy. That-- you know, you've

got a company commander doing the job. He briefed me on what it was that he was doing. I said, I'm gonna stay with you tonight. You know more about running this company than I do.

[00:29:21.59] I am not here to tell you what to do. You run the company. I'm just here to see to it that you get all the support that you need. So Ron later, many years later, made a written statement about what an impact that had on him because he said, here was the battalion commander down here, not taking over. He was going to do his job: see that I got the support. He was telling me to do my job: to run this company.

[00:29:47.78] Anyway, he gave only one order in the 10 or 12 hours that I was with that company. I said, get yourself in a perimeter defense. We were under fire. I said, we're going to have a tough time here tonight. I'm sure that Ron Odom recognized that better than I did. He was experienced. I'm green. So we got-- put them in a perimeter, the artillery officer, lieutenant I remember. I know what he looks like.

[00:30:19.19] He was adjusting his fires, planning a concentration. Everybody was doing their job. So Ron got the company in a perimeter defense. And I had my radio operator dig us a foxhole about 10 or 15 yards from where Ron was. So I'd be out of his hair but be close by. And I just spent the time walking around and talking to the troopers, just saying, you're doing great. Everything's going to be fine. You can do this job. So that was-- Ron was doing his job. The FO was doing his job. The platoon leader, platoon first serg-- everybody doing their job.

[00:31:04.55] Well, that was my very best day and night. That they did such a-- unfortunately, and I can say it's also my worst day. We had eight killed on that operation that night.

[00:31:18.02] At the LZ?

[00:31:18.74] At the LZ.

[00:31:19.73] The landing zone, right?

[00:31:20.54] And we had a lot of dead enemy all around. It was a good day in that the company had done a tremendous job. I could not be more proud of Ron and his paratroopers than I was that night, that morning. I left the next morning after sun up. So it was both the best and the worst experience. I had another worst experience. And this really is a criticism of me.

[00:31:50.15] About a month or two later, some guerrillas infiltrated my TAC CP and were dropping hand grenades around. And one of them-- two of them exploded 18 inches from my head. Fortunately, they had to have been not fragmentation grenades. It had to be--

[00:32:10.52] Concussion maybe or--

[00:32:11.37] Yeah.

[00:32:12.32] Concussion. The TAC is the tactical-- .

[00:32:14.93] That blew the tent that I-- the pup tent that I was sleeping in to smithereens, but it blew out my eardrums and I had a fragment in my arm, so-- . But I had-- I should have done a better job in seeing to it that we could not be infiltrated. That's my responsibility. But the Soldiers reacted there, that were defending the CP. We had an artillery battery up there with us. They did a good job. So that was my worst day in that I'd let the VC overcome us. They didn't overcome us; outdo us.

[00:32:50.87] They just snuck in on you.

[00:32:51.95] Right. No excuse for that. I had none that I can recall.

[00:33:02.72] Any contact with the ARVN, the Vietnamese army?

[00:33:04.64] I had no contact with them. I had one operation when-- well, it was not even that, where we gave some support, some fire support to an ARVN unit but no face-to-face contact. I had no contact with the Vietnamese people. Even when we had-- the battalion headquarters, of course, was always in a tactical CP. And we were out in the bush. And some of the Soldiers who had some free time would go into the village for a meal.

[00:33:40.10] I only went into a village one time. My feeling was, if I'm going to be killed, it's not gonna be in a bar in some village in Vietnam. I'm going to be killed on this CP or out with those companies. Fortunately, I wasn't killed. ... Yes, sir. ... But I had no contact with them. Particularly, compared to my contact in Korea, which was slow as it could be. Everything in Korea was by mail, which took ten days, two weeks.

[00:34:17.06] So my contact in Vietnam was much quicker, maybe a week. And I had a lot of contact with my family, with my wife. I had three kids. My oldest was 13. My youngest was nine. Had contact with my mother and father. And that contact-- after I'd been there-- after Christmas was through audiotapes, which was great. So I had contact with them about once a week. And that turned out real well. I tried MARS radio telephone one time.

[00:34:59.31] And while MARS did a good job, it was unsatisfactory. Really upset my kids because they didn't know how to-- . They'd say, over, and that confused them. And they were worried about me. So we didn't even try it anymore. We had a-- it was-- we were so pleased with the contact because it was so much better than Korea. I think that's very important, too, that they have that contact.

[00:35:23.40] The MARS was a radio offered to troops to talk back home, but there were certain procedures in place that you had to follow. And that was difficult for the family, right? Talk about that a little bit.

[00:35:33.01] It was difficult for some of us Soldiers, too, at least for me. But it had to do going through a civilian telephone and radio station. But it started with the military. We would just get a possible contact time in which we could-- it might be on the night of such and such a day from so-and-so. It might be a spread of four to eight hours that we could be called on, so you could be waked up if you had the opportunity to get some sleep.

[00:36:03.60] You would talk and-- on a telephone radio, or radio telephone. And when you finished with your sentence or whatever it was, you would say, over. And the MARS operator would change to-- from send to receive so that you could hear what your family was saying at the other end. And it was a complicated thing for them in particular. It didn't work out.

[00:36:30.19] Like I said, it upset my children because they knew that they weren't communicating like they wanted to. But it was the best that could be done, and I appreciated it. It's just we stuck with the audiotapes and the handwritten letters.

[00:36:47.25] Did you get much news from home about how the country was feeling about the war? News about the war from home.

[00:36:53.61] Little or nothing.

[00:36:56.49] So you didn't hear how the country was feeling, or-- ?

[00:36:58.96] Well, I-- somehow or another I got information about that. I knew that there was tremendous resentment and that a relatively small or large group, depending on how you want to look at it, was agitating very strongly against the war. And I remember in particular-- and this was right at the beginning of my tour-- at the change of command ceremony, where I'm taking command. Right after the change of command, we had a memorial service for the-- I guess it was about 10 or 12 of the troopers who had been killed in the previous six or eight months operation.

[00:37:38.16] And I was in command at that time. And we were memorializing those troopers calling them by name and what they were assigned to. And I thought, we've got this battalion, my battalion standing out there. I wonder what those guys are thinking. They hear about all of this mess going on back home. And here we are memorializing 12, or 11, or 10 of their buddies who've given their lives defending the right to do that back home.

[00:38:10.92] And I said, I wonder what they are thinking. How can they continue to do that? And I said, every one of him-- of those-- them are here based on orders from the commander in chief, the president. Nobody paid Boeing or American Airlines to fly them over here. The federal government ordered them to go and provided the transportation. They're doing what they were trained to do.

[00:38:38.52] I said, I wonder what's going through their mind. That really bothered me. Still bothers me when I think about it. But I didn't get a lot. Every now and the I'd talk to a Soldier, how do you feel about it? And the troopers would generally come back with some expletive that'd express their feelings. But it was, sir, I've got my job. I'm gonna do it. When it's over, I'm going home. Now as long as I'm here, do the best I can. That's it.

[00:39:06.31] It was no big deal. I am here. I am a Soldier. I know what my job is. I'm gonna do it. That's it. You can't be prouder of guys than that.

[00:39:23.79] Well, I flew. I went through Saigon. The only time I was in-- or, Tan Son Nhut I guess it was. I had never been there. Didn't go into the village. Didn't want to. Had 24 hours, I guess. Got on an airplane, 707. Quick, we called it. Flew us in. I got to Atlanta.

[00:39:42.60] I was standby to fly from Atlanta to Columbus. But it was just a feeling it's over for me at this time. I'll be using my experience or whatever to train new people, but I'm out of it. I'm going home. And it was a letdown in a lot of ways. I no longer have that responsibility which was a heavy responsibility. But it was a good responsibility. I won't say I enjoyed what I did.

[00:40:16.89] I will say I am glad, and I appreciated it. It was an opportunity to serve. And I appreciated what our Soldiers were doing. So that's the way I felt. When I got home, my wife and two daughters were there. And like I say, my oldest was 13. I brought them presents. I brought my daughter, who was 13, a bottle of perfume. And that really pleased her because now she's a teenager. And my daddy recognizes that I'm grown up. Of course, my wife told me what to do.

[00:40:56.10] My son, nine years old, was at camp. And he had been given a special permission to come to the camp by a family friend who ran the camp because he was younger than what the camp took. But it was the best thing that could have happened to my boy, nine years old, to be with those 10, 12, 14-year-old boys and away from all those females at home.

[00:41:20.59] And I remember this. I will never forget it. He was brought home by a family who had another son at that camp. And my boy, Tommy, that I named after my brother, he jumped out of that car. He jumped into my arms and didn't say anything. He just hugged me like I thought he'd never let go. It was great. Great.

[00:41:59.68] That's a great welcome home.

[00:42:01.24] Right.

[00:42:01.69] Yes, sir. You went on and stayed in the Army after you came home.

[00:42:07.39] Right.

[00:42:07.75] A lot of veterans got out, and they had some trouble readjusting. But you stayed in the Army. ... Right. ... So your adjustment coming back from Vietnam-- if you could describe that or if it was pretty-- a pretty easy transition for you.

[00:42:18.79] Well, I--

[00:42:19.33]

[00:42:20.41] Of course my family and my family friends that I saw were appreciative and expressed it. From Columbus, there was little or no anti-war sentiment that I saw. Fort Benning is here.

[00:42:35.73] Right.

[00:42:36.20] So I don't know what the people felt because I didn't have a lot of contact with them. We, right away, went over to visit my mother and father who were living in Tifton, Georgia, 150 miles away. My father was very ill. He died ten days later. But I got a chance to see him. He got a chance to see me. We think he was only hanging on until Junior got home.

[00:43:04.21] And then I went to West Point which is a total military environment. The cadets were under tremendous pressure when they go into New York City because here's a short haircut young man. And they were under a lot of pressure. But it was a good environment. No-- I experienced no demonstration or anything like that. I was busy with what I was doing. I had my family. They were busy. it was a great family assignment. It couldn't have been better.

[00:43:36.52] My kids were in good schools. My oldest girl made the ski team downtown. And they could go anywhere on the post. Nobody had to worry about anything. They were safe. They could do anything they wanted to. It just-- it was just great. It reminded me, which I-- something I needed no reminding, but something I've always known, even back from Korea: I'm fortunate.

[00:44:11.38] I should have been-- the wounds, while all not that significant. I was wounded three times in Korea, twice in Vietnam. None of them were all that significant. But what-- how they occurred should have killed me. I was fortunate. I had two mortar rounds, or hand grenades land in the foxhole with me. It should have killed me. Had some significant wounds, which still bother me. But not life threatening.

[00:44:45.59] So I was very fortunate through all my situation. I had great assignments. I had great people. We, here in America, don't recognize what great young being-- I never had any females because we didn't have females in the Army. But what I see today, we've got some great women in the Armed Forces today. Great Soldiers doing a great job. And it was just a wonderful experience.

[00:45:10.77] But I recognized how lucky I was. I didn't have anything to do with being born in America. There's chance or God, you can call it anything you want to. What a great blessing it is to be in this country. So I recognized that. I recognize it every day. I think about it. God, I'm thankful to be here. And I'm healthy. I've got good wife. My daughter passed away from cancer when she was 50, one of my daughters.

[00:45:45.15] But good grandchildren, good daughter, good son, great wife. Just I'm fortunate. And I have no regrets. I'm glad I went. I wish I'd done more. But it's just I'm fortunate. That's all I-- lucky is all I can say. And I recognize it.

[00:46:08.42] Do you think that the Vietnam War had any great meaning for your generation?

[00:46:13.88] Well, my generation, I was-- how old was I? I guess I was 40, 41. That's when I was-- yeah. Anyway, whatever I was. I was middle age. But it had a significant impact on those of us who went. And I think a lot of them are bitter. I have never experienced-- if I'm bitter, I'm the only one who gets hurt.

[00:46:39.98] I feel that the Vietnam generation that I know (and that's the youngsters who I was fortunate to command and serve with, my contemporaries in particular) have this feeling: I went, you didn't. That's it. And that's the way I feel. You didn't go, that's your business. I'm not concerned. I went. I'm glad.

[00:47:05.15] How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today, sir?

[00:47:08.99] I think it's not remembered today except by those who went or those who lost somebody over there. Maybe that's good, maybe that's bad. We don't wallow in our self-pity. That was a terrible time, some terrible things happened. We did our best. We didn't succeed for whatever reason. And I don't think the Vietnam generation, those who went, really dwell on it.

[00:47:38.69] I think most of them feel like, I went, you didn't. Okay.

[00:47:43.69] Do you think there are any lessons for today from Vietnam?

[00:47:47.24] I think there are a lot of lessons. I think nationally, there are lessons in that-- my wife will probably get me for saying this. But don't trust the politicians. Make your own decision. Every person, to include our media, has an agenda. Try to figure out what that agenda is. It may not be the truth. It serves them, but you and I have an agenda.

[00:48:16.01] We think we are telling the unbiased truth, but it's coming from our experience. Get involved. That doesn't mean you go volunteer to go to Vietnam or to Iraq or Afghanistan. That means you read as much about it as you can, about the history of those countries, about the Islam religion, about the Taliban, about al-Qaeda, all of those.

[00:48:44.81] Listen to what our politicians are telling you. And remember they're speaking from an agenda, but you make up your own decision. I think the worst thing that happened in Vietnam is people. And I think they did that in Korea. Korea really is the forgotten war. Nobody was involved in that war except those who went and their families. And I think America, we're fortunate in that we can disassociate from it.

[00:49:11.90] That's the Army's job. The Marines are doing that. I've got my work to do here at home. So I'd say become knowledgeable. And it's hard to do. As hard as I try, it's difficult to know what's going on. I think the-- another thing, and this is particularly true about Vietnam, and it's also true about going into Afghanistan and Iraq. Find out-- don't swallow without thinking what the politicians are saying.

[00:49:45.56] Come to your own conclusion. That's hard to do because they have that agenda. They are trying to sell me on what they believe. And I think it's very difficult to know what-- I thought it was extremely difficult to know what was going on before we went into Iraq, Afghanistan. It was pretty clear what we were-- why we were going. That was the president's war, President Bush's war. He wanted to be a wartime president, that wanted to be his legacy.

[00:50:18.65] I thought it was a major mistake going there. So did a lot of people who were knowledgeable, who were involved. I've read books, and there are quotes by name of officers

who said, Iraq? Why are we going there? So I think the American public-- and that includes us old guys who are still around-- need to get more involved in making our voices heard. And I'm only one voice, and that's all I can do.

[00:50:51.45] And I feel very strongly about this. So that's the public. The Army has to be prepared today to go to war today, not we've got time to get prepared. And we weren't prepared for Afghanistan and Iraq. We were totally unprepared for Korea. Like I say, you don't have a job. You're an infantry lieutenant? You don't have a job. But we fought one. And I'm rambling here. But I feel very strongly about that. Just because we have a time of peace,

[00:51:25.10] whenever that comes, that's the time to get combat ready because you never know when you're going to be called upon. That's a rambling statement.

[00:51:34.79] No, sir. It's very pertinent.

[00:51:35.42] Find out what's happening. Don't take wholeheartedly without a grain of salt what you're being told by the media and the politicians. Find out for yourself. And the Army, Marines, stay prepared. You're going to fight another war.

[00:51:51.86] It's just around the corner.

[00:51:52.97] It's just-- in fact, I don't believe it in my rest of my lifetime, another ten years or so, that there's going to be any total peace. I think we're going to get involved. We've got politicians talking about getting into Syria, getting involved. Well, we're not going to have troops on the ground. Baloney. We're going to get involved in Africa. We're not gonna have any troops on the ground. We're just going to have advisers there. Baloney. I don't believe that.

[00:52:24.77] And we need to be prepared. And the American public needs to make Congress own up to what they are thinking. They need to brief us. They need to convince the American public this is the right thing to do. And it's right because of these reasons. And I don't think they do that. They brief us on the reasons that will help them politically. I'm very critical of our leadership.

[00:52:58.09] I think I heard about it the first time when Joe Galloway wrote me and said, I want you to be a part of it. I think it's a good idea. And I guess, better late than never. I thank the Congress, or whoever is doing what they can to make amends for the disrespect that our Soldiers got-- and when I say Soldiers, I mean everybody who was involved-- that they received after coming home from Vietnam.

[00:53:26.29] I think they're trying to educate the public. And that should be the focus. You don't need to convince me of anything. I've made up my mind. But it would be great if my grandchildren-- Vietnam, where is that? If my grandchildren and my children knew something about Vietnam and what went on and the harm that it did our country-- and that this is what could happen again.

[00:53:56.57] We need to be involved in what's going on politically in our country. And our kids need to be told that. They need to know about Vietnam and what it did. And I'm not talking about just the people who were killed. I'm talking about what it did to this country. I think it's the worst thing that has happened to our country since the Civil War.

[00:54:18.98] Sir, it's been my honor to talk to you today.

[00:54:21.73] My honor, my privilege. Thank you. I hope it's been helpful.