

Wheeler, John USMC

[00:00:16.84] JOE GALLOWAY: When and where were you born?

[00:00:18.94] JOHN WHEELER: Downey, California. September 3, 1948.

[00:00:23.78] JOE GALLOWAY: Who were your family members?

[00:00:26.41] JOHN WHEELER: Ralph and Mary Wheeler were my mom and dad.

[00:00:30.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Siblings?

[00:00:31.38] JOHN WHEELER: I have two brothers, Robert and James.

[00:00:34.52] JOE GALLOWAY: What did your dad do?

[00:00:36.53] JOHN WHEELER: He was an over-the-road trucker.

[00:00:44.38] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you grow up in Downey?

[00:00:46.72] JOHN WHEELER: No. We moved a lot. In fact, I went to 10 schools in 12 years. He was always chasing the next job.

[00:00:54.46] JOE GALLOWAY: So what do you consider your hometown?

[00:00:57.73] JOHN WHEELER: Kankakee, Illinois, which is the neighborhood bedroom community of Bourbonnais.

[00:01:04.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. How did you come to enter the military?

[00:01:09.63] JOHN WHEELER: I got the draft notice. And rather than go in the Army, the Marine Corps was taking two-year enlistments then. So actually, I volunteered in lieu of draft.

[00:01:21.88] JOE GALLOWAY: This was what year?

[00:01:23.20] JOHN WHEELER: 1968.

[00:01:29.71] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did they send you for basic?

[00:01:32.61] JOHN WHEELER: San Diego.

[00:01:33.23] JOE GALLOWAY: San Diego. And further training before you--

[00:01:38.96] JOHN WHEELER: Was Camp Pendleton. We went to ITR, and then BITS at Camp Pendleton.

[00:01:43.85] JOE GALLOWAY: ITR is?

[00:01:44.99] JOHN WHEELER: ITR is Infantry Training School. And then, following that, you have Basic Infantry Training School, which is more an advanced class.

[00:01:54.92] JOE GALLOWAY: Did the training you got prepare you for what you faced when you got to Vietnam?

[00:01:59.90] JOHN WHEELER: Yes, it did.

[00:02:00.89] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah, it did. Good.

[00:02:08.19] JOHN WHEELER: We flew by commercial flight to Vietnam out of California. And we stopped once in Hawaii for refuel, and then flew straight into Okinawa. We were there for a day and a half. And from Okinawa, we flew into Da Nang.

[00:02:24.22] JOE GALLOWAY: And this is 1968.

[00:02:27.43] JOHN WHEELER: Eight.

[00:02:28.43] JOE GALLOWAY: What month?

[00:02:29.15] JOHN WHEELER: October.

[00:02:29.58] JOE GALLOWAY: October. You missed Tet.

[00:02:32.21] JOHN WHEELER: Yes,

[00:02:34.88] JOE GALLOWAY: That's good.

[00:02:35.63] JOHN WHEELER: Yes.

[00:02:38.41] JOE GALLOWAY: What were your first impressions when they opened the door on that plane?

[00:02:42.25] JOHN WHEELER: It was hot.

[00:02:42.98] JOE GALLOWAY: It was hot.

[00:02:45.43] JOHN WHEELER: It was hot and humid.

[00:02:47.93] JOE GALLOWAY: Where did they assign you?

[00:02:49.88] JOHN WHEELER: To the 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, Bravo Company. So I flew into An Hoa. We took a C-130 down An Hoa from Da Nang.

[00:03:00.08] JOE GALLOWAY: It's only about 15 miles.

[00:03:02.27] JOHN WHEELER: It's about, yeah, 30 miles, 15. 15 to 30.

[00:03:09.10] JOE GALLOWAY: And you were assigned to Bravo Company as a rifleman?

[00:03:12.67] JOHN WHEELER: Yes, sir. As a newbie, you're learning from everybody else. But eventually, I walked point. I did the other things. When they needed a radio operator six weeks later, I volunteered for that.

[00:03:28.26] JOE GALLOWAY: That's a bullet magnet.

[00:03:30.79] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah. But what I hated most was misinformation or no information.

[00:03:36.28] JOE GALLOWAY: No information.

[00:03:36.88] JOHN WHEELER: If you had a radio, you had information.

[00:03:39.60] JOE GALLOWAY: You knew something.

[00:03:41.11] JOHN WHEELER: Sure. JOHN WHEELER: You could never ask for better guys. They would give you the last drop of water, their last cigarette. If you didn't have one, they'd share it. They'd break it in half and give you half of the last cigarette. And they would give you half of their canteen if yours happened to be gone. And the food was the same way. It split everything right down the middle.

[00:04:05.13] JOE GALLOWAY: Did you form friendships with men from different racial and social backgrounds during your time in the Marine Corps you might not have had in civilian life?

[00:04:14.10] JOHN WHEELER: Not so much. Most of the time, the black guys, when you come back to the rear where you would actually form your biggest friendships, they were in there with their own. We stayed with our own. That's just the way it was. Now, once you got in the hole, it's all green.

[00:04:30.51] JOE GALLOWAY: It's all green.

[00:04:31.36] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah. When we first got to Liberty Bridge, the living conditions was an old rotted-out cot and a tent full of holes. But you didn't have to worry about sleeping in it because you were on guard duty every night. And so you was either in a bunker or staying in a hole basically. After you come out of the bush, you were used to it.

[00:05:00.03] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Now, back home, there's a lot of turmoil, a lot of social tension. There's antiwar demonstrations and race riots and people getting assassinated. Did any of that tension come over to where you were?

[00:05:17.08] JOHN WHEELER: No.

[00:05:17.58] JOE GALLOWAY: No. Especially not in the field?

[00:05:20.83] JOHN WHEELER: Yes. No. We never even heard of it.

[00:05:28.91] JOE GALLOWAY: You do your entire operations down south in Da Nang or did the battalion move around?

[00:05:36.58] JOHN WHEELER: No. We did most of them south of Da Nang and then southwest of, I think, west of Da Nang, what they called Arizona Territory.

[00:05:43.56] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, yeah. Bad country.

[00:05:46.35] JOHN WHEELER: Oh, yeah.

[00:05:47.19] JOE GALLOWAY: Bad.

[00:05:48.27] JOHN WHEELER: And the other place that was just horrible was a place called Go Noi Island. And we spent two operations there.

[00:05:58.55] JOE GALLOWAY: Where was that located?

[00:06:00.11] JOHN WHEELER: It was located west of An Hoa, but it was-- well, the reason they called it an island, it was surrounded by three rivers. You've got to wade to get across it and-

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[00:06:09.80] JOE GALLOWAY: More like a peninsula.

[00:06:11.54] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah. But it was just full of snipers and booby traps. And we lost a lot of guys there.

[00:06:18.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:06:20.18] JOHN WHEELER: The leadership was outstanding. It really was. Sergeant Ulmer, when I first got there, our platoon sergeant was very wise. But he was one of the guys that got killed on Go Noi Island.

[00:06:30.36] JOE GALLOWAY: Agh.

[00:06:31.31] JOHN WHEELER: Our Lieutenant Hayes, very good man. Cared about his men. He was very particular. He got killed on Go Noi Island.

[00:06:38.00] JOE GALLOWAY: Man, that island ate up for your leadership.

[00:06:40.43] JOHN WHEELER: Yes, it did.

[00:06:41.75] JOE GALLOWAY: How was your captain, your company captain?

[00:06:44.39] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah, captain. You don't know them too well anyway, a captain. The only time I ever got to talk to him was he came around one time, and my cover was off. And he says, Marine, how long have-- when was the last time you had a haircut?

[00:07:00.51] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh.

[00:07:01.46] JOHN WHEELER: And my hair was very long. It was down to there. I haven't had a haircut since I've been here, sir. He said, well, how in the hell how long have you been here?

[00:07:10.13] [CHUCKLES]

[00:07:10.92] So when I got back, I was just like-- I'd been there like two months. I got a haircut. But the ironic part about that, the guy who was cutting our hair and cutting our hair, in March of '69 led the VC into-- when they attacked Liberty Bridge.

[00:07:28.31] JOE GALLOWAY: Ah, your barber.

[00:07:29.21] JOHN WHEELER: Yes.

[00:07:31.83] JOE GALLOWAY: Can you describe significant actions or operations that you participated in? I really would like to hear more about that island campaign.

[00:07:42.49] JOHN WHEELER: Well, as it turned out, I got cellulitis in my foot about two weeks into that campaign. And my foot swelled up about that big around. I had to go back to An Hoa for about four weeks. And while I was gone, the Lieutenant and Sergeant Ulmer and a few others, they got killed.

[00:08:00.16] And I was only out there a couple of weeks, just going through the sniper routine and patrolling. But the shit actually hit-- excuse me-- hit the fan after I had to return to get this foot taken care of.

[00:08:14.02] JOE GALLOWAY: How was the medical treatment?

[00:08:16.03] JOHN WHEELER: Medical treatment was great.

[00:08:17.65] JOE GALLOWAY: And you had clean sheets and a cot to lay in.

[00:08:20.68] JOHN WHEELER: No.

[00:08:21.31] JOE GALLOWAY: No?

[00:08:22.32] JOHN WHEELER: No. The only time I ever seen clean sheets was after I got shot we went back to Da Nang. I didn't-- not even clean. That's the first time I even seen sheets.

[00:08:31.04] [CHUCKLES]

[00:08:32.14] You go back--

[00:08:32.48] JOE GALLOWAY: They weren't that clean.

[00:08:33.87] JOHN WHEELER: Oh, no. They were clean in the hospital. But you go back An Hoa, you know, you're just talking about an Army cot. And that's all there was to sleep on. But there, again--

[00:08:45.43] JOE GALLOWAY: So it was just an aid station, not a hospital that they sent you to.

[00:08:49.37] JOHN WHEELER: No, that was to An Hoa was the regimental rear. And I'd go down to the major aid station there. And they took care of the foot. But they'd come by and pick me up on a mule and drive me down there till I was up, good enough to walk.

[00:09:02.95] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. Now, you said you got shot later.

[00:09:08.18] JOHN WHEELER: Yes, sir. That was in--

[00:09:09.32] JOE GALLOWAY: How'd that happen?

[00:09:09.86] JOHN WHEELER: June of '69. That's when we went out in Arizona Territory. It was a battalion operation. And we'd been moving every night, every night, trying to get advanced. We knew that the NVA were out there.

[00:09:25.88] But we could never find them. And we were traveling around until we finally did, and the company PC got pinned down first. And our platoon came up behind, 2nd platoon, and we assaulted a tree line for this. And we actually picked up--

[00:09:45.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Across open ground.

[00:09:46.11] JOHN WHEELER: Well, yeah. Across open ground. We laid down our-- we were laying down a base of fire and two squads, two fire teams were assaulting this tree line. And one of the guys got hit and went down. I left that particular-- out to go out and get him. And as I was carrying, dragging him back, I took it a round to the shoulder. The corpsman, he come out to help me, and he got shot.

[00:10:10.76] JOE GALLOWAY: They medevac you?

[00:10:12.32] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah. They tried twice. The first helicopter got-- after we got on it, it got shot down.

[00:10:20.54] JOE GALLOWAY: Wonderful. Where'd they evacuate you to?

[00:10:24.97] JOHN WHEELER: We went to Da Nang.

[00:10:25.94] JOE GALLOWAY: You went to Da Nang.

[00:10:27.06] JOHN WHEELER: And then from Da Nang, I went to Guam. They opened the shoulder up and did major surgery in Da Nang. And they left it open. We flew from Da Nang, spent the night in the Philippines at a hospital there, then on to Guam. And that's where they sewed the shoulder back up.

[00:10:48.79] JOE GALLOWAY: How did you-- how long were you in the hospital on that one?

[00:10:54.45] JOHN WHEELER: Almost six weeks.

[00:10:55.74] JOE GALLOWAY: Six weeks?

[00:10:56.49] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah.

[00:10:56.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Then they sent you back to Vietnam?

[00:10:58.47] JOHN WHEELER: Yes, sir.

[00:10:59.16] JOE GALLOWAY: Aaah.

[00:11:00.33] JOHN WHEELER: The ironic part about that, when we left in the first part of May, they would start this operation. As I said, we were out there a month, I got shot. I spent five weeks in the hospital, I came back to Vietnam, went back to the company. They were on the same operation. They had never come in.

[00:11:16.48] JOE GALLOWAY: They hadn't even come in.

[00:11:17.50] JOHN WHEELER: No. And so I'm back within a klick of where I got shot. We were still doing the same thing.

[00:11:23.47] JOE GALLOWAY: And they're still shooting you.

[00:11:24.78] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah. They were still shooting at us. Yes, sir.

[00:11:26.73] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:11:34.19] JOHN WHEELER: We had-- on Easter of 1969, we were at Liberty Bridge, the company was. And they always had two platoons on one side, on the north-south side, and one platoon on-- however, the Seabees were building a new bridge down there. And we decided we would maybe buy some beer from the Seabees.

[00:11:56.02] And what turned into a squad party during the day wound up being a company party for the whole two platoons of us. And we kept buying more beer from the Seabees, and we

got some whiskey. And yeah, fine. That was a great day. But after we were all done, they sent us out on an ambush that night.

[00:12:19.26] JOE GALLOWAY: Oh, God.

[00:12:20.13] JOHN WHEELER: Except for--

[00:12:21.33] JOE GALLOWAY: Everybody a little bit drunk?

[00:12:23.70] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah, everybody except PFC Quick. And he was too drunk to go.

[00:12:29.85] [CHUCKLES]

[00:12:36.22] JOHN WHEELER: The worst day would be when we got ambushed in November, right in the first week of November of '68. It was the first time I'd just become right under direct fire. I'd been sniped at, but when we came under direct fire, and the first three guys in front of me all got shot, two were dead, one was shot really bad.

[00:12:55.45] I went into the ditch and returned fire. And what that taught you-- it goes back to our training-- you had to get fire superiority. That was the only time I had ever fired my weapon on automatic, which I did. And I fired off a whole clip out there automatic.

[00:13:13.14] And then I felt like everybody was shooting at me. And I took a round to this canteen on my back, a round to the canteen on my waist, shrapnel through my shirt, never got a scratch. But when that round hit that one on my back, all that warm water ran out on me. I thought I'd been hit.

[00:13:31.23] JOE GALLOWAY: You thought you'd been--

[00:13:31.98] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah, now you're still shooting and trying to look for water. That-- I would mark that as my worst day.

[00:13:40.20] JOE GALLOWAY: That sounds pretty bad. You managed to get out of there without any further--

[00:13:45.14] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah, we got out without any further damage. But it was one of those deals, you think-- that you actually think they're not going to take me alive because I knew everybody in front of me had already been either shot really bad or killed. And I could never understand, we had tanks behind us. And those tanks never came forward to put any fire out.

[00:14:09.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Why have them if you ain't going to use them?

[00:14:11.32] JOHN WHEELER: I understand. You tell me.

[00:14:19.04] JOE GALLOWAY: How much, if any, contact did you have with our allies over there, the Australians, the New Zealanders, the Koreans, any of them?

[00:14:28.07] JOHN WHEELER: None.

[00:14:28.67] JOE GALLOWAY: None.

[00:14:28.96] JOHN WHEELER: None. JOHN WHEELER: I had never seen too many military, other than they might wave if you went through someplace. But as far as working with them, I had no contact with them. The civilian population I did see is not like the civilian population you see in the movies out of Saigon, where they're actually civilized.

[00:14:52.55] Where we seen them, it was like people living in the Stone Age. And they were clothed, and where they were living at is a big hole in the ground. And there might be a whole family down there. And their up above-ground quarters is four sticks and a thatched roof. And that's where they cooked their meals and stuff.

[00:15:13.08] JOE GALLOWAY: Is that your peasant Vietnamese family?

[00:15:16.02] JOHN WHEELER: Yes. I felt sorry for them anyway. Anybody that have to live like that the whole time.

[00:15:22.25] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:15:27.64] JOHN WHEELER: I got letters from my wife three or four times a week. And my mom and dad would write. When my dad wrote, he would write a long letter. His letters were hilarious. He was a Marine during World War II, you know, in Iwo Jima and Guam and several campaigns. And so I got a letter at one time, it was like eight pages.

[00:15:50.20] And you could have swore, you know, he would write and he'd say, had any beer today, son? I think I'll have a beer for you. On every page. And you'd think he had about 10 beers and was getting drunk.

[00:16:02.76] And I was talking to him about that, my mom said, you know how many beers he had? He only had two beers. He was writing that. But it sure sounded like he had a 12-pack.

[00:16:11.57] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:16:12.03] JOHN WHEELER: And I'd pass his letters around. Everybody read his letters.

[00:16:14.97] JOE GALLOWAY: Got a honk out of them.

[00:16:16.19] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah.

[00:16:18.14] JOE GALLOWAY: Now, when you were writing to them, were you telling them much about what you were going through?

[00:16:23.30] JOHN WHEELER: My wife and my mom and dad some, a little bit, because my dad understood. But my wife kept all of my letters the whole time I was in the Marine Corps.

[00:16:33.65] And I've got all the letters that I ever wrote her at home. In '93, before I went to the first reunion, I got them all out and read them in order. And it was like reading a diary I'd actually sent her, and she knew pretty much what was going on.

[00:16:47.78] JOE GALLOWAY: How much news did you get about this war you were fighting? About the war, about--

[00:16:54.40] JOHN WHEELER: None.

[00:16:54.92] JOE GALLOWAY: --what's going on back in the States.

[00:16:56.77] JOHN WHEELER: None.

[00:16:57.12] JOE GALLOWAY: The Stars and Stripes?

[00:16:58.96] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah, we did.

[00:17:00.62] JOE GALLOWAY: Once in a while.

[00:17:01.95] JOHN WHEELER: But usually, by the time we got them where we were at, they were two or three weeks old anyway. Somebody might have been into An Hoa and, oh, let's pick this up. I'll take it back. Hey, guess who won the World Series three months ago?

[00:17:15.66] JOE GALLOWAY: Three months ago. So the news, whatever it was, didn't affect you guys.

[00:17:23.00] JOHN WHEELER: No. Not at all.

[00:17:24.92] JOE GALLOWAY: It didn't matter.

[00:17:26.00] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah, we got a lot of rumors. We had rumors that 5th Marines were going to go afloat. And, oh really? And you know, this was a big deal. The closest we came to going afloat was our company rode some AmTracs down the river once. And that was--

[00:17:42.35] JOE GALLOWAY: So that was your float?

[00:17:43.57] JOHN WHEELER: That was our afloat.

[00:17:46.09] JOE GALLOWAY: Scuttlebutt wasn't always very accurate.

[00:17:48.86] JOHN WHEELER: No. JOHN WHEELER: Going home was great because when I got out, I had already heard rumors before I got there, hey, they're letting guys on two-year enlistments, they're letting them out. And so what they did do, I came back to An Hoa,

regimental rear, about 30 days before I rotated. They had been keeping guys out five days, six days before they rotated.

[00:18:19.21] And some of them were getting killed. Orders come down, hey, we don't want guys killed five days before their rotation date. So I was one of the first ones they started bringing them back early. But when I did get back to the United States then, I spent two weeks in Okinawa and then a week in Camp Pendleton.

[00:18:38.59] JOE GALLOWAY: What were you doing for two weeks in Okinawa?

[00:18:40.93] JOHN WHEELER: Nothing. Drinking a lot.

[00:18:42.37] JOE GALLOWAY: Beer?

[00:18:42.76] JOHN WHEELER: Drinking beer mostly. And because what they called it was just a cooling-off period.

[00:18:50.17] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. All right. You get back to-- where did you go in the States?

[00:18:54.85] JOHN WHEELER: Camp Pendleton.

[00:18:57.40] JOE GALLOWAY: How much time did you owe the Marine Corps at that point?

[00:19:01.08] JOHN WHEELER: Six and a half months more. I was only in 19 months.

[00:19:04.48] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:19:05.11] JOHN WHEELER: And 13 of those was in Vietnam. So I owed them another five months.

[00:19:09.92] JOE GALLOWAY: And they kept you at Pendleton?

[00:19:11.83] JOHN WHEELER: No, they sent me home.

[00:19:14.07] JOE GALLOWAY: They were done.

[00:19:15.04] JOHN WHEELER: They were done. But you've got to remember, I think it was the next year, they started making troop withdrawals, and they were starting to cut back a little bit.

[00:19:27.76] JOE GALLOWAY: Right. Did you have any difficulty readjusting to civilian life after?

[00:19:32.68] JOHN WHEELER: I look back now, and I think I got-- a year and a half I was at home, I got a DWI.

[00:19:42.44] JOE GALLOWAY: Only one?

[00:19:43.53] JOHN WHEELER: Yeah. Only one. One was enough. And I got picked up by the police once. We went out to a 4th of July party. This was about the first year I was home. And there was a lot of fireworks. And I'd been drinking. And I just had some really good flashbacks.

[00:20:01.88] And the next thing I know, I'm low crawling across a field. Come to a road. I know, I'll walk home. And the county sheriff picked me up and brought me in for questioning. And my wife come and got me again. Those are the two main things that really bothered me.

[00:20:24.09] JOE GALLOWAY: What were you doing at this point?

[00:20:28.16] JOHN WHEELER: I worked, went back-- my job was available for me when I came back.

[00:20:33.49] JOE GALLOWAY: Which was?

[00:20:34.32] JOHN WHEELER: Working at General Foods as a lift truck operator in the warehouse. And that's what I did for the next 31 years.

[00:20:42.36] JOE GALLOWAY: You did that for 31 years.

[00:20:44.26] JOHN WHEELER: Sure.

[00:20:44.86] JOE GALLOWAY: Wow.

[00:20:50.54] JOHN WHEELER: I think it has affected me for good because you appreciate life more. And I didn't realize how much it had affected me until I came to the first reunion and talked to guys again, which became the best therapy a guy can have. I think.

[00:21:05.72] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah. What do you think the war meant to you and your generation?

[00:21:15.14] JOHN WHEELER: To me, it was an obligation. They wanted you over there, you went over there. And to my generation, it was probably an obligation nobody wanted to fulfill. But we did the job anyway, most of us.

[00:21:34.71] JOE GALLOWAY: How do you think the Vietnam War is remembered in our society today or is it?

[00:21:41.46] JOHN WHEELER: I think it's going to be a forgotten phenomenon, just like Korea is. JOHN WHEELER: It can be heart wrenching. I wasn't-- I had seen pictures of it. But when we first went there, you find guys' names on it.

[00:21:59.83] But before we'd gone there, I'd got my first computer, and I actually looked at it up close, and looked up their names and everything. So I'd actually seen it on my computer before I got there. So a lot of that-- it helped.

[00:22:13.21] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.

[00:22:18.96] JOHN WHEELER: Oh, I think it's good for the men who were killed there. They should be remembered. Even though nobody wanted to go, those men went and gave their lives.

[00:22:31.42] JOE GALLOWAY: Yeah.