

Stoddert, Thomas US Army

[00:00:13.35] THOMAS STODDERT: I was born in Burlington, Vermont. Actually lived in the Bronx until I was about 11 years old. Then we moved up to a place called Milford, Connecticut near New Haven.

[00:00:24.91] MARC HENDERSON: So what do you consider your hometown, where you grew up?

[00:00:27.34] THOMAS STODDERT: Probably Milford. It was very nice growing up there. So-

[00:00:36.60] MARC HENDERSON: Tell me about your family.

[00:00:38.64] THOMAS STODDERT: Dysfunctional. We struggled financially, which was actually led by the-- after I got out of high school, led to me enlisting in the Army. So-- I was 19 when I went to Vietnam.

[00:00:58.93] MARC HENDERSON: What was your sense of the war before you enlisted in the Army?

[00:01:04.75] THOMAS STODDERT: My feelings were very ambiguous. On one hand, I understood that we were there to help a small country to be self-determining and not being overwhelmed by the Communists. On the other hand, I wasn't sure whether it was worth fighting, because all I heard was bad news, that the Vietnamese government was unreliable, the Vietnamese Army was unreliable. And I've since then found out that much of it wasn't accurate.

[00:01:38.36] MARC HENDERSON: What year did you enlist?

[00:01:40.01] THOMAS STODDERT: 1969. The day Richard Nixon was sworn in.

[00:01:44.21] MARC HENDERSON: So what were your impressions of the draft before you entered the military?

[00:01:51.45] THOMAS STODDERT: I had no real feelings towards it. For a few months after I left high school, I went to work for Sikorsky Aircraft. And a couple of times, the bosses came down and asked me, would I like to get a deferment? And I thought about it, and I didn't feel right about that. So I thanked them and said, no.

[00:02:14.09] I met many good people who were drafted. What bothered me, to some extent, was there was a lot of people who were like National Guard or Reserves, and I knew that somehow, they were able to get strings pulled for them to get into these units. Later I found out they were like 115, 120% strength. The units I went to in Germany and Vietnam were like 70% strength. So look at the numbers.

[00:02:50.75] THOMAS STODDERT: Fort Benning, Georgia. They had great big billboards everywhere saying, more sweat in training, less blood in combat. And I understood that and I appreciated it. But it was rough for me physically. In one instance, there was a man from Georgia. He just seemed to be just very sort of hickish, redneckish or something. But you know, he never caused any problems. Just a regular guy.

[00:03:23.90] We were out doing calisthenics, the workouts, and we were doing push ups. And they wouldn't let us get up off the ground until everybody was in the correct, front leaning rest position. And this kid just turned around and just lost it. He just couldn't do it anymore. And two drill sergeants ran over and they were just screaming and yelling at him, swearing at him and cursing. And he just was lying on the ground, sobbing.

[00:03:54.20] And the chaplain walked over and tried doing his thing and wasn't getting anywhere. By then, our primary drill sergeant showed up. And he told the other two drill sergeants, get lost, ran them off. Politely told the chaplain to get lost, and then he just got down on the ground right next to him and just talked to him for a little bit. A couple of minutes-- we couldn't hear anything, what he was saying. But we're saying, please hurry it up, this is painful now.

[00:04:23.97] And he stood up and he says, OK, give me 10 push ups. And the kid just started, pschew, pschew, pschew. Knocked out more than 10. And the drill sergeant yelled, I mean, you could hear them all across the field. Scarborough, you lied to me. You told me you couldn't do any more. And then he just-- good job, and walked away. And I thought, the leadership qualities that man must have held.

[00:04:52.27] I look back at it and I'm very grateful for that man. He knew when to exert pressure and he knew when not to. He never bothered me much because when I went in, first interview, he asked me where I was from and I said, Connecticut. And he said, what are you doing down here, there's only Southern boys in here? And I told him I wanted to get away from home, as far as I could. And he goes, how old are you? I said, 18. And he just says, you've never been-- I said, no I've never been south of Washington, DC. And he looked at me and he goes, I like that. And then he screamed at me, you're too young to be in my Army. And he never harassed me.

[00:05:34.52] MARC HENDERSON: Did you receive any additional training before going to Vietnam?

[00:05:40.55] THOMAS STODDERT: Well, we went to infantry training.

[00:05:42.80] MARC HENDERSON: OK, is that what your MOS was?

[00:05:44.48] THOMAS STODDERT: Yes. For about six months I was in Fort Monmouth, New Jersey, which was very nice during the summertime. And I could go home on the weekends. But they had a system rigged up. So unless you had better than two years of college, eventually, you were going to fail out of the school and everybody went to infantry. I didn't understand how they were using the metrics with it, but a friend tried to explain it to me. Now I understand it better.

[00:06:12.79] MARC HENDERSON: Which was that MOS?

[00:06:14.41] THOMAS STODDERT: I was a 93 Echo, which was meteorological observation. But like I said, unless you are really good at studying and everything, eventually they raised the bar so much that they'll end up getting rid of almost a half of the class. I had chosen that for myself because I thought that-- it was science and thought it was interesting. But when I failed out of that school, I got sent down to South Carolina and went to 10 weeks of infantry training. And from there, Vietnam.

[00:06:51.73] THOMAS STODDERT: After I left South Carolina, I went up to Boston, spent some time with my mother. Then I had to get back down to New York to catch a flight to Seattle. But in between, I didn't have a car, I didn't have transportation. So we landed up leaving Boston, hitchhiking down to New Haven where I was able to catch a bus. So we had to hitchhike 200 miles in the middle of a snowstorm. It was about a foot of snow on the ground. And there I caught a bus into New York, and then a flight out to Seattle. And I stayed there and stayed in Fort Lewis for about a week.

[00:07:32.57] And it was interesting, in the fact that many of the guys were selected to go down to the mess hall, and they would have to work all night long, waiting, catering, to the guys who just got back, giving them steak dinners. And if the guy wanted a second or third steak, they would run back and get it for him. And it was really nice. I didn't have to do that. I don't remember doing anything there.

[00:08:11.20] And I remember one of the-- couple of the guys were saying that they came back and they saw the returnees, and they had a strange look in their face or something. And that was pretty much it. Uneventful except seeing Mount Rainier in the distance on the one day that it did clear up, but then flying out. It was a civilian plane. I don't think it was one of the regular airlines.

[00:08:41.36] MARC HENDERSON: Just a charter?

[00:08:42.56] THOMAS STODDERT: Probably, a charter or whatnot. And I remember as I was leaving the plane, I looked at the stewardesses as we were on the ground. And I had heard stories about people having to circle, fly around for a while until it was safe to land and whatnot. So as I was getting off the plane I asked the hostess, I said, aren't you scared being in here? She goes, nah. I was, because I didn't know what was going to happen. And yeah, that night we did get hit.

[00:09:13.68] They loaded us on a bus and it had metal screening all around it. So I said, oh, that must be to protect us from people throwing hand grenades in the bus with us. I remember seeing Vietnamese women with the poles on their neck and the Non La hats. And I thought, oh, it's almost like out of a movie. And the place smelled so bad. It just-- and then when we got further up away from the Cam Ranh Bay to other places where we had to do some initial training, I just remember the places smelling so bad. I mean, the odor just-- it didn't make your stomach sick or anything else, it was just kind of offensive. And I realized it was the vegetation, but it just--

[00:10:02.87] I went down to the enlisted club and I thought, I'll just get a beer. And I thought, probably may be the last beer I get for a long time. So I went in there and I had a couple of beers. And then I realized the place was empty. So I got up and I stepped outside and the whole club or something was covered in sandbags. And some guy was running by. And I could hear some thumps way off in the distance.

[00:10:34.39] And I said to the guy running by, so are we getting hit? And he goes, yeah. And I says, agh, I'm going to get worse. And I go, I need to finish my beer. And I went back in and finished my beer. So I was pretty well hammered by the time I went back to my bunk. And I didn't care. I figured things were going to get even much worse. That was my first night, so--

[00:11:00.45] MARC HENDERSON: So did you end up having to go through the Repo Depot or were you--

[00:11:04.47] THOMAS STODDERT: That was the Repo Depot or whatever they called it back then. And then I hung around. And then what they did was they posted lists of everybody's names and where they were going. And interesting enough, one guy who had left Fort Monmouth with me to go down for infantry training, we were together there. We came over on the same flight. So we had known each other several months before we even got there, and his name was next to my name to go up north to the 101st Airborne.

[00:11:42.58] And it was nice, you know, somebody I know. And then we landed up-- when all the initial training was done, we landed up living in the same hooch together. So-- and then we left Vietnam, same day, same flight. And it wasn't until the earlier reunions that we got back together again, and he has since passed away.

[00:12:07.53] MARC HENDERSON: So you said your initial assignment was to the 101st. How did you end up in the Cav? Did you get to choose?

[00:12:13.71] THOMAS STODDERT: The Cav is subordinate in unit to the 101st. I'm not sure that-- the complete chain of command, but we were basically the reaction unit for the division. And we kind of operated to some extent independently, but also very much at the request of the division for different things that came up. So if there was a downed aircraft or a rescue or something, we would be the one scrambled and sent out.

[00:12:44.37] MARC HENDERSON: What were your initial duties?

[00:12:48.11] THOMAS STODDERT: Burn shit from the latrines, bunker guard. And after about two weeks, I got really bored and I got tired. I said, this isn't going anywhere. Said, I'm tired of sitting around playing cards all day and just trying to stay warm or stay dry. And they ran in one day and they asked me-- or they yelled into the hooch they needed three volunteers.

[00:13:15.59] Well, the first guy jumped up and said, I'll go. And I thought, well, Bechtel is really a good guy and he's been really nice looking out for me all this time. Said, if he's going to go, I'll go with him. I got to lose my cherry status. And so I went out and then there was another

guy, he'd been there a little bit longer than I did. When I volunteered, he came out. And that was the mission that led to meeting Bruce Norton.

[00:13:45.14] We got back, we had spent a couple of days decompressing. We were only out there maybe a couple of hours. I remember that mission so clearly. We were only on the ground, no more than an hour and a half, two hours at the most. And it was pretty dramatic. It was a Marine recon team that had gotten shot up. And it was, I think, six or seven members to the team. Three were killed, two were shot up-- or one was-- one or two were shot up. And the other two, I think, were doing pretty good. They came out.

[00:14:24.48] It was gruesome because I had to carry out what was left of one body. And I just remembered him-- I had to carry his body out. But when we tied him to the poles, his hand was like in my front of my face, with a wedding band. And I just kept asking, I says, why is he dead and I'm alive? I have very little to go home to, to care about. My family had pretty much broken up, disintegrated. He has a wife, probably children. I said, it just seems so unfair.

[00:15:01.63] And then I suddenly came out of it, well, there must be a God, and he decided who lived and died. I don't know. And to this day, I can still remember seeing his fingers hanging. And they were only like maybe a foot away from my eyes. And I had to climb up to the top of this hill and get him loaded into a helicopter. And I remember a lot of the little details. Well, years later I was-- I downloaded a sample of a book and had just read through the sample, just curious. All his usual stuff.

[00:15:39.50] And then I got to the last page of the sample and I realized I was reading about that mission. And so I contacted the publisher and he immediately replied to me and he gave me Bruce Norton's contact information. Bruce got in contact with me. He says, I'm going to be out in Olympia, Washington next week. Let's get together.

[00:16:02.48] He sat down and he wasn't on that-- he was working as a medic on another team. But he knew everybody on the team. He knew everything that had happened. He drew a map, and the map was exactly as I remembered it. So I knew that what he was telling me was from his memory, was very accurate. Except I turned it around, and then it made sense to me. I had viewed it from the south, and he wrote it out as if he was looking north. And when he turned it around, it just fit in my memory perfectly.

[00:16:41.43] And he gave me all the details. And he told me the one guy that we loaded on-- we put them on a jungle hoist, because it was so thick that you couldn't see more than 10 feet into the bushes. That the one guy who was lifted up out, but that somehow somebody screwed up and he fell back down to the floor. And it was very, very soft so it didn't hurt him any more-- I mean, he was shot up pretty bad. But he told me he's still alive and gave me his name, and I've been in contact. And every February 7th, he calls me from Boston and we just wish each other the best.

[00:17:28.54] And he told me he was going to try coming here. But I don't think he will be, but-- I think he still has some medical issues. But he went on through Boston University, got a master's degree in art history and he was teaching at Boston College, all his life, art history. So all of that basically brought us all together.

[00:17:59.68] THOMAS STODDERT: It was the main division base. It was a pretty good size, like maybe a mile wide, three miles long.

[00:18:04.54] MARC HENDERSON: Camp Eagle, or--

[00:18:05.69] THOMAS STODDERT: Yeah. Camp Eagle. I was on Evans for a little while, for about a week. And that's when I had my first contact with the North Vietnamese POWs. They were living right among us. They seemed like pretty decent guys. Then I went down to Eagle and they made me march up a hill and he said, that's your new duty station.

[00:18:28.54] It was just one of those hooches that had plywood on its side, four feet high, another four feet of screening. It didn't hold up too much with the weather because a tornado-- a hurricane or a typhoon went through and our roof just went down the street. So we went back and put it back on and sat down.

[00:18:56.37] It was just dirty, dusty. Sometimes it was very hot. Sometimes it was actually cold. Had to sleep in a sleeping bag. And just on a canvas cot. It didn't make much difference to me.

[00:19:13.52] MARC HENDERSON: How about the food?

[00:19:15.77] THOMAS STODDERT: Food was pretty decent. We had a very good cook and he had-- he managed the cooks well, and we ate well. And the only time-- in fact, we were eating well enough that there were times we just, in the evening, would get a little hungry or peckish, and we'd just open up a case of C-rations and cook up some stuff for ourselves. The only time it went bad was when we were out in the field. And there was one time we got socked and we had no food. This went on for about a week or so. But overall, we ate pretty good.

[00:19:52.87] MARC HENDERSON: Now, I'm curious. You mentioned living among-- the POWs living amongst you. Where they Chieu Hois, or were they like--

[00:19:58.66] THOMAS STODDERT: Yeah. Chieu Hois. They were Chieu Hois. And I just remember they were kind of-- they couldn't speak the language and we couldn't speak. And I just remember one came up to an empty space at the sink. And he just came up next to me and he was sitting trying to shave, because he was-- he looked to be about 10, 15 years older than I do. But he was sitting there trying to shave, and he was only cutting his face up.

[00:20:29.15] Then some jerk tried to start messing with him or just doing stuff. And a couple of us other guys turned around and told him to shut up and leave him alone. And I looked at the Vietnamese guy and he had a disposable razor and it was past being useful. So I gave him a handful, and he was so grateful that we would do that. And yet the other guy that was witnessing this, he gave him a bar of soap or something or toothpaste, extra, because these guys had nothing and they couldn't buy anything. So I don't know how the Army got what they needed. But they didn't have much so we gave it to him.

[00:21:17.80] THOMAS STODDERT: Marines, I hated. I didn't have too many-- contact with the Navy, obvious reasons.

[00:21:27.02] MARC HENDERSON: Why did you hate the Marines?

[00:21:29.84] THOMAS STODDERT: It's a bit of a story, but I thought they were jerks. I stepped outside the hooch, went down to Freedom Hill, down in Da Nang. I stepped outside of the hooch without my hat. And when I realized I forgot my hat they-- I said, nah, it's too far to go back. I'm just going to go down to the PX here. And I've been in the country about eight months. So my attitude was really relaxed.

[00:21:55.99] And every time I went by there, a Marine's yelling at me. Troop, where's your cover? Troop-- I said, we're not getting hit. What do you mean, cover? And he was talking hat. I was sitting there, bunker. And so they kept yelling at me. And finally one of the Marine MPs came up to me he says, troop, you don't have any cover. You better do something about it now. I said, who the hell are you talking about? And we've been pulling your people out of the jungles for-- so it just pissed me off. So I went down and bought a hat and came back.

[00:22:31.09] And then when I returned back to Cam Ranh Bay after R&R, I went up to the counter in the Air Force terminal. And they said, oh, no, there's no flights going north to Phu Bai for at least three days. So I looked, I said, you mean, I got to go back up there with those Marines? And he said, yeah. So I turn around and I said, screw this. I picked up my little ditty bag, found a road that looked like it was going north. So I hitchhiked all the way up to Phu Bai.

[00:23:04.66] And the Vietnamese gave me rides. And then I got into a convoy that was gathering and make the trip through the pass with plenty of arms and protection and all this other stuff. And got up there and I just didn't want to have to deal with the Marines. Just had no mood for it.

[00:23:25.48] MARC HENDERSON: Do you remember the name of that pass?

[00:23:28.01] THOMAS STODDERT: No.

[00:23:28.52] MARC HENDERSON: What was it like? What was it like riding as a passenger in a convoy?

[00:23:32.97] THOMAS STODDERT: I was riding in the back of an open-- I think it was a dump truck. And--

[00:23:40.95] MARC HENDERSON: Was it up-armored?

[00:23:42.81] THOMAS STODDERT: It was-- I don't remember. And it didn't seem anything special. I mean, there were a lot of armored vehicles where they had mounted M60 machine guns on the back. And supposedly this pass had the reputation for being ambushed. But by the time I went through it, the area had been so pacified. Even riding with the Vietnamese locals that were kind enough to give me a ride, I didn't feel afraid of them or anything.

[00:24:16.99] It's only the one where-- I think they were woodcutters, and he went off the main road, QL1 and he started heading out towards the jungles. And I said, whoa, wait a minute.

We're-- I'm not going out there. I don't know who you are. So I hopped back and got on QL1 and continued on the way up. And it was very well pacified. And sometimes we would just do local recons and right outside Camp Eagle. And we'd run into some civilians.

[00:24:52.04] THOMAS STODDERT: I liked them. I liked them. And I felt sorry for them. I knew there was certain situations where you could not trust them, especially if there were young boys around. They'd steal anything they could from you. But then, overall-- that the people-- I liked them and I felt sorry for them.

[00:25:13.34] I went to Germany, I really liked the Germans. I went to Saudi Arabia and I had no respect for the people. I didn't trust them, I didn't like them. And from what I've been taught to more recent veterans, their attitude towards the Muslims, the Middle Easterners, are the same as what mine was in Desert Storm.

[00:25:43.27] MARC HENDERSON: Did you form friendships with folks of either different racial backgrounds or socioeconomic backgrounds than you would have if you hadn't enlisted in the military?

[00:25:55.34] THOMAS STODDERT: Yeah, I did. I mean, but, I was on a lower economic end to begin with. I went to a high school that was made up of like, everybody, upper middle class, lower middle class, where you knew that they weren't going to graduate high school. They would quit by the time they were 16, and go find a job in a garage.

[00:26:19.91] Yeah. In one example or one experience, I'd been up all night so I decided I'd try getting back into the far end of the bunker because it was nice and cool. And so I went down in there and it started raining very hard. And I saw bits of the roof starting to collapse, so I started heading for the hole to get out, and I didn't make it. And so I was-- only my upper part was sticking out.

[00:26:53.64] And it was-- the team leader, who was a black guy from the South someplace. The other guy was-- he graduated Tufts University in Boston. And the third guy was some poor farmer from Georgia someplace. And, you know, he struck me as a redneck hick, not very sophisticated and whatnot. But we all got along, we all cared about one another. And it was those three who pulled me out of that collapsed bunker.

[00:27:25.80] And I just remember the black guy just yanking on me, yanking on me. But we cared. We cared about it. I mean, we just didn't see color. There were issues that happened, but they were caused by troublemakers-- black and white. But for the majority of us-- and we continued those relationships of trust, decades later. So-- and that led to other stories.

[00:27:56.39] There was one incident. It was started by a troublemaker who didn't like another guy because he thought he was lazy. And I guess there were some remarks. I don't know what was going on. Until one evening, the door got kicked open. And the platoon sergeant was standing there with the platoon leader right behind him. And the platoon sergeant just yelled-- he was black. And he just-- or it might have been the platoon leader, who was white. One of them just reamed us all. Just yelled at us. And there was no more problems.

[00:28:36.64] I went to Berlin, and again, it was troublemakers. And there was one bad incident and it was a white guy trying to-- there was a black girl who worked in the club. And she was walking to the bus one evening and she got jumped by some black guys who thought that she was their property. And it was a couple of-- it turned out it was one white guy from my platoon who went to her rescue and a couple other white guys went to his rescue, and it turned into a massive race riot. But that was it. You know, had friends both, whatever, didn't matter.

[00:29:23.39] MARC HENDERSON: How much time did you have to yourself?

[00:29:25.88] THOMAS STODDERT: Sometimes too much time.

[00:29:28.13] MARC HENDERSON: Yeah. What did you do for recreation?

[00:29:30.59] THOMAS STODDERT: Play cards. Play cards or get drunk. I made tapes-- cassette tapes, wrote letters to send home, communicate with my family. Because I was only in communication with just my mother and my one sister. So it was-- just learned to kill time.

[00:29:58.76] MARC HENDERSON: What about the pop culture? Do you remember any songs or books or movies that stick out in your mind from being in Vietnam?

[00:30:06.37] THOMAS STODDERT: Every day exactly at noon, they would play We Got to Get Out of This Place by The Animals. Yeah, there was a lot of songs. And I remember there was one song by The Kinks, Lola. And then there was another song, Jeremiah the Bullfrog or something.

[00:30:34.47] One song that really stuck with me was-- I'd got back to Connecticut and my kid sister, she was only seven years old or so. And I didn't find this out till years later that she was really missing me, but because of the situation I didn't have very much contact, if any, with her. But when I first got back, she was in the car with me riding in the back seat.

[00:31:04.30] And there was a song, a little girl singing, All I Want for Christmas is my Brother Tommy. And then it goes on to say, her brother went to Vietnam, he's not coming home. And I just remember breaking out in tears, sobbing, punching the car seat next to me and talking to my kid sister and saying, it's OK. I came home, I came home.

[00:31:32.14] MARC HENDERSON: Any memorable holidays stick out in your mind from your time in Vietnam?

[00:31:38.26] THOMAS STODDERT: Thanksgiving was nice. They put on a very nice meal for us. I mean, considering the situation.

[00:31:48.75] MARC HENDERSON: What made it so nice?

[00:31:50.49] THOMAS STODDERT: The food was good. The food was-- we had-- I think we really had turkey and ham or something. But the-- so I call it the mess sergeant was a master schemer. So a man would give him something and he could trade it for almost anything that he

thought would benefit us. So we were able to get a lot of good food and I enjoyed it, so-- But we ate a lot of beef. After a while we just called it water buffalo because we were eating it so much, and a lot of fried rice. But we had a good, healthy meals. Generous portions. So there was never any complaints about the food.

[00:32:39.69] We had a memorial service for the guys we lost. And I think that might have been on Memorial Day. And I just remembered everybody had a stone face. And I just kept saying, I'm not going to let them see what a sissy I am. I'm not going to cry. I'm not going to cry. But a couple of the upside down rifles were people that I knew, and one of them I cared for very much, who was a black guy.

[00:33:08.65] MARC HENDERSON: Did you cry?

[00:33:09.97] THOMAS STODDERT: No. I just would not let that happen. But now I've kind of cried a few times, sobbed, when I think of that sergeant, because that was really painful. He was a great, big, tall black guy. He was sort of the section team leader, E6. And I don't know, we just hit it off. And it went from just being a good Soldier for him to where we were personal friends.

[00:33:40.64] MARC HENDERSON: What was his name?

[00:33:41.87] THOMAS STODDERT: Neal, Arthur. And one day I heard him yell in the troop area-- I heard him yelling my name, so I ran out, found him. And he goes, look at this Stoddert, look at this, Stoddert. And he pulled out a picture of his-- he said, I just got a letter from my wife. And I just saw-- he pulled out this picture and it was this tall, skinny black woman, all dressed in white with a big white hat. And next to her, two little black boys, all dressed in white. And it still really bothers me that-- standing in front of this white, wooden church. And he was so proud of that picture. And I'd say about three weeks later he was killed.

[00:34:30.79] And I did-- kind of did look to go see her, but then I thought, would I be bringing up memories for her of a terrible time? And I was thinking about it last night and I thought, well, his sons must be in their 50s, well in their 50s.

[00:34:49.22] MARC HENDERSON: What would you tell his sons if they were listening to this right now?

[00:34:54.30] THOMAS STODDERT: Your father was a great guy-- a good guy, a good NCO, and I loved him.

[00:35:09.06] MARC HENDERSON: What were the areas that your unit operated-- that Delta Troop operated in?

[00:35:15.44] THOMAS STODDERT: Laos was one trip.

[00:35:19.26] MARC HENDERSON: So I Corps?

[00:35:21.04] THOMAS STODDERT: Yeah. They rushed us up to Quang Tri. We sat in Quang Tri for a couple of hours and then they said, board the helicopters. And I just remember being in the helicopter saying, the place up here is only 30 miles wide. We've been up for an hour and a half flying around. Where are we?

[00:35:42.93] And then, so I did the math one time, I said, well, we had to have been well into Laos. And then later on, I met a guy and he said, you're just asking that now? Didn't you know they told us after we got on the ground. I said, yeah, but you had the radio, I didn't.

[00:36:01.16] There was nothing left of the helicopters to retrieve. We pulled out one and a half bodies out of the four we were supposed to get. And other places were the A Shau Valley. I was on a place called Firebase Ripcord for about three-- I'm only guessing-- maybe four weeks. And it was beginning to heat up, and they pulled our team back out and sent us back to Camp Eagle.

[00:36:40.16] MARC HENDERSON: So you mentioned that one mission into Laos where you were retrieving American bodies. What were some of the other missions that you guys typically did?

[00:36:47.93] THOMAS STODDERT: Well, the first one was in the A Shau. And that's the one where we tied up with the Marines. And for me, tying up with Bruce Norton and the Marines, it's mainly because they are the only ones that ever said thank you. They expressed that and they came to the very first reunion that they came to and they got up there and they said, we're thanking you for saving our lives and the lives of our friends. And it was the only occasion that anybody ever said thank you to us.

[00:37:25.79] And it kind of made it worthwhile, or at least to say, yeah, there was some-- because most of the stuff, we never found. The two, one and a half bodies we found in Laos, we don't know who they are, or what they are, or even what they were doing. We just got them in, bagged them, and got out. The helicopter we got to was burned beyond recognition. There was nothing salvageable on it.

[00:37:56.98] Other mission was to Ripcord. And that was four months of just boredom and misery. There was only four of us. We were there for security. We had a 106 millimeter recoilless rifle that we were to use for base defense. But we still got hit.

[00:38:23.67] MARC HENDERSON: You want to describe that rifle?

[00:38:26.24] THOMAS STODDERT: It was a 10 foot long barrel, hollow barrel. Approximately five inches on the inside, diameter, with a big, thick-- now we're at the back end of it. And you'd load a 36 pound projectile in it and you'd aim it and fire it. And it would explode. And the projectile came out one end, and then all this concussion explosives came out the other end. So we had defense, front and back. But we had to be very careful where that back end was pointing, because it could easily kill a bunch of men if they were close enough.

[00:39:12.89] A lot of ambushes-- we were sent out on ambushes and things like that. Then there was a lot of bunker guard, tower guard. A lot of burning shit, the latrines. But we'd make fun out

of that. I mean, we would do different things to have some sort of fun doing it. In fact, the Rangers got pissed off at us or something.

[00:39:41.45] The story I heard was one of their guys went out to go to the bathroom one night and one of our guys, fed up of them. So he sent a couple of rounds over the guy's head. And so they retaliated against us. They dropped a grenade or something down our latrine and blew it all to hell. I remember the first sergeant was kind of pissed off because he was going to have to come call their first sergeant, get their people to come back over and rebuild it.

[00:40:14.91] MARC HENDERSON: Did they?

[00:40:16.08] THOMAS STODDERT: I don't know. I was leaving. I was leaving. I assume they did. For the most part, you didn't worry about the bad things. I guess you just stuffed them. And the only time we ever talked about it is when we got together for things like this. My wife had-- we've been married 44 years, I've known her 50 years. She'd asked me questions and I thought, what? Which was-- inadvertently and unknowingly, I kept her ignorant.

[00:40:50.28] MARC HENDERSON: You mentioned the first sergeant. Can you talk about your leadership as high up as you can remember it?

[00:40:56.52] THOMAS STODDERT: It was good leadership. We had very good leadership. They were fair, they worked it. And if you did something stupid-- instead of a water canteen on your side, you had a beer canteen there. You got your job done, you did what you needed to do. You didn't screw it up. OK, so you took a little break in between whatever we had to do and it was a beer can in there.

[00:41:28.41] They told me that one time where they went out to retrieve a helicopter that went down. And the Chieu Hoi that was with them, he was helping-- he got up on top of the helicopter and he was helping them trying to sling, and his stuff came out and two beer cans came out. And they all had a good laugh and came back.

[00:41:51.03] So it was-- I think the Army then was much more-- how do you say-- human? Human, than it is now. There were drugs, but for the group I was with, we just had no interest in that. Now on any good night, right after payday, there might be like a couple of cases stacked up. You know, we'd be-- party. And then when the other guys in the other platoon found out what we were doing, they'd come over, too.

[00:42:24.06] And I got pictures of it. I got pictures of one guy that went on to become a state senator in Ohio. And he asked me to send a picture that I had of him, so I had to send it to his secretary. And I thought, this is not very flattering. Yeah, it was-- there was-- I think in one or two cases that there was a bad incident that happened. And I don't know enough about them to even talk about it. But not in my platoon. I always remembered thinking I had made five combat assaults-- CAs-- and that wasn't very much.

[00:43:11.36] MARC HENDERSON: What did it take to qualify as a combat assault versus just a regular other incident?

[00:43:16.96] THOMAS STODDERT: They had to fly us in someplace, drop us off, and we carried weapons and ammunition with us. The stuff where we went out locally, like on thunder runs or ambushes didn't count. So only when you went out someplace in a helicopter and got dropped.

[00:43:39.59] MARC HENDERSON: So as a grunt, did you receive any special training for that, when you first got in country or anything?

[00:43:44.96] THOMAS STODDERT: Yeah, there had been a little bit of it. I mean, we had to learn how to-- because we actually were not grunts-- or I didn't consider that we were grunts, because we just didn't have to carry heavy things like they had to. We didn't qualify for that. But we generally went very light. Half the time I would only take a quart of water with us, or two quarts.

[00:44:12.21] MARC HENDERSON: Do you want to talk about the mission you were on where you were out without food for a couple of days? How did that happen?

[00:44:20.22] THOMAS STODDERT: They flew us out to a base-- the team-- called Firebase O'Reilly. And we were there-- it must have been maybe-- it seemed to me like only five, ten days, but it must have been longer. And when we left, as we came in, the other team was leaving. And the team leader said to me, whatever you do, don't go over that hill way over there. He goes, we saw helicopter after helicopter sling loading bodies out. And he says, they got overrun already.

[00:44:54.66] But they mentioned to me, send us over there. He said, don't go. So they did send us. And some major was walking around-- I think he was clueless. We were trying to grab some boxes of C-rations to take with us as we were loading the helicopters. And he said, no, no, don't bother. You don't need that. You need to get over there real quick. Get over there, fast.

[00:45:22.67] And so we got on the helicopter and just before it lifted off, one of our guys jumped out, ran over, and they had with-- I don't know, a big box. Some goodies in it. And he grabbed that and he loaded us up. We got over there. And so, this is going to be nice and easy. There's nothing up here. We'll take it easy. And then they all-- it started to rain. And then they came up-- whoever was in charge came up and told us, we need to get up, build a bunker, set up a thing, stay up on the wire.

[00:45:57.74] And so we did. We were trying to dig, build in the dark, couldn't get anything. And then two guys stayed watch. We didn't have a place to sleep, so we just stayed out on the open ground. And I just remember the water streaming through the mud. And I was getting colder and wet. And I cuddled up against the guy from Boston. And he was kind of big and chunky.

[00:46:28.36] So I finally just turned around, I says, do you mind if I pull your coat-- your rain jacket over me? I mean, we were in there. And he kept me halfway decent warm, because I was very much underweight. And got up the next morning, we started working, digging. And so we went through all the candy that was in that box the guy stole. We didn't have any more C-rations.

[00:46:58.62] And then finally, when we ran out of the candy, the team leader went up and started begging. And the lieutenant that was in charge of the place, I think his name was Hawkins, gave-- he only had three meals. So he gave us one. And we went back and it was one of these freeze dried things. So we just kept filling it up with more and more water and we passed the spoon among the four of us. And that was the last time we ate for a couple of days.

[00:47:30.66] For water, I was drinking out of mud puddles. I don't remember what the other guys were doing. And then all of a sudden, it just cleared up and it was beautiful and it was just really pleasant. The choppers were coming in, so we knew we'd get food. We knew we'd get the wounded out. And we got hit again.

[00:47:52.05] MARC HENDERSON: The situation that you're talking about, was that up with your recoilless rifle team?

[00:47:59.40] THOMAS STODDERT: Yeah. The rifle was down below on the side of the hill. But the first or second day, the weather had cleared. And they did their best to come in. I mean, they were flashing all sorts of lights, but they just couldn't safely get in to us. Because if the chopper got too close and crashed, it was liable to hit one of us. So they just bagged it.

[00:48:23.58] But when it cleared up, I left my rifle down with the recoilless rifle and the three other guys, and I just went scouting around the thing, what was left, trying to pick up some garbage or anything we could use to make a roof for our bunker. And as I was coming up to the very top of the hill on Ripcord, I looked down and I saw a Chinook helicopter lowering a big Conex. And there was a bunch of-- maybe about six guys. And I saw a smoke right in the middle of them, and they were kind of flying through the woods-- the air-- like from a barrel. And just flying outwards.

[00:49:04.84] The helicopter took off with the metal box still underneath it, the Conex. It was maybe about half the size of this room. And he must have missed my head about no more than 18 inches. And I ran back and got around and I just didn't tell anybody what had happened up there. And to this day, I don't know what happened. It was just-- except after I almost get hit with the thing, I jumped over the side of an embankment and landed up on this guy's lap. And he's got two radios in his ears, calling in for support. And I just looked at him and I thought, I don't think he appreciates this. And I took off.

[00:49:55.85] But-- and then about maybe a week, week and a half later, they finally pulled us out and brought the team back. And later, that base, a couple of months later, fell. They're only beginning now to talk about it. So there's a whole bunch of videos on YouTube for it and different things, so--

[00:50:31.45] THOMAS STODDERT: I didn't see anything. I mean, they had these things where you put in the ground and supposedly it would pick up any movement or ground shaking or anything. But we just stopped using them because we felt it was too unreliable. The big Starlight scopes. They were like this. Yeah, that was pretty-- we used to like to sit up there and just kill time looking through it. The things-- how far we could see and how well we can see. And only

recently have they started taking that technology and making it available for sportsmen and hunters and whatnot. So yeah.

[00:51:21.51] THOMAS STODDERT: On that first mission, it took me about three days to calm down. And I just remember one of the guys come up to me and just said, pretty bad, huh? And I go, huh. And he looked at me. He goes, did you get hit? Your face is bleeding. I said, yeah, I got some shrapnel or something. And I was like-- wiped it off. But it took me a couple of days to where I would do anything or whatever.

[00:51:51.41] And it was gruesome. That mission into Laos, pulling half bodies out of the thing. By then, I was kind of hardened, so it didn't matter as much. And even when I was on Ripcord and I saw the bodies flying through the air. That didn't bother me like the first one had. And a lot of the other stuff I've just kind of forgotten so much.

[00:52:28.10] THOMAS STODDERT: I don't think there was any. It was hard, but-- I think-- nah. It just wasn't any day I could say was good, better, that I can enjoy, something that I can look back-- there were lots of incidences, or events, yes, I remember back and it was good. But, no. I just don't think there was any. But then the bad incidents were few and far between. You know, it was just boring. I think the biggest thing was that it was boring.

[00:53:13.50] I remember there was two guys-- I was put in this one hooch and I was sharing it-- a part of it-- with two married guys. And I felt bad for them, because they were married. And they became very close friends and they shared a lot of-- I would listen in on their conversations at different things.

[00:53:39.63] And I remember one guy saying many times, he says, if I can learn to be happy here, I can be happy anywhere. And I just had so much respect for him. And for what he told us about his pre-military time. He was a criminal. He was the bad boy in high school and whatnot. But then I'd just sit there, and just the depth of character that I saw in him and the other guy. And we've never been able to find them.

[00:54:14.38] MARC HENDERSON: Yeah.

[00:54:17.17] THOMAS STODDERT: We just haven't been able to locate them. Would I do it over again? I think I would. I would have a better attitude. I would be more aggressive in what I did, instead of just trying to be passive. What I got out of Vietnam was much better than any place I'd ever been to, before or since. So I'm grateful for Vietnam. I'm very grateful for this unit.

[00:54:58.66] THOMAS STODDERT: No. No. We had very little interaction with anybody, actually. Except for maybe bumping into people or whatever. But very little interaction with other American units or whatever, because our mission was so different from everybody else's.

[00:55:21.60] THOMAS STODDERT: Fairly regular, except for when I was up on Ripcord. We didn't get any mail for a month or whatever it was. But yeah, it was good communications with home.

[00:55:31.89] MARC HENDERSON: So was it mostly letters, or what, tell me about your communications.

[00:55:34.86] THOMAS STODDERT: Letters, pictures come through. When I first got to Vietnam, my mother used to send me food things. And there was one Chieu Hoi, him and I became pretty good buddies. And he could slice your throat without a second thought. But then he had it-- like, very childlike qualities that really endeared me to him.

[00:56:04.78] And so my mother-- I wrote my mother and I said, can you send me more raisins? The Vietnamese guy really loves raisins. I mean, because he couldn't get anything like that. So I'd give him my raisins. And then I found out later on, the ones I didn't see him eat, he took downtown and sold for extra money. But he was killed there, too.

[00:56:33.59] MARC HENDERSON: How much of the war that you were fighting in did you hear about from other sources, like newspapers or radio or-- ?

[00:56:44.71] THOMAS STODDERT: Not that much from the States. I remember one incident. We did get news about what happened at Kent State. And that really, really demoralized us. That really upset us. I remember seeing one buck sergeant, big tears coming out of his eyes.

[00:57:10.01] But there was a lot of other things. I think one of the funniest things, when I got back to the States, I learned about microwave ovens. And everybody knew how to operate a microwave oven. I didn't even know what it was. So--

[00:57:31.58] THOMAS STODDERT: They posted a thing saying that if-- basically saying that some of us will be leaving a lot earlier than we expected. And that was nice. I mean, I was ecstatic. The less time I had there, the better. And I thought-- and then when I got home, I realized I might be doing the same thing someplace else, even less. And when I got to Germany, to Berlin, it was like-- if they weren't training-- and it wasn't good leadership at first.

[00:58:07.84] Yeah, so it was just like, they'd say, OK, you go down to the motor pool. You go do this. And by now or later, you couldn't find anybody. And I thought, this is crap. And I started heading-- I started heading back to the orderly room. I was going to put in to go back to Vietnam. And I was debating, should I try going back to Delta Troop?

[00:58:33.55] And this is about the time that they got pretty well sliced up on Khe Sanh. But I didn't know that. But a couple of friends talked me out of it. And they said, oh, no. You only got a year left, you only-- And a couple of months later I met my wife. But yeah, it was just the boredom. I couldn't stand the boredom. The lack of meaningful work or doing-- busy work.

[00:59:07.25] MARC HENDERSON: In Germany that is?

[00:59:08.30] THOMAS STODDERT: In Germany and Vietnam, in some ways. But at least in Vietnam, OK, all right, you're going out burning the latrines. But you needed to do that, for yourself and the other guys. Bunker guard was necessary. Tower guard, you go up there, sleep at night and hang out during the daytime and write letters, because you were just sacrifice, anyway.

Because the first thing that would get hit would be the tower. So nothing you could do about it. So we'd just chill out during that time.

[00:59:41.61] Now after a while, I learned the ropes and I volunteered for it every time. They'd put me on bunker guard. And the one night I was up there with a Ranger, and the base got slammed very badly. And I got pictures of what was left in the morning.

[01:00:02.10] MARC HENDERSON: We were going to talk about going home?

[01:00:03.66] THOMAS STODDERT: It sucked.

[01:00:04.35] MARC HENDERSON: It sucked to leave?

[01:00:06.12] THOMAS STODDERT: No. It was great to leave. And you kind of felt bad-- I didn't realize it at the time, but I felt terribly guilty that I had left the others behind. It sucked badly, because I went home and people I knew in high school, friends I had in high school, wouldn't talk to me anymore. You get together and you do something. And they say, well, where have you been? I haven't seen you in a while. You've got a nice tan.

[01:00:34.59] And I stopped telling them that I'd been in Vietnam. And I went to a party one night with my sister, her boyfriend, some other people. And this girl came over and just started asking me all sorts of questions. Where do you go to school? You go to Yale? And she's naming off all these things? No, no. I wouldn't give her any information. So my sister did.

[01:01:00.76] And then finally, she goes, well, where are you going now? I said-- my sister tells her, I'm headed to Germany. So, oh, wow, you're going to study in Europe? Wow. And I was just getting more and more disgusted. And I just didn't want to say. Finally, my sister just spilled the beans, and said, no he just got back from Vietnam last week, and he's going to Germany because he still has time. And I thought, you know, why don't you shut up?

[01:01:32.24] And the girl who was asking me the questions just looked at and goes, uughh, and got up and walked away from me. And so I took my date and I walked away from the thing and left my sister and her boyfriend there.

[01:01:47.90] MARC HENDERSON: How much time did you have left in your tour when you came home?

[01:01:50.63] THOMAS STODDERT: A little over a year. And I was really looking forward to going to Germany. I had studied German in high school. And it just-- Germany is just a fascinating place. And then going, being stationed in Berlin with all the museums, the concert halls, and other stuff. It was great. But by the time I got there, I just spent all my money on booze and just stayed drunk for six months.

[01:02:28.61] And then I met my wife and I couldn't spend the money on her and the booze, so I spent it on her. And things got really good. I really enjoyed it. We'd do lots of plays-- her being a

civilian. Lots of things that-- we went out to do bike riding and tours and art museums and whatnot. It was great-- the second half.

[01:02:52.84] MARC HENDERSON: So did you have trouble adjusting to life-- life after the war?

[01:03:01.66] THOMAS STODDERT: One of the things that was really painful-- I didn't realize it, but it was really painful for me. But I couldn't sleep in a bed. So sleeping on a floor was-- I was more accustomed to that. So in Connecticut in the middle of wintertime, without realizing it, I'd just go to bed at night in a bed, and then I'd wake up in the morning with the blankets on top of me on the floor. And that really made my mother mad. She would just yell at me. Forget about what you're doing there. Forget about it. Just go home and get a job and live normal.

[01:03:38.74] And the other thing was I remember having a fork-- we didn't have metal forks, we just had little plastic forks that we ate from all year round, all the whole time. And so then coming back, having a fork, not thinking about it, I kept jabbing myself in the face with the fork until finally the bottom of my lip was all sore. And there was other things like that. It was just just-- I don't know. I felt like a foreigner in a foreign land.

[01:04:12.83] And I felt, when I went to Berlin, I just felt more welcome there, more welcome, whatever, even though I couldn't speak the language. The people would sometimes make an effort to be friendly. But I felt more comfortable in being in Germany than I did back in Connecticut.

[01:04:35.98] MARC HENDERSON: Did you ever witness any of the antiwar demonstrations in Germany or in the United States or anywhere?

[01:04:43.42] THOMAS STODDERT: There was trouble. We heard about it. But again, it was troublemakers. It was troublemakers. In one instance, I was told that they had like-- they would have a reaction platoon. And if there was trouble, they would be called out for it. They were the first ones to get called.

[01:05:06.69] MARC HENDERSON: Were they active duty or National Guard?

[01:05:08.28] THOMAS STODDERT: No, they were active duty. It was in Berlin. And they told me, yeah, riots had broken out. And because of instances with the first bunch of riots, they would go through the ranks and tell the black guys, if you're uncomfortable with this, you can go to the back of the formation. Most of them didn't. And the NCOs, the black NCOs, went in there and they-- the last instance, they pulled the black NCOs out, because they were brutal. They would go in there smashing heads and rough things up more than needed to be.

[01:05:48.63] So it wasn't a matter of race. It was troublemakers. It was kind of embarrassing, seeing it from the Berliners, and then just on the other side of the wall, not even 400 yards from our barracks was East Germany. But no, it was sort of relayed to me as a warning. If there was something like that, don't get in the way of the black sergeants, because they hated these-- I mean, they were brutal. They'd go in there smashing them. Those were the people that got hurt.

[01:06:26.07] And most of the black guys in the platoon, the lower enlisted, they didn't leave the ranks. And I've thought about it a few times. All I could think of was, they were as much a part of the whole platoon as we were. And they didn't want to leave us because we were a team. The team mattered. And they probably resented the trouble that was being caused by just a handful of troublemakers.

[01:06:59.48] MARC HENDERSON: So how much contact have you had with fellow veterans over the years?

[01:07:05.77] THOMAS STODDERT: It wasn't until 2003 the Delta Troop formed up this reunion stuff. But after-- I retired from the Army in 1994, and I started getting involved with different veterans programs, organizations. A bunch of them. And then about 10 years ago-- I'm not sure how it happened, but there was a big meeting in Olympia. And all the American veterans they could contact were encouraged to come.

[01:07:47.80] And they invited a bunch of former South Vietnamese military members. And I remember the one guy came up to me, just handed his card, and we're still friends. And so we started putting together a group that would build a joint American-Vietnamese War Memorial. And we built it right outside of Seattle.

[01:08:14.41] And for me, all this so-called, oh, thank you for your service, it bothered me. And then at one reunion, a couple other guys said, yeah, they didn't like it either. And it was sort of a, too late, you don't know what you're thanking me for, it's all superficial. I'm sorry. But then I went to a Vietnamese function and they asked me when I showed up, they said, you're an American Soldier? You were in Vietnam? I said, yeah. He said, OK, you sit in front.

[01:08:49.93] And then they called us up on the stage, my wife and I, and they put flowered leis around our neck, and then they thanked us. And I just remember shaking, saying, these people suffered everything. They were refugees. Some of them were boat people. And they suffered so much, but they're thanking me for having fought for their country. And I was really touched by it. And that's when I started doing things more and more with them.

[01:09:30.70] Even now, because of my affiliation with different groups, PBS contacted-- my name was given to them. And they contacted me and they asked me to view the-- I can't think of his name right now. Ken, whatever.

[01:09:49.78] MARC HENDERSON: Ken Burns?

[01:09:50.35] THOMAS STODDERT: Ken Burns. They asked me-- contacted me, and they wanted to get more input from Vietnam veterans. So I got to sit down and watch the series a couple of weeks before. And so it was a woman in New York and I contacted her. And I said, you need to edit that carefully. Besides all the inaccuracies, that is just sheer bullshit.

[01:10:18.23] You're going to hurt a lot of people, and I expect the suicide rate to jump up. And she was concerned. So she contacted the people up in WGBH in Boston, several times, and finally, she relayed their last message to me. They don't give a shit. We don't give a shit. And so

I kept that in mind. And then when he was coming out with his 10 episode series, a few of us-- some Marines on the West Coast and a lot of other people-- were asked to review it and look at it.

[01:10:57.09] And I stopped watching. I said, that's not the war I was in. I'm sorry. It's just not. And so our Vietnamese-American group was asked to come up to an affiliate in Tacoma, Washington. And they interviewed us, and they were trying to do-- how would you put it? Like a supporting, local project, in addition to Ken Burns. And they wanted us to come across-- same thing.

[01:11:34.84] And I asked the guy several times, are you going to edit out our remarks that don't follow along with Ken Burns? And he wouldn't give us a straight answer. Whatever. I said, thank you, bye, walked out. And then I found out there was-- it started when I was still there. An Air Force veteran started asking him the same questions. Anyway, they never did it. The vets wouldn't support it because it was inaccurate. It was deceptive. And it would do more harm than good.

[01:12:11.19] You can report the historical-- now the one that Kennedy did on the Last Days of Saigon, I think it was, she did an excellent job. It was very good. And it was factual, it was-- to the point. Not this left, liberal bullshit compared to what we really did. And I've encountered several times since then, especially in Olympia, Washington, people wanted to hear the bad. They wanted to hear the error. And when you tell them something different, they weren't interested. Excuse me, I was there.

[01:12:59.59] MARC HENDERSON: So how did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans returning from combat today?

[01:13:07.84] THOMAS STODDERT: I notice some things. They don't talk. I was involved in one organization, and a lot of them would come in. And they rarely talked about anything except kind of superficial stuff. But they don't talk. And yet I hear that-- they're saying now that 22 Iraqi vets commit suicide every week, something like that.

[01:13:41.63] A lot of us older vets would turn on and say, we want to tell them. Don't rely on government. They'll turn on you like they did us. And you know, and the phrase. But basically, we won't let you guys be betrayed like we were being betrayed. Because it seemed like even the World War II, the Korean vets turned against us. And we would basically have the thing is that, we would be there for them.

[01:14:28.11] And one vet group I belonged to, we did contact a lot of the new vets and we did go to the hospital with them. We did go to the counseling thing with them. So they would not be alone. So--

[01:14:44.13] MARC HENDERSON: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered today?

[01:14:46.77] THOMAS STODDERT: Inaccurately. There's no understanding of the history of it or why it happened. I mean, they still say OK, we lost the war. We lost the war. The military

screwed up. They couldn't win the war. And yet, from very good sources, that was only three days more of needed bombing, and we would have won the war, period, militarily.

[01:15:14.35] The thing is, we come back say, yeah, we lost the war, we lost. But it was all fruitless, it didn't need to happen, it was so uncalled for. And I spoke to this one guy who claimed he was a Vietnam veteran, but he was very proud of his membership with Veterans for Peace. And I've dealt with those-- I've interviewed the people, their leadership and management out of Missouri.

[01:15:41.88] And it's not a veterans group. It is a political group under the guise of veterans, because very few of their members are veterans. But anyway, this guy was going on and on about this. And I said, hey listen, I've seen what you people do, and I'm fed up of the lack of truth, the lack of understanding. Anyway.

[01:16:12.97] MARC HENDERSON: What do you think the Vietnam War means to your generation?

[01:16:20.43] THOMAS STODDERT: I'm tempted to go back to a high school reunion and see what the response is. But I notice, maybe out of like 10 men graduating high school, only one would go in the military. I think out of my class of 400 seniors, I think there was only maybe a handful of us who went to Vietnam.

[01:16:48.46] So I notice the people who didn't go, the people who got deferments. They don't share with anybody. And it would be really hard for me to treat them civilly, because-- yeah. I've seen cases in the back where somebody says, oh, I was a draft dodger, I was doing this. And he almost got his ass tore apart. To be able to listen to something like that and to listen to things like Ken Burns. And you think of the friends you lost. And they're telling us it was unneeded.

[01:17:25.19] But when we understood the Vietnamese history, going back to the late 40s, the mid-late 60s, the books that came out by Tom Dooley, Dr. Tom Dooley and others who were there at that time, taking care of the refugees who were being shot up by Ho Chi Minh. That's all forgotten. But we knew at the time, we were really there to help the peasants-- the people who had no power. We guarded their cities, we guarded their villages.

[01:18:06.21] And that was part of our job or something. And especially the troop. And one of the things we did was we'd give the Vietnamese orphanage all our dirty laundry, and for like \$5 a month, they would keep our clothes clean. And that money was being used to feed those children. So it was just so many things. And you know, and I am-- there's a lot of bitterness in me.

[01:18:43.51] MARC HENDERSON: So I know you spent a career in the military.

[01:18:45.78] THOMAS STODDERT: Yeah.

[01:18:46.59] MARC HENDERSON: But if there were lessons from Vietnam that you could pass on to future generations, what would you say?

[01:18:54.72] THOMAS STODDERT: Don't trust government. There's much, much more to a conflict than what you can read about, that they don't put out in the news media. But from Kennedy's documentary, I learned that it was a Democrat Congress that was in place that held off supplying the-- or providing the supplies that the South Vietnamese government needed. That was part of the peace treaty with what's his face in Paris, with--

[01:19:40.83] MARC HENDERSON: Kissinger?

[01:19:41.60] THOMAS STODDERT: Kissinger. He's referred to as the white collar crime because generally veterans don't-- who understand-- there's no respect for him. But then the Vietnamese guy-- and the treaty was that the North would stay in the north, the South would stay in the South. We would support the South, and the North would do whatever it wants, but not come north or south.

[01:20:14.36] If this North needed something, they can get the supplies they needed on a one to one basis, basically, and same thing for the South. And part of the agreement is that we would help with aid to the North for the damage we did. Well, Congress was taken over by the Democrats in the early 70s. And they turned around, ignored the peace treaty that Kissinger and-- I want to say Chou En-Lai, but he's the Chinese guy--

[01:20:51.84] ignored the thing--

[01:20:52.88] MARC HENDERSON: Le Duc?

[01:20:53.34] THOMAS STODDERT: Broke the--

[01:20:54.15] MARC HENDERSON: Duc?

[01:20:57.06] THOMAS STODDERT: No, it wasn't Duc. Duc was the political chief. And I thought, if anybody should have been hung, it should have been him for what he did to the Vietnamese population-- North and South. That man should have been left hanging. Don't start a war unless you're willing to follow it all the way through. There's 58,000 men who basically died and achieved nothing, and it was all because of the politicians.

[01:21:31.56] What I saw in Vietnam, I saw again in East Germany-- East Berlin. The communism, the socialistic-- they would say socialists make the people feel good, the government will take care of you. And the government didn't. I saw the most unhappy people I've ever seen, walking arm in arm with their girlfriend and their wives in East Berlin. And it was so obvious. It surprised me at first, but it was so obvious. And again, it was that communist rule. And I fear that this country is going that way, very much. Especially like what I've seen in Washington State the last couple of months.

[01:22:19.60] THOMAS STODDERT: It took me a while to be able to work my way up to it. The shape, color was so appropriate. And then you had the opportunity to go up and see a name, and then you recognize a name. And so you're able to go more. I mean, we've got statues all over

the place for the different wars. There's a statue of a man marching and whatnot. But the Vietnam War Memorial allows you to really take part in it, and it becomes very personal.

[01:22:56.52] And that's why at first, I couldn't look at it. And I had to go to the traveling wall a couple of times before I could go to the real Wall. So yeah, I was in Washington DC and I suddenly saw it at a distance, and I jerked myself around away from it, so I wouldn't look at it. And I'm glad I overcame it. And with the electronics, the stuff where you can leave messages. And hopefully I've left enough messages that maybe family members might check out later on and see the messages myself and other people have left.

[01:23:41.93] MARC HENDERSON: I tell you, I use that all the time.

[01:23:43.54] THOMAS STODDERT: Do you?

[01:23:44.14] MARC HENDERSON: I do. As a researcher, I do that all the time. And it's very helpful. The messages that people have left over the years.

[01:23:52.35] THOMAS STODDERT: Yeah. With Neal, Arthur. I wish there was a way I could just reach out and be able to just touch him again, or just to hear him again, laughing, or be in contact with his family. And we played cards. We were always on the same side. And that's what really-- from that playing cards all the time. We built that relationship, that friendship up. And it still hurts.

[01:24:31.73] MARC HENDERSON: What was your favorite card game?

[01:24:32.99] THOMAS STODDERT: Spades. And we were very good as a team. So I just remember sitting around with-- everybody was bare chested and with a beer can next to him or a diet Fresca.

[01:24:54.54] THOMAS STODDERT: I think it's excellent. I think it was a good way to start bringing unity. Because one of the guys coming in here, General Reese he told me about it, so I contacted them. And I got the joint American War Memorial, Vietnamese War Memorial on their list of organizations. And they've been very-- have supported us.

[01:25:22.70] MARC HENDERSON: Have you received your Vietnam veteran lapel pin?