

Suitor, Jerry USA

[00:00:15.94] JERRY SUITOR: When I went to Vietnam, I was 20.

[00:00:17.95] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your family's status?

[00:00:20.65] JERRY SUITOR: We were farmers. Well, my dad was a farmer. My mother was a housekeeper, and she worked at the lunchroom at the school.

[00:00:29.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you have brothers and sisters?

[00:00:30.77] JERRY SUITOR: I have two brothers, no sisters. One brother was in the Army. One brother was in the Navy.

[00:00:42.49] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your hometown?

[00:00:44.59] JERRY SUITOR: At the time I went in, it was Windom, Texas.

[00:00:47.70] JOE GALLOWAY: OK. Where is that?

[00:00:49.65] JERRY SUITOR: That's between Bonham and Paris. But it's about 25 miles from the Oklahoma border. We were up in North Texas.

[00:00:57.67] I was drafted in 1966, September the 6th. And I served till September the 7th, I think, of 1968.

[00:01:10.06] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your sense of the Vietnam War before you were drafted?

[00:01:14.62] JERRY SUITOR: Well, I pretty well had an idea that I would be going. At that time, they drafted a lot of boys-- 18, 19 years old. And of course, when I was drafted, I was 19. A lot of the boys, as soon as they got out of school, they got into college so they wouldn't have to go. And then the military came up and said, well, you had to be married. A lot of them started hunting wives.

[00:01:40.39] Then you had to have a baby. But I didn't fall under any of those exemptions. So I was subject to go. And I knew it.

[00:01:55.09] JERRY SUITOR: I done basic at Fort Polk, Louisiana. And I also done AIT. I went through--

[00:02:02.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Also in Fort Polk?

[00:02:03.85] JERRY SUITOR: At Fort Polk, Louisiana. I went through Tiger Land.

[00:02:06.28] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, my.

[00:02:07.51] JERRY SUITOR: And that was an experience. I think-- well, I actually told some of them-- I think I would have volunteered to go to get away from that place. It was awful. We called it Fort Puke.

[00:02:21.22] [LAUGHTER]

[00:02:23.50] JOE GALLOWAY: What was your impressions of the draft before they got you? Did you think it was a fair operation?

[00:02:30.76] JERRY SUITOR: Well, I shouldn't tell this story, but our draft-- one of the guys on the draft board I actually knew. And I knew I would be going, because his son wouldn't. And he's one of these that ended up with the land and the cattle. And he had to go find a wife. And actually, evidently, she got married. And I think I had put one of my pictures on Facebook. And this was for Veterans Day or Memorial Day. And she put on there a comment-- of course, she's divorced from him now-- she said, I knew that you would get killed over there. As I say, I felt so bad because you went and my husband didn't.

[00:03:13.96] I didn't mind doing-- I was doing it for my country. And I felt like I owed it at that time. Yes.

[00:03:22.84] JOE GALLOWAY: Describe the training you got before you were sent to Vietnam. Was it adequate?

[00:03:28.72] JERRY SUITOR: Yes, I think so. I think we were some of the best trained Soldiers that went to Vietnam. Because the people that came back, especially at the time that you was over there-- I think when you came back, you taught the rest of us a lesson. Because we went into the guerrilla warfare that's never been fought in the military before. Or I don't think it has.

[00:03:53.59] And we actually trained with Daisy air rifles there at the AIT in Tiger Land. In the military, in basic, they teach you to do it all military style. AIT, we went through, we shot from the hip. And we had to do it fast. I mean, you didn't take time to aim. You done it from instinct. And I think that paid off.

[00:04:26.83] JERRY SUITOR: I went over in-- I want to say-- August of 1967. That was the stinkiest this place I have ever-- hottest and stinky-- when they opened the doors and that smell hit you in the face, I mean, it was sickening. And it'd almost knock you out. It was awful.

[00:04:47.12] I was assigned to-- well it was the 90th Replacement. And they sent me-- and on my orders it actually had 1st Division, the Big Red One. But I had been to Fort Benning, Georgia, and trained as a dog handler. After I got out of AIT, I went there and trained for 12 weeks with the dog. And when we got there, there was three of us, myself and one of our sergeants and a vet tech.

[00:05:15.64] Well, they were sending them to the 38th, and they had me down for the Big Red One. And I told the sergeant, whenever they got on their Jeep to go to their unit, I said,

[00:05:27.10] tell someone that I'm up here and they're fixing to ship me out to the infantry-- to come get me. So I sat down, very nervous and scared. And probably an hour later, the Jeep pulls up. Well this black lieutenant gets out. And the sergeant that I had-- so I saw him, and I started getting up. This lieutenant comes over, and he said, Suitor, and I said, yes, sir. He said, come on and go with me. He said, I understand you're a dog handler. And I said, yes, sir. He said, well, let's go in here.

[00:06:01.04] He went in and started chewing out the first sergeant, and told him-- he said, this guy has had special training. He said, I'm having to go out and beg people to come in to be dog handlers to walk point. He said, he has already trained. He says, now I know where all my people are going. He said, you're shipping them to the infantry. And he said, I'm taking him with me.

[00:06:22.73] And he told me-- he said, go put your bag in my Jeep. And I looked at the first sergeant and I said, what do I do? He said, he outranks me. I said, well, I don't want to be counted AWOL. He said, you won't. He said, we know where you're at.

[00:06:35.39] So they carried me to the 38th. He told me, go pick me out of bunk and put my stuff up, and he would find out where I was supposed to go. So I said, yes, sir. So I hung around for about two weeks. I helped them feed the dogs, clean the kennels, do anything that I could. Well, he called me over and told me. He said, well, I found out. You're supposed to go to the 44th Scout Dog Platoon.

[00:06:57.01] But he said, how do you like it here? And I said, well, I like it. He said, well, I'll tell you what. He said, I have a dog. He said, his handler was killed a few weeks ago and no one can read the dog. And if you can read him, you can stay here.

[00:07:13.80] And I said, well, that sounds fair. So they carried me out. And most of our dogs are pretty much full blood German shepherds. But the military will take them if they've got a quarter. So I go out and get this dog, looks like a Heinz 57. His ears kind of droop.

[00:07:29.07] JOE GALLOWAY: When you talk about reading a dog--

[00:07:31.56] JERRY SUITOR: Have you ever bird hunted?

[00:07:33.12] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:07:34.26] JERRY SUITOR: You know how your bird dog works?

[00:07:35.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:07:36.57] JERRY SUITOR: That's the same. The same principle. When those ears go up or their body tenses, you know it. And if you've got that leash on, especially at night, you could actually feel that dog, the tension of him pulling. If he smells something, he's going to start going to it. Or if it's a booby trap, he will actually sit down in front of it. We trained them to sit down and block the trail.

[00:08:03.89] And my dog actually has saved me from walking into punji pits, and a booby-trapped grenade before that. I had a lot of faith in that dog. I do. We are a team. He was just a light brown dog. And I said, well, if it's going to save me from going somewhere else, I will try to do it. So they go out put out decoys. And he tells me to go up and smoke a cigarette, and he'll come back and get me when he's ready.

[00:08:36.70] So we start up the trail. And I called an alert. He said, well, where is it? And I said, well, it's probably 30 meters up the road. He said, well, let's move on just a little bit further. So we go just a few steps, and the dog alerts again. And I stop him. And I call an alert. And he said, let's go a little bit farther. He said, are you sure? And I said, yes, sir.

[00:09:03.88] So I get up there, and the dog was alerting strong this time. He is really pulling on the leash. And I stopped him and I said, sir, I said, there's something up there. So he tells the decoy to stand up. And he said, that dog alerted quite a ways down the trail. He said, and you picked him up. You pinpointed where he was at. He said, that's good. But he said, I'm still not satisfied, and said, I want to see something else. And I said, OK.

[00:09:33.81] So I go back and smoke another cigarette. And probably 15, 20 minutes, he comes and gets me. He said, OK, let's go back. And he said, now, remember, he said, the scent of the first decoy will still probably be there. And he said, the dog may alert. And I said, I know.

[00:09:50.13] So we go up the trail and go on past where the-- of course, the dog does kind of look, but doesn't hold the alert. So we go on up the trail. And about the time I rounded the corner, he alerts. So I called the alert, and I stopped the dog. And he said, OK, where is it? So I'm sitting down and I'm pointing to where the dog is alerting.

[00:10:12.59] In the meantime, the dog turns to the other side of the road and alerts on it. And I said, well, wait just a minute. I said I'm picking up something else. He said, like what? I said, well, he's alerting on both sides. He said, kind of like an L-shaped ambush? And I said, yes, sir. He said, is that what you want to call it? I said, yes, sir. He said, decoy, stand up. These two guys stood up.

[00:10:35.81] He said, OK. He said, let's go take a break for lunch. He said, but we're coming back and do it one more time. So we went back. Took a break. And after lunch, he said, OK, so we're going to do it against. He said, I'm almost satisfied, but not 100%.

[00:10:52.88] So after lunch, we went back, and went through the same deal. Went down the road, and the dog alerted. He said, decoy, stand up. The decoy stood up. And he said, I've had enough. Let's go. He said, you've got the-- he said, now, if you want another dog, you can have any dog that's available, or you can keep Paddy. And I said, well, what's going to happen to him? He said, we're going to put him down. And I said, no, sir. You're not. I kept the dog the whole time.

[00:11:30.65] JERRY SUITOR: From feeding the dogs, cleaning the kennels, combing them, training them, plus doing our daily routines in the company area or wherever we was at if we

wasn't on patrol. When we went out, we went out from anywhere from 3 to 5 days. We would come back in for about three days.

[00:11:53.99] JOE GALLOWAY: You would be attached to an infantry outfit?

[00:11:56.48] JERRY SUITOR: Yes. Yes. I've worked with Cav. I've worked with 4th of the 9th. I've worked with 101st Airborne. We were assigned mostly to the 1st of the 27th Wolfhounds. And I worked with them. I worked with the 2nd of the 27th. We were attached to Headquarters Company. And when anyone needed a dog team, they called headquarters. We'd get on a truck, a chopper, whatever--

[00:12:25.25] JOE GALLOWAY: And get out there--

[00:12:26.09] JERRY SUITOR: We did not know where we were going. We didn't know who we were working with. And we went out. We introduced-- we'd go to the headquarters company, introduce ourselves. They would brief us on where we were going, what we was going to do. And we went on patrol. Most of ours were nighttime ambush patrols. We would do a few village sweeps. But most of ours were nighttime.

[00:12:51.01] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, they had you walking point?

[00:12:53.26] JERRY SUITOR: Yes.

[00:12:54.63] JOE GALLOWAY: So you're going out with a--

[00:12:56.31] JERRY SUITOR: Yes.

[00:12:56.52] JOE GALLOWAY: --strange outfit you've never walked with before?

[00:12:59.31] JERRY SUITOR: Yes.

[00:12:59.64] JOE GALLOWAY: And you're their eyes and ears?

[00:13:01.38] JERRY SUITOR: Yes.

[00:13:02.46] JOE GALLOWAY: That's pretty dangerous business.

[00:13:03.69] JERRY SUITOR: We actually had a bounty on our head-- the dog. And they said, get the dog first, and the handler second. [LAUGHS] All they had to do is cut that tattoo out of that dog's ear and they might get a few more bowls of rice or whatever. But the bounty wouldn't be that much. But then they could cut our insignia off of our uniform and they'd get a double.

[00:13:31.67] JERRY SUITOR: Well, you learn to hate them, but you also learn to respect them. Those people-- it's hard to say. You see the way they live, the way they survive, and you kind of wonder what you would be doing if you were in their shoes. They could take anything and make-- they could take a Coke can-- or Coke cans-- and build a house, with the shingles and the siding,

and mirrors, booby traps, anything. They could take and just-- their imagination was just amazing, I think. And good carpenters. They worked, most of them.

[00:14:18.35] Now, if you found the men laying up in the daytime, you pretty well knew what they were doing at night.

[00:14:28.71] JERRY SUITOR: We had a good relationship. We were a close unit like, say the-- of course, I guess every group of military, they got-- well, it's a band of brothers. You band together. And our dog handlers, it didn't matter if you were Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines, you've got a special bond, and it's with that dog. And it bonds you to other people in the same situation.

[00:14:59.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial or social backgrounds during your time in Vietnam that you might never have done in civilian life?

[00:15:09.65] JERRY SUITOR: Yes. Just like I say, the first lieutenant, when he came down-- it's very unusual at that time period to see a black officer. And I learned to respect this man. And I would have followed him anywhere into battle. And we still keep in touch. When he got out, he went into the FBI. He's retired out of the FBI now and opened up his own security business. But we still keep in touch. And I think he's a wonderful guy.

[00:15:38.93] Like I say, he's-- in the '60s, even other blacks come in, they would come in and kind of look around where to find a bunk. There'd be one right beside me. I said, well, here's an empty bunk. Oh, you don't mind? I said, why should I mind? You're going to be out there in the field with me. But a lot of them did have problems. But most of us, like I say, we worked them out. Because we knew what we were going to-- we had a job to do, and we were going to do it.

[00:16:11.20] JOE GALLOWAY: What did you do for recreation or off-duty activities if you had any?

[00:16:16.18] JERRY SUITOR: Well, when we wasn't out, we actually-- we would go to Saigon, and we'd buy our dog food or get our dog food. We'd also pick up a pallet of beer and a few cases of whiskey. And we built our own club. And we would trade the beer for cases of chicken. We had a lot of friends in motor pool, so we got some barrels and built us some grills. And we had barbecues and invited a few of the Donut Dollies down. So we partied some.

[00:16:53.56] There wasn't a lot to do. We had a volleyball net. We had a basketball net. And we had horseshoes. We could go to special services. And if they wouldn't give them, we had a chaplain that was a good friend of ours.

[00:17:08.14] JOE GALLOWAY: He could get them?

[00:17:08.80] JERRY SUITOR: The chaplain could get more stuff than anyone on that base. And we were also scroungers. We scrounged around. Actually--

[00:17:16.65] JOE GALLOWAY: What base were you located--

[00:17:18.79] JERRY SUITOR: I was at Cu Chi.

[00:17:19.56] JOE GALLOWAY: At Cu Chi?

[00:17:20.38] JERRY SUITOR: At Cu Chi.

[00:17:21.34] JOE GALLOWAY: The famous tunnels.

[00:17:22.63] JERRY SUITOR: Yes. Yes. And we were right on the edge of the bunker line. There was nothing between us and the wire out there except the dogs.

[00:17:35.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Do you have any specific memories of the popular culture, music, books, film, from your time in Vietnam?

[00:17:44.15] JERRY SUITOR: All of the '60s music. It's the greatest and it still is the greatest. And I've got copies. I've got over 600 songs--

[00:17:51.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, my.

[00:17:52.54] JERRY SUITOR: --all of the top 100 from 1966 to '71.

[00:17:56.65] JOE GALLOWAY: What is the one song that sticks in your head?

[00:17:59.53] JERRY SUITOR: Oh, gosh-- Spooky. I come from a small town in the country, and everybody thinks, well, you're supposed to like Country and Western music. Well, I did. But I also-- gosh, I like soul music. I like James Brown, Aretha Franklin. Just any of it. It was all great music. And my grandson, I get him out there, and we still listen to it. And he gets to clapping his hands. He's only 11 months old. But I'm breaking him in right.

[00:18:31.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Breaking him in right.

[00:18:37.29] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions that you witnessed, combat operations in which you participated?

[00:18:44.44] JERRY SUITOR: Well, all of the Tet Offensive. We were all over at the Hoc Mon Bridge. We were there. We went up to-- I might be wrong on the pronunciation, but it was about five clicks from the Cambodian border. And there was a Kon Tum and a Katum. And we was the one right, I guess, north of Tay Ninh. And when we got there, they told us go pick out-- there was a bunker-- said there's an empty one over there. And said, either that or, he said, you can find somebody that's got room and just bunk in with them. So I said, well, there's four of us. We'll take the empty bunker.

[00:19:28.07] Well, they didn't bother to tell us that it got hit with a mortar round the night before and three guys had got killed. And so we're sitting around. One of the guys comes over. He says, oh, you got the Lucky Hotel. I said, Lucky Hotel? He said, yes, had three guys killed here last night. Said, Charlie's got this bunker zeroed in. I said, well, now you tell us. He said,

well, we put a layer of sandbags, but there's two more-- enough for two more layers if you want to put it on there. And I said, we'll put it on.

[00:19:55.82] JOE GALLOWAY: We'll put it on.

[00:19:56.42] JERRY SUITOR: So we worked all afternoon, filling up sandbags, and put them on that. And probably about-- it was about getting dusk. A chopper come in to bring supplies. Here comes the mortar rounds. The first one landed out close to the chopper. Well, it took off.

[00:20:16.85] The second one landed in front of our bunker. Well, we all dove in. And my dog is sitting in the doorway of the bunker. And the third one-- we got a direct hit on the bunker. Of course, my steel pot was sitting on the bunker. My shirt was laying on the bunker. Because I had just got through watering my dog and I'd washed my feet. And I was going to get a cold Ballantine-- or a hot Ballantine beer. And we had four air mattresses in the bunker. All four was flat. One guy had a scratch. And my dog got hit in the neck.

[00:20:54.11] JOE GALLOWAY: Not bad, though?

[00:20:55.16] JERRY SUITOR: Not bad. We could have all been dead if we hadn't put them other layers of sandbags on there. But I went over and told the CO my dog was hit. I said, I don't know how bad. I said, but there's an entry wound, an exit wound. And I said, it's right in the middle of his neck. I said, I can't work him. So he said, well, we've got a medevac coming in. It's going to take some of the guys out. He said, be out there. He said, you've got about three seconds to get on it. If you're not, he's leaving. And I said, I'll be on it.

[00:21:28.97] So they flew us back to Da Nang and carried us to the hospital there. Well, the guy said, I don't work on animals. I work on people. So they actually flew me back to the division veterinarian, and they operated on him all night. And he made it. So we went back to the field. But that was one of them.

[00:21:52.65] JERRY SUITOR: Well, I'm getting cold chills on me now. Like I say, they called us and told us we needed a dog team, and they would be there within 15, 20 minutes to pick us up. I mean, we had to throw some stuff together. And the way they talked, said, you'll be going into a hot LZ, and so be prepared.

[00:22:19.58] The chopper flies into the back of our area. Me and my dog get on it. And they told me-- he said, you'll be joining the tracker team. He said, they're already out there, en route, but said they want a scout dog as a backup. He said, you'll be working with them. And I said, yes, sir.

[00:22:38.30] So when we got there, my dog was laying-- he loved to lay with his feet hanging on the edges of the chopper, his nose out in the wind. Well, the chopper pilot didn't bother to tell us that he was going to drop us down so quick. But he leaned that chopper over on the side, and my dog slides out. And I'm sitting here, trying to hold a waterproof bag with the dog food and our supplies, my rifle, and the dog.

[00:23:06.53] JOE GALLOWAY: And the dog.

[00:23:07.64] JERRY SUITOR: And I'm trying to get someone to help me. Well, they're all hanging on too. And the dog is-- I'm holding him like this, and my rifle is under my arms. I can't pull him. And I told that chopper pilot-- I said, you better get my dog out on the ground. I said, he's fixing to--

[00:23:26.24] JOE GALLOWAY: Fall.

[00:23:27.18] JERRY SUITOR: Well, he's going to die, because I had a choke collar on him. And when we hit the ground, his tongue was already turning black. But we got him going. So I went over and told the CO. And he said, well, we'll give you a few minutes, but said, we've got to hit the trail. And he introduced his self as Lieutenant Ford. And it was with the 2nd of the 12th Infantry Division. And we was at Trang Bang. And I said, OK.

[00:23:59.34] So they said, well, we've got some tracker dogs here, and said, you're going to be-- said, we've got a blood trail over here. Said, we're going to go over there. Said, we want you to stay and lead the patrol, till we get to where the blood trail is. And said, then the tracker dogs will take over. But said, we still need you in the background. Said, we've been in contact with the enemy. So I said, yes, sir.

[00:24:23.24] So we go several clicks. Well, we go through this a little old place, and there's a guy sitting in a hooch-- Vietnamese. And he's sitting there eating pineapple. Lieutenant Ford reaches over to get a piece of this pineapple and eats it. Tries to talk to him. He won't talk.

[00:24:40.04] So we go on, get over to where we find the blood trail. And he said, well, I'm going to send these two guys on down. And there just happened to be a bomb crater there where they had been going in there, dropping their bombs. And so we sat there by it. And the two guys come running back, and we can hear some AK-47. He said, oh, there's some gooks down there. Said, they started shooting at us. Said, they've got RPG rounds. And he said, they're coming. They're following us. And we've got to get out of here.

[00:25:11.51] So Lieutenant Ford told me-- he said, I'm calling in artillery. Said, take cover. So we got down in the bomb crater. And I got my dog and I'm holding him. Then he said, when that artillery round-- when the first one hits, he said, don't run, but let's get up and let's get out of here. He said, you lead us back out the same way we came in. I said, yes, sir.

[00:25:33.50] That first round hit. We took off. And on the way, he hollered and told us to slow down, said, let the others catch up. We was walking fast. We wasn't running. Well, we looked out across the field. Well, here goes this Vietnamese that was up there eating the pineapple with a bicycle, and it's got a rocket launcher on the back. And he's probably 600 meters from us. And the lieutenant said, can you hit him from here? He said, I haven't got any guys that's very good shots. And I said, you're an infantry unit. I said, I could probably hit him. But I said, just think-- I said, if I miss, he's got a rocket launcher.

[00:26:13.57] He said, well, that's OK. Just let him go. He said, I'm calling in the airstrike also. He said, they'll take care of him.

[00:26:22.24] So we move out again. We come up to some berms where the rice paddies berms are. And there's a wood line there-- a hedgerow. And he hollers and tells us to hold up. So we get inside the hedgerow and we're waiting. Well, here comes one of the tracker dogs, a sergeant, running. He said, they're coming. They're coming. I said, who? He said, the Viet Cong. He said, they're fixing to overrun us. He said to take cover.

[00:26:50.84] Well, just right at the corner of the hedgerow there was two pretty tall trees. And I started for it. And I said, that would be good cover. I'm covered from three directions. I would have a good-- and get between the trees, I would have a good place to fire from. Well, about that time, that sergeant jumped up there where I was going. And all of a sudden-- I mean, it broke loose.

[00:27:20.16] He got a direct hit with a rocket. And they opened up with M60s. Our gunships saw us and thought we was the Viet Cong. They killed two guys-- they were both the tracker dog teams-- and wounded six before we could get on the radio. And Lieutenant Ford was shot through the stomach. And he hollered for somebody-- the radio guy, I don't know what happened to him. I don't know if he got hit or whatever. Our medic was hit. And it blew his shoulder-- pretty much messed up his shoulder. He couldn't-- had another corpsman there that was trying to work on him. But the lieutenant said, well, get the radio and call them off.

[00:28:11.07] And I run over there. I didn't know the call sign. I didn't know anything. And I started hollering. Another guy, finally, he ran over and grabbed the radio out of my hand and started cussing them. Then they quit. But if they hadn't, they still had another volley of rockets that they could've fired at us. But then they came down and I had to go over and help pick up the sergeant. He was blown nearly in half. He was still alive, hollering.

[00:28:39.72] We made a stretcher out of our shirts and put him on the chopper. And that bothered me for 30 years. I had not ever talked to any of his family-- no one. And thank god for the internet. It was one of the military posts. I got on there and I was reading it. And some guy from California had put on there and said something about a dog team that had gotten killed by their own helicopters up at Trang Bang. And it was on May 23, 1968. That was that incident. That was the day.

[00:29:29.67] And so I wrote back. And he happened to be the medic. So we got to communicating. And he said, where in Texas do you live? And I told him. He said, well, I'm going to be coming within 18 miles of where you live. Can we meet? And I said, yes. So it turned out his brother lived up there. And another guy that was actually with us at the unit lived just north of there. So they had a reunion, and I was invited. And now I'm part of their team.

[00:30:09.78] [LAUGHTER]

[00:30:12.12] They have me actually listed on their roster with the 2nd of the 12th Infantry Division.

[00:30:16.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Amazing. Amazing.

[00:30:18.66] JERRY SUITOR: It was Charlie Company. But then someone-- because of that, I had put on there-- and they had told me that-- the guy's name that had got killed. Actually, I didn't know-- I couldn't remember what the sergeant's name was or the other dog handler. And I think he was a forward observer that was with it. There was usually a five-man team with the tracker dogs. Scout dogs was myself and the dog.

[00:30:46.71] But I went to the Wall and I found his name. And when I saw it, it said on there, Killed by hostile fire. Well, that made me mad. Because I knew it wasn't hostile fire. It was friendly fire. And I put a note on there that I was with him and I would like to talk to some of the family. And probably about a month later, his nephew wrote me and wanted to know if I would talk to his wife. He said, she's terminally ill. And said, his son couldn't deal with it. He killed himself when he was 17 years old.

[00:31:21.96] And I said, well, if she's terminally ill, do you want me to tell her? He said, well, let me talk to her. And he talked to her, and she said, I want to know the truth before I die. So we called and talked for an hour. And that took a weight off of my shoulders that's been there for 30 years.

[00:31:48.00] And then I finally got to talk to the other guy's niece. In fact, I talked to her during-- what was it-- last Memorial Day? She got on Facebook and saw where I had put their deal that was posted on the Wall. I put it on my web page in honor of them. And she saw it and called, and wanted to talk to me. So that's helped.

[00:32:21.55] JERRY SUITOR: When our helicopters opened up on us. I've been getting shot at-- and I've been shot at three or four times by friendly fire. But that was the worst, when you have to sit there and actually fold someone in half to get them on a chopper, because you can't carry them. And listen to the screams. And I actually picked his foot up-- or his shoe up-- and his leg and foot is still in it.

[00:32:57.72] JERRY SUITOR: When I got on that plane coming home.

[00:32:59.39] [LAUGHTER]

[00:33:01.74] We went to-- I guess it was Bien Hoa Airport, and got on that plane. And I'm sitting there-- because I loved to take pictures. I had a 35-millimeter camera. And I'm sitting there taking pictures out the window. So when we get to-- well, we stopped in Guam. Of course, they wouldn't let us get off the plane. And we fueled up with us on it. And flew-- when we were coming in to Hawaii, they got on the radio and told us that they had found a bolt on the landing gear at Guam.

[00:33:40.45] And so the flight attendant-- he's coming in and he's taking up the floorboard. And I said, what are you-- right beside my seat-- I said, what's going on? He said, we've got to check the landing gear to make sure it's going to go down so the pilot don't have to hand-crank it. So

he's sitting back there, and I said, well, are we going to be able to land? He said, well, I hope so. He said, we may have to take the ocean.

[00:34:06.91] And I said, man, all the way out of Vietnam and here I am in Hawaii. I said, at least I'm on American soil, I guess. So we're circling Hawaii to burn up our fuel. And the guy gets over and he cranks the landing gear down. And we have to fly by the tower. And they're checking to make sure it's down. So we're coming in. Well, here comes the ambulance and the fire truck. And I'm still taking pictures, with the pineapple field and the fire-- I've got one of the fire trucks. It's on that disk.

[00:34:40.86] Well, the stewardess-- a little blond-headed girl-- she's scared to death. She came back and she said, sir, you need to get in the crash position. I said, we're still not landed yet. I said, I'll get down. She said, you are so calm. I said, lady, I've been to Vietnam. I said, if I die, I'm on American soil. She said, oh, my goodness. Said, can I sit by you? Said, if I need some help, if something goes wrong, can I count on you to help me? I said, well, if we're alive, well, you can.

[00:35:10.18] So when we landed, she bought me an ice cream cone.

[00:35:12.83] [LAUGHTER]

[00:35:22.09] JERRY SUITOR: The Koreans, the Australians, there were quite a few there. We actually had some that came down to our club. And we had one that liked to drink. And he'd want to buy everybody a round, and then he wouldn't want to pay. And we couldn't get him out of the club. I actually had a dud--

[00:35:42.88] JOE GALLOWAY: Must have been an Australian?

[00:35:43.93] JERRY SUITOR: Yeah. I actually had a dud grenade. We got him out of the club.

[00:35:47.65] [LAUGHTER]

[00:35:49.95] I got in trouble. But we all had a good sense of humor, in a way. I mean, we had fun times, but we had bad times. You had to take it.

[00:36:06.13] JERRY SUITOR: Well, when we were back in base camp, I would write. And I kind of made a mistake and we got-- it was during the Tet Offensive. We got a mortar round attack. And we got one that hit our hooch. I got the tail section through my bunk. And it's just lucky I wasn't in it. The first one landed outside. And of course, when they start coming in, you can get pretty fast on your feet.

[00:36:38.66] Well, we ran and dove in the bunker. And after it was all over, we got out. Well, I had a friend that had been to the dentist and had some teeth fixed. Well, they had gave him a Darvon, and of course he had smoked a joint and drank a few beers. And he was out. But anyway, when we were on the way out, I hollered and someone answered, and I thought it was him.

[00:37:02.59] And when we got in the bunker, someone come walking out of the bunker-- or out of the hooch-- after it'd been hit. And I said, somebody just came out of that bunker. And they said, well, that was Kelly. I said, Kelly is in here. And they said, no, he's not. He said, no-- here I am. And I said, when I hollered at you, you answered. And he said, no. He said, I didn't know anything until something went off in there.

[00:37:28.67] And we got at it. It looked like if you'd took a 12-gauge shotgun and peppered his chest, just from the shrapnel. But on the side of his neck, he had blood running down on each side. Well, the lieutenant that I was telling you about, the black lieutenant, he came running from their bunk, their hooch, and the vet tech came running over there-- mortar rounds still coming in-- and wanted to know if he was all right. And we said, well, Kelly's hit.

[00:37:59.61] So the veterinarian was looking at his neck. He said, he's got blood running down both sides of his neck. And he kind of feels it. He said, that's where the jugular vein is at. He ran back to where he had all of his medical supplies for the dogs and got a bandage, and come back and bandaged his neck. Him and the lieutenant got in a Jeep and drove him to the 12th Evac Hospital. They said, when they got up there and took bandage off, said the blood just-- when it had went through, it had seared enough--

[00:38:37.04] JOE GALLOWAY: To hold it.

[00:38:37.85] JERRY SUITOR: To hold it. But they saved him. But I wrote home about that. And I got this big, long letter from my brother-- not my mother, but my brother. And he said, Jerry, you talk about the weather, talk about the dogs, talk about your cookouts, talk about the girls. Don't tell mother what's going on. And I realized I had messed up and I'd done wrong. So from then on, it was about the weather, my dog, and her cookouts.

[00:39:11.39] JOE GALLOWAY: Don't tell mama the truth.

[00:39:13.04] JERRY SUITOR: No. And she kept every letter I had. And also, I bought a little reel to reel. We made disks. And I shipped one home and I kept one. So we made tapes and sent them back and forth to each other.

[00:39:29.99] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news, if any, did you receive about the war from home?

[00:39:34.46] JERRY SUITOR: Well, we didn't do a lot of reading. But we did have a TV in the day room, and we watched some of it. We knew about Hanoi Jane. We saw the demonstrations in California. And that didn't go well.

[00:39:54.08] It got you just kind of wondering what the American people was thinking and wondering why we were over there trying to defend them and them treating-- or doing the things that they were doing, calling us baby killers and calling us names. And a lot of the guys, we would find out, would get to California, get off the plane, they would throw dog crap, spit on them. That wasn't the way of a hero's welcome to come home. They didn't do that in World War I, World War II.

[00:40:29.56] And then, when we got ready to come home, they told us-- said, if you wear your uniform home, when you get home, take it off and don't wear it. But I was proud. I fought for that uniform, and I was going to wear it home.

[00:40:48.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you?

[00:40:49.14] JERRY SUITOR: I did.

[00:40:55.27] JERRY SUITOR: Actually, I had a good experience. We got to Oakland, California. And we were going through our physical and everything. We have to go through the paper-- because I ETSed. I was through with--

[00:41:06.88] JOE GALLOWAY: You were done?

[00:41:07.15] JERRY SUITOR: I was gone. So they had a little girl up there who was typing. I think she might have been a sergeant. And of course, I come out, I was a sergeant and had on my beret. I had a black beret. I always wore it while I was over there And I had my-- I don't know-- I think I might have had jungle fatigues on. I don't know what I had. But anyway, they're sitting there. And the lieutenant is up there flirting with her.

[00:41:36.24] Well, the last bus going to the airport was out there. And I told him-- I said, do you all have my orders ready? He said, no, we're not quite through. I said, well, there goes the last bus. He said, well, you'll have to get a taxi. I said, if you get away from that girl and let her do her job and quit flirting with her, I could be out of here. I said, I ETSed. I said, I haven't had any sleep in three days. And he apologized and he left.

[00:42:01.22] [LAUGHTER]

[00:42:02.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you make the bus?

[00:42:04.05] JERRY SUITOR: No.

[00:42:04.71] JOE GALLOWAY: No.

[00:42:05.37] JERRY SUITOR: But he did get me a taxi and he paid for it. But when I got to the airport, all the flights was gone. I had to sit there all night and wait. Well, this father and his young daughter-- she was probably 18 or 19-- and they saw me and they came over and wanted to know if they could buy my supper-- or breakfast-- or whatever, because it was around 1 o'clock. And I said, no, I've already ate. But I said, I'll take some coffee.

[00:42:35.32] And they said, can we sit down and talk to you? And I said, well, I guess. I said, it depends on what you want to talk about. They had just put their son and her brother on a plane to Vietnam. They was wanting to know what to expect. And I told them, I said, don't write and ask him what's going on, because he can't tell you. I said, a lot of the places he's going to be going, he can't talk about. And I said, a lot of them, you don't want to know.

[00:43:09.48] I said, there's good times over there and there's bad times. But I said, just put his faith in God, and hope he can get you home. That's all you can do. But they sat there and talked to me all night long. So I had a good experience.

[00:43:28.50] JOE GALLOWAY: How was your reception from family and friends when you got back to Texas?

[00:43:33.60] JERRY SUITOR: Well, I actually got home a day early-- or two. I think it was two days early. And I caught the bus from Dallas to Grand Prairie, Texas. And when I got to my brother's house, there was no one there. But I had lived with them before, and I had a window back there that I had fixed where I could get in. So I crawled in the window and spent the night.

[00:44:04.66] Then I went over to the neighbors, because my car was over at the neighbor's house and they had the key. But I had got there, I think, and they wasn't there. But anyway, I got over there and got the keys to my car and I drove home. But my mother saw the car pull up. Well, she ran out. And then my dad and my brother was out dove hunting. So they wasn't expecting me. But it was good, though. I got to surprise them.

[00:44:37.97] JOE GALLOWAY: How much contact have you had with your fellow veterans over the years?

[00:44:43.85] JERRY SUITOR: Well, like I say, until the internet came along, I didn't get to talk to any of mine. The group that I was with was the 38th. We have never, any of us, got together.

[00:44:54.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Never had a reunion?

[00:44:55.55] JERRY SUITOR: Never had a reunion. I've tried to get them to-- let's meet in Branson, Missouri, or somewhere. But I joined the Vietnam Dog Handlers Association. I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, to the dedication of the Dog Memorial down there. And I met a lot of great guys through that. But I keep-- there's about 15 of the guys I was with in Vietnam. We still keep in touch on the internet and call once in a while. And some, I'm still trying to find.

[00:45:27.89] JOE GALLOWAY: When you guys left Vietnam, you left your dogs behind?

[00:45:31.43] JERRY SUITOR: Yes. That's the hardest thing you ever do is say goodbye to someone that has saved your life and saved countless other lives. And that's kind of why the Vietnam Dog Handlers Association got started-- is trying to get that stopped. And now they let the Soldiers bring them home, yes.

[00:45:51.79] JOE GALLOWAY: Bring the dogs home with them.

[00:45:52.88] JERRY SUITOR: Or to get them adopted into another family. We had probably 4,000 to 5,000 dogs went over; 250 made it home. I found out my dog was put down in 1972. He went through two more handlers before they did, though.

[00:46:11.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Saved a lot of lives.

[00:46:12.71] JERRY SUITOR: A lot of lives.

[00:46:15.94] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you have any difficulty readjusting to life after the war?

[00:46:24.02] JERRY SUITOR: I had a pretty good temper. You didn't say anything about the veterans. You didn't say anything about Vietnam. I was working at TI, and we had an old hippie down there. And he was asking me some questions. And I guess I kind of took it a little bit wrong. He said, I think I was as good as those guys that went over there. And I had a hammer in my hand and I reared back. I was fixing to hit him. And two more of the guys was listening to us. They grabbed me.

[00:47:02.27] Well, I had to go into the general foreman to explain what happened. I didn't get fired. Even when I left, they offered me a job as a lead in management. I told them-- I said, you know, it just-- but they explained real quick not to talk about Vietnam to me.

[00:47:18.38] And then I had another guy that made a comment to some girls up there one night that I-- someone had been bringing drugs around. And they said something about, I'd been to Vietnam-- I'd probably done that. And I heard it. I smoked pot one time while I was over there. I would drink beer. I would drink whiskey with you. But I didn't do the marijuana or pot, or anything.

[00:47:44.90] Well, he had a whole carload of girls that he was trying to impress. Well, I run him down one night. Pulled up in front of him. Went over and pulled his door open. And I told him-- I said, if I ever hear you say I've done that, I will whoop you. [LAUGHS]

[00:47:59.81] But yeah, I do have a temper whenever-- it don't take mu--

[00:48:04.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Certain things.

[00:48:05.33] JERRY SUITOR: Certain things will set you off. And you don't walk up behind me and holler or drop anything.

[00:48:19.51] JERRY SUITOR: That's something you don't forget. I can go-- and just like today-- I can start talking and think about things that happened. But like I say, the friendly fire was probably the most-- that stayed with me more than anything. Why? With the technology that we had-- but I know people get so excited in the events that's going on that-- but they need to be more careful and look to see what's happening before they take someone's life.

[00:48:55.11] And I think you ran into some of that same situation pretty much.

[00:48:58.44] JOE GALLOWAY: I did.

[00:48:59.17] JERRY SUITOR: We ended up going out on patrol-- and I don't even know what unit I was with. And a lot of times I got stuck with some pretty fresh units. The guys hadn't been in country very long. And we had to go over to this ARVN compound. And they opened up with grenades on us, firing grenades out there, with the M79 grenade launcher. And one hit-- my dog

actually backed out of the harness. And I'm trying to holler and find my dog. And this is at nighttime.

[00:49:32.76] And we're getting-- one of the guys said, that's coming from that ARVN compound. We get on the radio and called. Oh, no, we know where you're at. Said, the Viet Cong is between you and them. Said, we're firing at the Viet Cong. They fired again. And we said, no. We said, you're firing at us. I told them-- I said, well, tell them we're fixing to open up with everything we've got and call in artillery and airstrike if they don't quit firing. And we did. But they fired-- I don't know-- six or seven grenades out there. It's a good thing they wasn't good shots.

[00:50:09.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:50:11.37] JERRY SUITOR: Well, we go on down the trail, and we come up-- going down a rice paddy berm. And with a dog, we could walk down it and hoping we could find the booby traps if they had any in there. We come and we make a L. And I'm walking across here. Well, all of a sudden, here comes this automatic rifle fire. Just happened-- somehow there's always a bomb crater around when you need it. Me and the lieutenant and the radioman and my shotgun guard jumps in there. And he said, that's where we came from. He said, that's the guys behind us.

[00:50:48.78] So we get to hollering ceasefire. Well, the guys in the back of patrol saw us and thought we were Viet Cong and opened up on us. Two times in one night.

[00:50:58.90] We didn't go-- finish going to where-- we set up there-- we said, well, there's a trail here, so we're going to say they're coming down this trail. And we called in and let them know where we were at.

[00:51:11.52] Then we had ARVNs opened up with their helicopters on our little forward base camp there one night. We was on patrol when they done it. But we found bullet holes in the sandbags on our bunkers. Interesting place.

[00:51:29.41] JOE GALLOWAY: Is there any memory or experience from your time in Vietnam that has stuck with you through the years and had a lasting influence on your life?

[00:51:40.23] JERRY SUITOR: I guess the one about Billy Joe and Rodney that has stayed with me. It's a nightmare that you can't forget. And I think that's what pushes me to do something like I'm doing today maybe-- to tell the future generation, don't do this again. Learn from our mistakes.

[00:52:09.07] JOE GALLOWAY: How did your experience in Vietnam affect the way you think about veterans coming home from combat today?

[00:52:18.20] JERRY SUITOR: Well, we know what they're going through. And we know what we're fighting for. And sometime I don't think our politicians do. And I feel sorry for them. But I do want to welcome them all home and thank them for their service. When I see them, I thank them, shake their hand, and tell them I appreciate it.

[00:52:52.80] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today, or is it?

[00:52:58.71] JERRY SUITOR: When they brought that 3417 exhibit to our town-- we have a town of 1,600 people-- we had over 2,000 people came in to view it. And that's a pretty good deal. But our school children came in. They did not know anything about Vietnam. They had all kind of questions. There's a small paragraph in the history books about Vietnam-- and Korea. Korea is the same way.

[00:53:32.59] We actually had one woman-- we were taking up donations to bring it in-- we had one woman that made the comment-- and it is a good thing I wasn't there-- because I would have probably said something I would have regretted-- but she said, we do not want to honor the Vietnam War. And a lady that had asked her, looked at her and said, we're not honoring the war. We're honoring the heroes that died.

[00:54:00.85] And I would have probably had a different one if I had been there. But here, again, she went-- her and her boyfriend went over and went to Normandy beach and got a picture of her standing on the beach. I said, we can honor World War I, World War II, but why not Vietnam? People die in every war. What's the difference? We're all fighting for the same thing.

[00:54:35.95] JOE GALLOWAY: In the end, what did that war mean to you and your generation?

[00:54:40.36] JERRY SUITOR: I'm glad I done it. I mean, I'm glad I went over. It taught me to respect life. It taught me to respect people. And I feel like, if I hadn't went, I would have probably ended up in prison or jail or dead on a highway somewhere.

[00:55:10.08] I don't know. I'm not saying I liked the war. I respect what I went over there and I done. I'm glad I done it. And if I had it to do over again, if I was young, I would probably do it-- if I could do it with a dog.

[00:55:38.34] JOE GALLOWAY: Have you been to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in DC?

[00:55:41.88] JERRY SUITOR: I have not. I've been to the traveling deal. But that's on my bucket list. If I can ever get up there, I'm going.

[00:55:55.14] JERRY SUITOR: I think it's a great idea. And I think we should let our younger generation know what went on. Because, like I say, they're not teaching it in the history books. They're still wanting to try to forget it. And even the VA, I think they want us all to die off so they won't have to take care of us. [LAUGHS]

[00:56:15.64] JOE GALLOWAY: Thank you, Mr. Suitor.

[00:56:17.13] JERRY SUITOR: Thank you, Joe. I appreciate it.