

Shinseki, Eric US Army

[00:00:16.67] ERIC SHINSEKI: Born on the 28th of November, 1942. Born in a lovely place called Lihue, Kauai, Hawaii. 23 years, I recall-- 23 when I went to Vietnam the first time.

[00:00:35.28] JOE GALLOWAY: And Lihue was your hometown?

[00:00:37.96] ERIC SHINSEKI: It was. Hometown. I was actually born about 10 miles away, but spent most of my childhood in Lihue. ERIC SHINSEKI: As Hawaii was getting ready to enter the Union as the 50th state, the good people in the town of Flemington, New Jersey wanted to know what a Hawaiian looked like, and I was invited to spend the second semester of my junior year in Flemington. So I went there as a junior, and then came back and graduated out of Kauai High School.

[00:01:20.68] While I was visiting Flemington, I stayed with families who were doing with their children what you normally do, and that is you go visit schools. So I had a chance to visit a number of great universities and one of those places was the Military Academy at West Point. Didn't know much about it then, but I was interested in what I saw. I wasn't quite sure about the hook, as you describe it. I think that came much later. But I thought it was a good place for me to see if I could make the grade.

[00:01:57.85] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have family in the Army? World War II?

[00:02:02.26] ERIC SHINSEKI: Yeah, I had uncles who served in World War II. They were part of what, in the Japanese-American community, are the legendary units of the 100th Infantry Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and along with that, the Military Intelligence Service. My uncles served in the 100th and the 442. So not career Soldiers, but certainly combat tested, combat experienced men who came back, then were part of my landscape as I grew up.

[00:02:42.69] ERIC SHINSEKI: I was commissioned in June of 1965 and seven months later, was in Vietnam with the 25th Infantry Division. I was a forward observer in a rifle company. Company A, 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry. A great battalion. The Golden Dragons. If you recall, Joe, in April of 1965, very few Americans-- maybe 16,000-- in Vietnam. And then over the summer of 1965, as I was graduating-- my class was graduating-- and as we were going through the preparatory steps of airborne and Ranger training, a lot of change was underway in the Army and the decisions were made to send large divisions into Vietnam.

[00:03:41.53] And so things changed. And for those of us who were headed to stateside units we were not sent to the Officer Basic Course. And it was just felt that we would in those stateside units within the first two years get what we would have received in technical training out of the basic course. So I was not on a slate to go to the basic course, but then as we finished up in December of 1965 at Fort Benning, I moved to Hawaii to join the 25th.

[00:04:20.05] The 25th had been one of those divisions secretly alerted. So all the great personnel plans of the Army and the operational requirements didn't quite line up. And as a

lieutenant without basic officer course I joined the 25th and we deployed. And so Ranger School was the last leadership course I took and probably the best leadership course I took in 38 years.

[00:04:48.28] JOE GALLOWAY: You deployed by ship on that first tour.

[00:04:50.74] ERIC SHINSEKI: I did.

[00:04:51.44] JOE GALLOWAY: And you had some unusual training from an NCO aboard that ship. Tell me about that.

[00:04:59.41] ERIC SHINSEKI: A great young sergeant E-5 named Ernie Kincaid. We had met just weeks before deployment. He was the recon non-commissioned officer in charge of that element that I had as a forward observer. And he had figured out that I didn't get to the Basic Course and so one day he popped up to where they had us billeted, invited me from the group of lieutenants I was bunking with out in the hallway, and had a very frank discussion.

[00:05:36.94] And said, well, sir, I understand you haven't been to the basic course and right now you're the biggest liability our unit has. And I suggest that we do something about it. And I said, well, Sergeant Kincaid, sounds like a great idea. What do you have in mind? Well sir, I've already been to the galley where we mess and worked it out with the cooks. Every day after breakfast until they start setting up for lunch, every day after lunch until dinner, every evening after dinner and to as late as we want to go, we can have the mess hall for training purposes. And I said, sounds like a great idea. And we reported three times a day to the mess hall.

[00:06:24.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Just you and him?

[00:06:25.39] ERIC SHINSEKI: Just he and I. And he set up a puff board exercise, if you will. Laid out a range with grid strings used as grid marks and put me through my paces on all the calls of fire that I would need for combat. And we drilled, and we drilled, and we drilled for 12 days consecutively. Probably the best graduation ceremony I participated in was the night before we docked and Ernie Kincaid said, OK sir, you're ready for combat. And I've remembered that for many years.

[00:07:12.32] Two things out of this set of experiences. The basic course would have taught me the rudiments of leadership and also the technical skills I would need as a young artillery officer. Well, I did get those elements. I got it out of Ranger School-- the best leadership training program I'd ever been to-- and the technical training from Ernie Kincaid. And so between Ranger training and Sergeant Ernie Kincaid I had my basic course and it made all the difference.

[00:07:48.46] JOE GALLOWAY: Did that experience teach you a few things about good NCOs?

[00:07:54.68] ERIC SHINSEKI: Oh, absolutely. Ernie Kincaid and I remain friends today. But he gave me this clear understanding. It added grist to the sort of oft-heard phrase about NCOs being the backbone of the Army, and you say it so easily it rolls off your tongue, but here's an example of why that statement is made. Ernie Kincaid had trained many lieutenants and his job was to get this one ready to go to war, and he did. And it's made all the difference. And for my

38 years in the military, NCOs have been pretty special, pretty important, and I've never forgotten those lessons.

[00:08:48.40] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of what was happening in Vietnam as you were deploying?

[00:08:54.39] ERIC SHINSEKI: Yeah. Well, that first tour, a clear difference when we deployed in January '66 for the first tour and then when I came back for the second tour in 1969. The first tour was still somewhat a popular experience. There was a lot of going over there to do our part, to stop the spread of communism. So there was sort of that sense of the brotherhood of an important mission. Very positive. And so it was getting over there, doing well, finishing up, and coming home. A lot tougher situation there than I think most expected.

[00:09:52.74] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions on arriving in Vietnam? You came in on a boat.

[00:09:57.69] ERIC SHINSEKI: I came in on a boat. Large bay, Cam Ranh Bay. Beautiful. I saw ships anchored in the bay there, and some reason I had this image of something different. Sort of the World War II films of gray boats pulling up next to large docks and amphibious vehicles going across the land, and it wasn't quite that. We pulled up next to the dock, we unloaded, and then we mounted on a caravan and moved. So the first introduction to combat wasn't what I thought combat might be. It was sort of an admin move.

[00:10:48.66] But I remember our route was secured by a Korean unit-- later realized that they were the Korean Tiger Division. Just a reputation for tough, good soldiers. And as we drove in, I could see on the visible skyline soldiers standing at parade rest with weapons on their hips looking out.

[00:11:19.86] Not too far from the roadway, soldiers laying there with machine gun emplacements. The gunner on the weapon, the ammo bearer with a belt of ammunition, and just everything pristine and staged. It was comforting. I have since learned a little bit more about readiness, but it was that impression of being secured. You're out being secured. You're safe moving through that sector.

[00:11:54.03] JOE GALLOWAY: With that division you probably were safe.

[00:11:56.89] ERIC SHINSEKI: We were. Nothing happened on that march in. It was quite comforting.

[00:12:04.74] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your initial duties? You were an artillery forward observer.

[00:12:09.33] ERIC SHINSEKI: Forward observer.

[00:12:11.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Assigned to an infantry unit?

[00:12:13.26] ERIC SHINSEKI: Assigned to an infantry company. And so our responsibilities were, first of all, to establish rapport with that infantry company. Captain Bobbie Chavis was my company commander and I had to ensure he developed confidence in his artillery forward observer to do what is required. And for some company commanders that's a reach. Does this guy, with all the artillery he can call in, know what he's doing? So we had to work on that relationship, and it worked just fine.

[00:13:00.66] ERIC SHINSEKI: In base camp there is a bit of a routine. You get up after sunup and then you go through the daily activities of getting cleaned up, squaring your area away, accounting for your equipment, having that opportunity to go get something to eat in a mess tent that was set up there in the open on field stoves, stacked up on stacked up C-ration boxes. You went through with your mess kit filled up and then went to have your meal. And then you cleaned up afterwards and went through those gallons of water, washing your stuff and putting it away, and squaring yourself away for the next day.

[00:13:55.27] And then you went about your daily activities. Lots of that coordination with your infantry company commander. But also in base camp my artillery unit was there and I'd get back, check in with them, make sure that all the latest information from them we captured, swapped out gear, and got ready to go for the next operation. So it was really recovering from the last trip to the field and getting ready for the next one.

[00:14:23.62] JOE GALLOWAY: In the field, there was a total difference?

[00:14:27.76] ERIC SHINSEKI: Oh, all absolutely different. You got up before first light. Everyone on the perimeter, 100% alert, and stood by for instructions whether or not we were going to do a recon by fire, or a mad minute. And then, if not, you stood down and then you could go about the business of cleaning up, squaring your gear away, and getting ready for that day's operations, which had been briefed the night before, but the next morning there are always adjustments to it.

[00:15:03.81] Yeah, just more disciplined in the field. Even throughout the night, having security on that perimeter, and a certain percentage of folks getting downtime and then rotating on and rotating off. A whole set of priorities are driven by a requirement for security and a requirement to get people rested. And there's a balance in both of those.

[00:15:37.41] ERIC SHINSEKI: You know, I didn't have all that much contact on that first tour. I would say between base camp and being in the field I may have gotten downtown in Pleiku-- which is where we set up-- maybe once. So not much contact with the Vietnamese people, other than passing through towns and villages. They seemed industrious people. Lots of what I would call the shop keeping activities underway. So a robust sort of economic landscape, but not much personal contact other than passing through towns and villages on our way to operations.

[00:16:39.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions you witnessed? Combat ops in which you participated that first tour?

[00:16:52.16] ERIC SHINSEKI: I would say that first tour a couple probably stand out. One involves a piece of terrain you're familiar with, the Ia Drang Valley there. We were operating in the Ia Drang and we had been looking for a large force that was operating in the area. We could see evidence-- just wide swaths of grass beat down. You knew a large unit had moved through there. Could never quite pin them down.

[00:17:30.11] But the Ia Drang, as you know, is a thoroughfare to get to the Cambodian border as well, and so there was a lot of movement across that border. And I know on one day we were coming along the base of the Chu Pong mountain range, between the river and the mountain range, and we happened across sort of the mouth of a valley that led into the Chu Pong, and we spotted what turned out to be a North Vietnamese soldier, probably a scout or LP/OP-- listening post/ observation post-- guarding the mouth of that.

[00:18:19.79] And we gave chase and all of a sudden the place opened up, began volume of fire coming, and we kept trying to put enough fire out there to get superiority fire-- make the other folks put their heads down. But there was building and we were on the gun target line, which meant that we'd be shooting artillery over our positions. And always, in this part of the country-- at a time that maps weren't all that precise, if you recall-- just wanting to be careful here. So we tried to get artillery in and it was with the ridge lines and the pinnacle shots, they were either over or under, and trying to get the artillery in where you wanted was a little difficult.

[00:19:22.18] Had a chance to go through my book of call signs and frequencies, and picked up on air cover. And had not done it before, but I thought I'd get on the net and give my call sign and see what was available, and I got this wonderful voice of an Air Force pilot I've never met. A very seasoned, calming voice, sort of suggesting, you tell me where you want it. I'm going to put it there. You just let me know where you are.

[00:19:59.70] And as I recall, we were on the gun target line with a valley opening in front of us and that's where we needed it, and he couldn't come in this way. That's the gun target line. So he came in at an angle and tried to get it in there where we needed it and yet be able to exit the area without running into high ground.

[00:20:26.30] So he asked if we would mark our positions. I did. He asked for a direction. I gave him an azimuth. And he said, OK, I got you. Coming in. And I rolled over on my back and looked over my toes, and I could pick him out finally coming in. And he got bigger and bigger. He's coming in at an angle. And then I saw him release this thing. I went, oh my God, he released the bomb, you know?

[00:20:56.99] And he flew in over our position, banked hard, and I watched this spot become a bigger spot, become a big bomb, and it rolled in right over the top of us, and exactly where we needed it. Broke everything up. Everything went quiet. A deafening roar, but he was not much above treetop level as he came in. He got in that low to get the right glide path on this thing.

[00:21:30.23] And then he pulled off and he said, I got more here. I said, no, I think that was quite enough. Thank you. And then his sign-off was, I'll be here. And so you had this sense that there was somebody available, watching over you. Comforting for a young lieutenant here.

[00:21:51.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you move into that valley and clean up on them?

[00:21:54.86] ERIC SHINSEKI: You know, we didn't get to. We quieted everything down and then we got-- this would have been late afternoon now-- we got instructions to move out of there. They were bringing-- I didn't know then-- but they brought in an Arc Light and went down that valley, so they needed us well clear.

[00:22:15.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Well clear.

[00:22:16.47] ERIC SHINSEKI: And so we started moving and we were out of the area, but the ground shook that night.

[00:22:24.59] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, you were wounded on that first tour.

[00:22:28.67] ERIC SHINSEKI: I was. I was in a helicopter that went in and--

[00:22:34.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Shot down or--

[00:22:35.72] ERIC SHINSEKI: No.

[00:22:36.20] JOE GALLOWAY: --not sure?

[00:22:37.28] ERIC SHINSEKI: I can't really say that. I know that we were mounted, going in on an operation late in the day. It was supposed to be my-- I was coming out of a position as a forward observer and was instructed to report back to my battery that day, and this thing just lit up out of nowhere. And I went to check with the infantry company and offered to go on this last mission, which they thought it was a good idea, having been a seasoned FO at that point.

[00:23:13.26] So I hopped on an available bird. We lifted-- wasn't very far away but it was a hot, hot fight underway, and we never got there. The bird tailed off and-- this would have been midafternoon. I probably came to the next morning, between 4:00 and 6:00, so I'd been out for a while. And I was pretty badly beaten up. Broke broken jaw, fracture of the left cheek, orbital floor was fractured, left eye just dropped out of the socket. So--

[00:23:57.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Woo.

[00:23:57.71] ERIC SHINSEKI: Yeah, so a little bit of follow up surgery required, but all-- you know Joe, here I am.

[00:24:07.34] JOE GALLOWAY: There you are. Did you go back and finish out the tour or--

[00:24:10.52] ERIC SHINSEKI: No, it was about eight months of hospitalization. And so I was medevacked back to Hawaii-- Tripler Army Medical Center. Wonderful people there. And then eventually reassigned there in Hawaii. I had not been to the basic course for the field artillery. I knew more about infantry ops and armor operations because I had been around those units as a forward observer. So it became time for me to make a decision about where my usefulness to the

Army was going to be. And so I branch transferred out of field artillery and into the armor branch, and from there was sent to the armor advanced course.

[00:25:11.42] ERIC SHINSEKI: This would have been 1969. And so by this time, if we go back and check, there was a good bit of divisiveness in this country politically about the war.

[00:25:26.10] JOE GALLOWAY: Demonstrations, et cetera.

[00:25:27.86] ERIC SHINSEKI: Demonstrations, students taking over university campuses, and a lot of focusing on people in uniform as part of the problem. There were folks who I know-- I wasn't teaching on college campuses at that time, but there were folks who had been in ROTC programs, found it tough on campus.

[00:26:00.58] It's in this environment that I'm headed back, a second tour in '69. We also had some tough days in this country socially between our majority of our population and some of the ethnic minorities, especially African-Americans, who weren't happy with the situation as it was. You can remember the assassinations of Martin Luther King and even the assassination of then Senator Kennedy-- Attorney General Kennedy. Assassination of a president in 1963.

[00:26:47.04] And so there were other issues. Not just the politics about the war in Vietnam, but there were other social issues that cropped up. So that second tour demanded a lot more out of young leaders on how to ensure--

[00:27:05.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Those issues went with you back to--

[00:27:09.08] ERIC SHINSEKI: They showed up in units because we were then a draft Army. You always had an influx of new, young soldiers who were great youngsters, I will tell you that. Some tend to compare the draft with the all-volunteer force now. There are differences, but the youngsters in both formations were the same-- great, young Americans. They were there and they were there to do their jobs.

[00:27:44.31] But these social issues that came with them had to be dealt with. And in good combat units you dealt with them early. And the idea that you can go into the stress of combat and the pressure of that-- the over pressure of combat will make you stronger as a unit, I've not found that to be true. Those little fissures become cracks and the cracks become ruptures under that kind of pressure. And so what we've always been good about in the Army is creating that sense of team and going to work on those fissures. But they were there on the second tour and you had to deal with them.

[00:28:34.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Now you were going back as a young captain.

[00:28:37.32] ERIC SHINSEKI: A young captain.

[00:28:38.70] JOE GALLOWAY: To command a company?

[00:28:40.74] ERIC SHINSEKI: I went back initially in-- I joined the organization in Phu Bai-- a large base defense command-- and I was there for probably seven or eight months. And then something happened in one of the cavalry units north of us, in a place called Dong Ha. And there was a call out for armor officers to come in and take the place of a troop commander. I was tapped, and I reported up there and went immediately into the unit and on operation of Troop A, 3rd Squadron, 5th Cavalry, the Black Knights.

[00:29:29.94] JOE GALLOWAY: How was that outfit?

[00:29:31.89] ERIC SHINSEKI: Great outfit-- good youngsters, very much toughened by the experiences of the A Shau Valley and having fought in this northern corps for some time.

[00:29:53.73] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a very hard area.

[00:29:55.32] ERIC SHINSEKI: That's a tough area.

[00:29:57.87] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you ever experience any combat refusal by the troops?

[00:30:04.05] ERIC SHINSEKI: Yeah, I did.

[00:30:05.82] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you handle that?

[00:30:08.67] ERIC SHINSEKI: Well, I got a number of lessons out of this. First of all, we had received a number of young NCOs. In particular, one was a staff sergeant E-6 squad leader and so he was assigned down to a squad. And late in the afternoon one day, as we were getting ready to put our ambush patrols out for the night-- and you're always in a crunch time.

[00:30:41.70] You want to get them out the wire at last light and give them enough time to get in position to do what they needed to do to set up. So you're fighting time here, but you want to go through the procedures correctly-- pre-patrol instructions and a shakedown to make sure that you're not carrying any loose or noisy items.

[00:31:06.34] A young Soldier presents to the first sergeant, demands to see the troop commander, which is myself. And so when I engage him he says he's not going to go out. And I said, well, you're going to have to give me a reason.

[00:31:30.33] I recognized him because I routinely walked the perimeter and met the youngsters, so I didn't know him well but I recognize him as one of the better Soldiers. So right off the bat there's something going on. And he just let me know in no uncertain terms that his squad leader didn't know what he was doing and he was not going to go out on a mission with somebody that didn't have--

[00:31:59.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Could get him killed.

[00:32:00.28] ERIC SHINSEKI: --didn't have the competence to get everybody out there and back safely. And so, I-- what are you talking about? You know, this back and forth between a

commander and a young Soldier. He was very, very respectful the whole time. But because he was one of the better Soldiers that I recognized, I-- First Sergeant, let's go check this out.

[00:32:22.51] So the first sergeant went down and encountered the young sergeant, and it turns out that the young sergeant was one of our quick promotees. Top graduate in basic course, top graduate in AIT, and therefore promoted very quickly. Now wearing the insignia of an E-6 staff sergeant, but not a squad leader. No experience, no competence there, and I have a young Soldier who's figured it out and refuses to go.

[00:33:05.73] And so no amount of indicating to him this was pretty serious stuff, that I was going to have to take legal action if he wouldn't go do his job. And he was adamant. The other piece of this, Joe, is if I pulled him off line and sent him to the rear, I'd have another line of folks lining up to tell me--

[00:33:36.22] JOE GALLOWAY: To go with him.

[00:33:36.97] ERIC SHINSEKI: --yeah, to tell me that they didn't have confidence in their squad leader either, right? I've always remembered this because some place a decision was made and I'm sure for the right reasons. We were short E-6 non-commissioned officers so we're just going to speed up the promotion. Except we just lost control of that.

[00:34:01.63] In time this young sergeant would have been outstanding, but he wasn't a squad leader, or not ready for combat. Sort of like Shinseki was a few years before. And so we owed it to him to get certified. I also owed it to this young Soldier-- the one individual in the entire Army who had figured out that this thing--

[00:34:31.04] [LAUGHTER]

[00:34:31.33] --this thing broke down-- not to unfairly punish him. And so we took that patrol out that night. I did.

[00:34:46.02] JOE GALLOWAY: You took it yourself?

[00:34:47.25] ERIC SHINSEKI: I took it and--

[00:34:48.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Did the boy go with you?

[00:34:50.13] ERIC SHINSEKI: The young Soldier went and the young staff sergeant went as my assistant patrol leader. It was a training mission for him and we got it done. Nothing happened. It was a quiet night. But I was reminded that again, at that fairly young age, that all of these decisions get visited at the level at which you don't have many options. And you're the least experienced in this whole business of command and leadership. There isn't anybody you can call. You own it and you have to come up with a solution.

[00:35:33.93] Important thing was to keep that good Soldier and to also develop that good, young non-commissioned officer. There's no case study on this. In all my leadership classes that

I took I never had anyone take me through a case like this. And so you just figure it out and you have a great first sergeant who's standing by to advise and assist, but you figure it out. And I'm always--

[00:36:01.92] JOE GALLOWAY: And you go out and show them how.

[00:36:04.72] ERIC SHINSEKI: Yeah, ultimately. That's not necessarily the best outcome, but sometimes that's what it takes.

[00:36:13.22] JOE GALLOWAY: It's amazing. What was the difference in climate between your first and second tours? Not the quality or willingness of the Soldiers, but the climate-- the atmosphere?

[00:36:33.42] ERIC SHINSEKI: Clearly different. Clearly different. The first tour, I mentioned, was sort of popular. The second tour, very much less so. And having to learn to communicate with all of your Soldiers in ways that you just really don't get in leadership classes. I still walk around a room in a meeting, when I walk in, and shake everybody's hand before I sit down. I've been doing this forever, whether I was chief, and now here.

[00:37:16.35] And it's a habit I got into there, on that second tour, because you had all these internal stresses-- these little fissures-- and you had to find them and go to work on them. Not unusual to have a bit of friction between your African-American young Soldiers and others. And if you recall--

[00:37:41.22] JOE GALLOWAY: I didn't see any of that early in the war.

[00:37:44.01] ERIC SHINSEKI: I didn't see it at all on the first tour. Second tour it was clearly there. And if you recall, it didn't happen in my unit or any unit close to me, but you had reports of fraggings.

[00:37:57.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:37:57.91] ERIC SHINSEKI: You know and so-- I didn't have much firsthand experience with it, but you know, it's there in the back of your mind. And so you had to go to work and build trust. I mean this was about building trust between folks that weren't necessarily in a part of the world doing something they wanted to do, but we still had a mission. And then if inside of that you had these social frictions, you had to go to work on it. And so we did.

[00:38:41.17] ERIC SHINSEKI: There were many good days, Joe. A good day was when you got your work done, nobody got hurt. And so there were a lot of those good days. A good day was-- I deployed in January of '66 and I have a daughter who was born on the 22nd of February, '66, and a good day is hearing that she'd arrived and everybody was doing well.

[00:39:12.13] Before I deployed, Patty and I got two matching cassette recorders-- you know, little handheld jobs. They were-- by today's standards-- they were clumsy, but they were small enough I could carry with me. I thought I would write or record messages as I went about my

day's activities. I never had the time and so my tape cassette recorder didn't get used very much, but Patty was pretty good about it.

[00:39:47.36] And I recall the first cassette tape I received from her after Lori had been born. Mail call, late in the day, evening darkness setting in when I turn this thing on and you know I hear this introduction by Patty of our new daughter and then I listened to Lori cry, and cry, and cry. 30 minutes worth of crying.

[00:40:21.72] [LAUGHTER]

[00:40:22.81] I couldn't turn the thing off. I had to wait to see if Patty was going to come back on with a message of some kind. Meantime, the guys around me were getting a little tired, right? Hey sir, come on. Come on now.

[00:40:34.24] [LAUGHTER]

[00:40:34.70] JOE GALLOWAY: Come one now, it's enough.

[00:40:36.07] ERIC SHINSEKI: Turn it off. So I'm listening for a message here of course. No message, but--

[00:40:42.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you get letters as well?

[00:40:44.92] ERIC SHINSEKI: I did.

[00:40:45.79] JOE GALLOWAY: From Patty, from your mother?

[00:40:48.67] ERIC SHINSEKI: Rarely from my dad. More from my mom. But just routinely from Patty. Oftentimes letters were shoved in the same envelope.

[00:41:02.77] JOE GALLOWAY: With the tape?

[00:41:04.27] ERIC SHINSEKI: Yeah.

[00:41:04.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:41:05.32] ERIC SHINSEKI: With the tapes in there.

[00:41:12.37] ERIC SHINSEKI: We lost a great first sergeant in the first tour. It was late in the tour. So I was medevaced in September. This would have been probably in the summer time frame. He had come out with a daily run to see the company commander and brought mail, and brought food, and the usual logistical resupply-- picked up stuff, taking sick Soldiers back to the rear with him.

[00:41:44.38] So the helicopter had just lifted off and was just above treetop level, and a low-flying Air Force aircraft-- just streaking along at treetop level-- collision and you know everybody's killed. But a great infantry first sergeant that day left us.

[00:42:12.07] I knew him pretty well. I was the one lieutenant that wasn't in the unit so I was also the one lieutenant who got a lot of his attention, making sure that I lived up to the standards of the infantry. So I got to know him pretty well. Had a lot of respect for him. It was a tough day. I looked around and it had an impact on the entire unit, you know? And it took every bit of our company commander's leadership-- another young company commander. How do you get the unit back up, pay your respects, and then get back on mission?

[00:42:47.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Now you were severely wounded your second tour.

[00:42:52.61] ERIC SHINSEKI: Yeah. First tour, eight months in the hospital. Second tour, about 15 months.

[00:43:00.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Tell me the circumstances of that and how it went in recovery?

[00:43:06.19] ERIC SHINSEKI: Sure you want to hear all about this, Joe? [LAUGHS]

[00:43:08.02] JOE GALLOWAY: I do. I do.

[00:43:11.05] ERIC SHINSEKI: Second tour, I'm commanding a cavalry troop up in Dong Ha-- so I Corps-- and our area of operation went from Dong Ha all the way out to the western border there at Khe Sanh. So a large area of operation. Didn't travel all of it often, but you were missioned into various pieces of terrain.

[00:43:40.66] And on a particular night in April, we had set up for the evening and we were near two camps on an airstrip, both Vietnamese. On the one-- northern end there was a Vietnamese Army compound and on the southern end of the airstrip was a Special Forces camp. So into the evening hours I can hear a lot of automatic weapons fire and so I call up and ask for a spot report. What's going on?

[00:44:21.23] I realized there's some probing going on and I asked, do I need to reposition because the cavalry troop is spread hither and yon-- three platoon locations. No, no requirement to do that. More probing, call again. And they're checking with the camps and they're saying, no, you know, everything's under control. So I remember about three distinct probes where lots of fire.

[00:44:54.47] And then a little after midnight, after I'd been assured there was no requirement to reposition, all hell breaks loose. I mean flares and tracers are going off, loud explosions, and at that point it is mount up and go. Just run hard, get down there, and save the camp. The Special Forces camp had been penetrated, overrun.

[00:45:19.71] And just running hard to get there and knowing that to do that you get your headlights on so you can see where you're going and-- yeah, big signature, but clearly needed to get there quickly. And as we get close to the camp I can see figures in the wood line and so everybody's alert, and I pick up on one individual wearing I think a red neck scarf, which was what the ARVN soldiers used to wear. So right off the bat, we assume they're friendly, but you're still moving into unknown, uncertain.

[00:46:04.44] We make the run down to the southern end of the airstrip and the SF camp has been penetrated, and we roll up to get in. We can't get any response from the camp and our communications with folks who can talk to the camp no longer gets us an assurance that somebody will come and open the gate. The gates are wooden gates but they're chained shut. So no response.

[00:46:36.67] We pull up. I can see Claymores facing out on the road and if we're going to get to the gates we have to de-mine the area. So a great, young track commander named Charlie Brown dismounts, takes his .45, walks up, and gingerly disarms the Claymores. And then we go rolling. Hit that gate, run one direction. The light tank who's following goes the other way, and we begin to clear the camp up. Lots of shooting in the distance as the attackers give ground and depart.

[00:47:27.92] Tough night. We didn't take any casualties, but there were a lot of casualties in the camp, just policing up, securing. And it's this camp that we're there for a couple of days, and as we are trying to run down the caches of ammunition that might have been left behind for another hit-- which is not unusual for attackers to dump their stuff and come back later-- this is where I wander into a minefield that had been set up. No markings and so you're in it before you know it.

[00:48:18.06] It goes off and you're laying there, and you know you're now in the middle of mines. So great, young Soldiers-- by the textbook, as they show you-- probe with a bayonet probe their way to me. It took about 45 minutes. And then once there-- they had marked their steps on the way in-- and then dead lifted me on-- somebody about my size-- but dead lifted me off the ground, over the shoulder, and backed out, and medevacked.

[00:48:54.90] So I guess the point of telling this story is, again, the great, young Americans that do these difficult missions we ask of them. They're always-- in my experience-- were focused on doing their job, taking care of their leaders. And having been carried out of these situations twice on the back of American Soldiers sets up a relationship of a lifetime, as you know.

[00:49:29.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Now there were those who wanted to cut your leg off-- your ankle, above the ankle-- and there was somebody who told you don't let them do that.

[00:49:41.98] ERIC SHINSEKI: Yeah, so after I'm injured here, I am medevacked to Da Nang. I'm in the medevac hospital there, waiting to go out, and I'm in a large ward of the injured, wounded-- a number of amputees, a lot of gunshot wounds, a lot of other injuries. The senior trauma nurse on this ward was more mature and tough.

[00:50:14.91] JOE GALLOWAY: Army field hospital?

[00:50:17.67] ERIC SHINSEKI: It was an Army surgical hospital. So I had an open wound. I had lost the right forefoot. All of it was still open, and they wrap you in a large ball of gauze. And so one day-- I was only there four or five days. I don't even remember how long. I have a vague-- they have you, you know, a lot of painkillers-- so I have a vague recollection of what she looked like. I don't even remember her name.

[00:50:57.52] But she stopped by one day and said, you know, I've been a trauma nurse for a long time. When you get back to the States, they're going to tell you that they're going to give you a Syme's amputation. That means remove your foot at the ankle, and they're going to ask you to sign-off and do that.

[00:51:31.20] And she said, I've seen a lot of these and there's one thing we've never been able to design in a prosthetic device, and that's something that an ankle does. It moves in every direction and that's what allows you to be upright, and walk over uneven ground, and not trip. I can still see her doing it with her hands, you know? And I said, well, OK, so what do I have to do here? She said, well, do you want to keep your ankle? I said, absolutely.

[00:52:08.34] And she said, here's what you're going to do. When they ask you that, you need to be prepared to answer the question. But between now and when you leave, every time I come by your bunk I expect to see your foot elevated, and I expect to see you working the ankle so it doesn't freeze up.

[00:52:28.94] Now that ball of gauze around your foot is like sandpaper to an open wound, as you're rotating this thing. It's very, very painful. And so whenever I saw her coming or heard her coming, I elevated that thing, and squenched my eyes and rotated, and she nodded as she went by.

[00:52:52.04] And true to her word, I got back to Tripler and the first discussion was about removing the ankle. I declined. Nobody was happy about it. I kept declining, and I think they finally settled on letting me keep it, which they did.

[00:53:14.85] I still remember the name of the surgeon, Colonel Spencer Walton. A wonderful surgeon. And all the rest is history. Joe, I walk upright and I don't need a cane. I don't need crutches. For a period of my life I ran pretty well. Not as much anymore.

[00:53:35.91] But it came down to that nurse knowing enough about medicine to educate the patient and let the patient decide. And for my money, that's always better medicine. And that's a little bit of what we do here, making sure we educate folks.

[00:54:00.20] JOE GALLOWAY: When you went home, both tours, were to hospitals, so you didn't come through the experience of the West Coast and demonstrators, or anything like that?

[00:54:14.24] ERIC SHINSEKI: No, I didn't. Not firsthand knowledge, but I did come in the back end of that when I went to graduate school at Duke University, which had had a fairly active student population. And so coming in the back end of it, you sensed what had gone on.

But those memories were fresh. There were a couple of professors I studied under who said, you know, thank goodness that those times were over because it was very difficult.

[00:54:55.34] But it suggests how much the war had become a divisive topic and--

[00:55:07.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Very much so. How much contact have you had with veterans of your combat tours since then?

[00:55:18.50] ERIC SHINSEKI: Not as much as you would like. I mean, Ernie Kincaid and Les Cotton, two non-commissioned officers from that first tour, but we went over as a unit. And I think there's something different when you go over as a unit.

[00:55:37.43] Second tour I was in command a short period of time, but you join a unit and it takes a while to develop those relationships. And so not as much contact of that second tour. There are a few people I know, but not anything like the relationship with Ernie Kincaid and Les Cotton, with whom I stay in contact today.

[00:56:09.15] JOE GALLOWAY: It's a little bit of an odd question since you stayed on in the Army and rose to four stars, but was it difficult readjusting to life after Vietnam?

[00:56:25.99] ERIC SHINSEKI: Today, Joe, I would say, yes. At the time, probably didn't think of it that way, but I just say that-- there's a great story here about Patty Shinseki standing at my side to those hospitalizations and just making sure I got better. And especially the second one, helping me learn how to walk again, and just restored my confidence. So on a personal level, those were clear.

[00:57:10.31] But I think there were adjustments after Vietnam. The things today that we talk about, some of the mental issues of readjustment, I think all of us had. Any of us who have been through the stress of combat, there is some of that. And most of us eventually worked through it, but it takes time.

[00:57:39.26] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today in our society?

[00:57:47.48] ERIC SHINSEKI: I don't know about our society, Joe. I mean I think there are young people who barely know the Vietnam War. For our generation, I think Vietnam has had tremendous influence on shaping our lives. What we thought was important, how we decided to live it, and what we continue to feel a sense of obligation to do about it. Having this interview, for one, with my old friend. It has shaped my life and I think it's shaped yours as well.

[00:58:32.98] JOE GALLOWAY: Of course it did.

[00:58:36.51] ERIC SHINSEKI: But I can't answer for the broader, general public of what they think of Vietnam. I think-- I'm not sure that everyone understands what led up to it and what impact it had on us as a country. I think we should remember it. For my purposes, the generation that fought in Vietnam wasn't very well treated, and it is absolutely a big part of the reason I'm

doing what I'm doing today. In this position, I get an opportunity to try to help take care of those folks, as well as the ones that I also had a hand in shipping off on operation.

[00:59:33.47] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you take away from Vietnam more that was positive and useful than you invested in blood, sweat, and tears?

[00:59:44.19] ERIC SHINSEKI: I think so, Joe. It's hard to measure how I would describe that, but Vietnam has influenced my life and how I thought about the profession of arms that I remained a part of for 38 years. What was important about leadership, how important non-commissioned officers were to the Army-- their value is immense. I don't know that there's any other Army that has a non-commissioned officer corps like we do, and sometimes I think we under-appreciate them.

[01:00:24.31] But yes, what I thought about leadership, what my approach to how I saw my responsibilities. I always found the big, collective brain in an organization much more powerful than one big brain, and I surrendered that argument a long time ago.

[01:00:51.14] I've never been the one big brain so that wasn't a problem for me, but learning how to get the one, big, collective brain working? That's a different level of engagement of getting everyone to sign on the team and take on the responsibility for making everything work. And it begins to shape how you exercise leadership.

[01:01:15.85] JOE GALLOWAY: Now you, today, are the secretary of the VA and I don't think there's anyone who better could speak about the true cost of war. You take care of all our veterans-- millions of them. Have we ever had a good war?

[01:01:43.60] ERIC SHINSEKI: You know, Joe, I don't know that there is such a thing as a good short war, but I know for sure there isn't a good long one. You know, Vietnam was a long one, and we're currently in a long one.

[01:01:58.15] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What have you carried from these two tours along your path to the present, to your service as secretary of the VA? What's it all mean? If you had a chance for a redo, would you do any of it different?

[01:02:16.01] ERIC SHINSEKI: Well, this job is a bit of a redo for me, Joe. I mean as I indicated, I have the opportunity to care for the folks that I went to war with. All these great, young Soldiers I've shared stories with you about. Except for them, I wouldn't be here speaking with you today. You know, I'd have been more seriously injured or been a failure. They never let either happen to me.

[01:02:49.22] So this is a great privilege for me to have this opportunity to redo that part of my life, taking care of these youngsters which, for my money, we didn't do a very good job years ago. And we're bound and determined this generation of young Soldiers are not going to have the same experience. And we're doing the best we can. More to be done, but we're doing the best we can.

[01:03:22.88] ERIC SHINSEKI: Memorial was dedicated in November of 1982. I was serving here on the Army staff, and I and a group of friends had been looking forward to attending the dedication ceremony. In June of '82, I get a short notice alert that I'm going to go to command in Germany and get moving. So I'm gone.

[01:03:55.44] But after the dedication, I hear from friends who had gone to the ceremony and they described the emotion and how important it was for them to have been there. And they're lecturing me that when you get back, you need to go do this. That there is something about that monument that begins to heal the soul. And you know what I'm talking about. It is one of the very few monuments that has a name of every Soldier who fell in battle.

[01:04:38.58] And so I was gone until the summer of 1985, but the first evening back-- it's the summer now, so just short of three years after the dedication-- late afternoon-- dusk as I recall. By this time all of the excitement about this new memorial is over and I am either there by myself or very few others, and I get to walk. I describe much of this in a speech I gave a couple of years ago, at the Wall a couple of years ago, when I was invited to speak to the veterans of Vietnam.

[01:05:31.77] And you know, there is a connection when you walk up and see the names of people you know, and as I described, you touch and instantly your recall is of them as young people, as you knew them. Here it is, 40 years later. They never get old, they're vibrant as they were, and every time you take your hand off and touch the next name it's a different memory comes in. It's an amazing connection. Very emotional, very moving, and my friends were right. I needed to do that. There was a lot of healing in it. A lot of emotion as well. A lot of memory of good, young Americans who had given everything for our country.

[01:06:23.15] ERIC SHINSEKI: I have heard about it. And this is the Education Foundation?

[01:06:27.32] JOE GALLOWAY: It is.

[01:06:29.83] ERIC SHINSEKI: I think it's an important project. There are lots of monuments and battlefields, and I've visited them throughout my professional career, and find monuments without plaques or where the inscriptions have worn off in time. And you even ask some locals, so what's this monument about, and they give you the shrug and they don't even know. So it's not about just building monuments, although those are important hallmarks to mark events.

[01:07:09.60] I think the education piece is the only way the lessons of Vietnam, and the lessons of the Gulf War, the lessons of current operations get captured and passed on to generations yet unborn, so that they treasure what it is they have as gifts from young men and women who did their duty, didn't ask much. Did their duty and preserved our way of life.

[01:07:45.01] I sometimes tell a story about having the opportunity to speak in Margraten, the Netherlands, at an American cemetery there. I went there the first time in, I guess, Memorial Day in 1998. And I arrived to speak, and I'm greeted by the mayor, and there are thousands of people there, and I'm surprised by it, you know?

[01:08:16.47] Memorial Days, you show up and there's a coterie of people-- thousands of people-- 10,000 people, Joe. And I turn to the mayor and I say, Mr. Mayor, all these people turn up when an American general comes to speak in Margraten? And he says, oh no, it's not about you, General.

[01:08:39.48] So there are 8,000 plus Americans buried here. Every one of them has been adopted by a Margraten family, and throughout the year they come on their own to care for the grave, to put flowers. But on Memorial Day, they all come and they all wear their Sunday finest, and they're here to honor their American, you know?

[01:09:02.61] And then he says, come. So he takes me through the cemetery as we're going to the speaker's rostrum to make my address, and I see three generations of Margraten families. There's grandparents, who were probably young adults in World War II, there are their children-- adult children-- and their third generation, and the third generation, the youngest generation, are there cleaning the headstones, and clipping grass, and laying flowers. And the adult children are supervising, and the grandparents are standing back, you know? And so you see three generations here.

[01:09:45.09] The education goes on. And that's how this lesson of sacrifice by Americans in this part of the world is preserved. It's told over and over again. And people are reminded that their way of life is a direct product of this American, with whom they have no familial tie. This American they never met. They know nothing about this American except the name on the headstone-- maybe where that individual was born-- but yet the importance is preserved.

[01:10:24.14] And I said then to the mayor, I said, I wonder if I were able to come back in 10 years, whether you'd be doing the same thing? He said, oh yes, we will be. So by chance, after taking this assignment here a couple of years ago, I had a chance to go back to-- one of the World War II anniversaries-- and spoke in a couple of places-- Luxembourg and Belgium-- but I asked to go back to Margraten, and so I was given the opportunity to go and speak at Margraten.

[01:11:00.04] 12,000 people showed up, Joe. The queen of the Netherlands was there. And it just reinforced for me the importance of education. That's why I am hopeful that this project will have the same effect of making important to generations yet unborn what young Americans did for them many, many years ago.

[01:11:31.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, sir.

[01:11:33.17] ERIC SHINSEKI: OK, Joe. Thank you.