

Pointing West
Interviewer

So today is Thursday, June 23, 2011. We're here with Paul Bucha. Paul, would you just spell your name for the transcriber?

Paul Bucha

B-U-C-H-A, Bucha.

Interviewer

Bucha, not Bucha. What is the derivation of that?

Paul Bucha

It's Croatian. The H was added when my grandfather got off at Baltimore—they were too poor to get off at Ellis Island—and today, it's B-U-C-A in Našice, Croatia, where they're from. And he said his name is Buca, and the person said, "B-U-C-H-A" Buca. And then it got modified to become Bucha later on, 'cause people didn't like saying "Buca."

Interviewer

How long back do you go for your Croatian roots, then—when did your—

Paul Bucha

My grandfather was the first generation to come here. It's Croatian, Czech, Slovak, and Ukraine—that's the four grandparents—all Baltimore-based.

Interviewer

And did you grow up in Baltimore?

Paul Bucha

No, they just landed [there]—that's where, when the boats were bringing the immigrants here, the wealthy, they said, got off in New York, at Ellis Island.

Paul Bucha

The unknown part of it is they took the rest, who were steerage, and kinda dumped them in Baltimore, where it was a health check, and then if they didn't pass that, back on the boat and they went home. And so they got off there, and many of them went on to McKees Rocks [BKGPB1] and places like that, outside Pittsburgh, to work in the mills. And then, eventually they would get on another train and go to the mills on the south side of Chicago—Hammond, Gary, Indiana, that area.

Interviewer

Where did you grow up, then?

Paul Bucha

Well, I grew up as an Army brat, so my mother and father were Hammond, Indiana, and

Calumet City—south side of Chicago. My dad, World War II, ended up in the Army, because he'd been in the CCCs, and he never got out.

Interviewer

But he was enlisted.

Paul Bucha

No, officer.

Interviewer

Officer. And so you grew up

Paul Bucha

Correct.

Interviewer

And where'd you finally go to high school, then?

Paul Bucha

Two years in Camp Zama, Japan—freshman and sophomore there—and junior and senior years in St. Louis, Missouri, a town called Ladue, at Horton Watkins High School.

Interviewer

And when did the idea come to you that you wanted to go to West Point?

Paul Bucha

In Japan, my Scoutmaster was a guy named Dick Renfro, who was a second regimental commander, class of '57.

Interviewer

How do you spell Renfro?

Paul Bucha

R-E-N-F-R-O. And Dick and his wife used to be really my close friends. We would go out camping together. He would have his camp with his sleeping bag and the two of them, and I would be there maybe with one other guy. We would just go camping out throughout the countryside of Japan together. And he talked about West Point, and in his home—he was a general's aide while he was there—he had books about

Interviewer

And before you arrived as a plebe, you had never been at West Point.

Paul Bucha

No. I didn't even know where it was. In fact, I had accepted—I was a swimmer in high school, and I accepted a scholarship at Indiana and a scholarship at Yale.

Interviewer

Well, Indiana was a big swimming school.

Paul Bucha

Yeah, and Yale was, too, and I had decided, really, to go to "my family had all gone to Indiana, but I decided to go to Yale. And we were driving back from Yale, and I guess probably in February, and"

Interviewer

What year are we talking about?

Paul Bucha

1. But my dad said, "You know, we're near West Point. Would you like to go see it? I'm a regular Army officer, and you could perhaps qualify for a presidential appointment." And I said, "Sure, why don't we go look at it?" And we both

Interviewer

He had never been there either.

Paul Bucha

No, he had never been there.

Paul Bucha

So we got in our car, we hung a right off of Pennsylvania Turnpike, and started trying to find our way to West Point, and drove all the way to Poughkeepsie, looking for a sign for West Point, "cause there had to be a sign for a military academy. And we asked a guy at a gas station, "Where's West Point?" I said, "It's gotta be on the point, pointing west." He said, "No, it's on a point on the western side." I said, "But it's pointing east, then." He said, "I didn't name the place," he says, "but go back across the bridge, go south on 9W, you'll see the sign for West Point." And we did, and that's how we found it.

Paul Bucha

And then we stayed at the Thayer Hotel. Jack Ryan, the swimming coach "my dad had already called him" came to see me. I went to dinner. Had a lot of fun "went to dinner in the mess hall, watching all the people get harassed. But I sat with the athletes, where it was a little different. And on the way home, my father said, "What do you think?" I said, "Well, let me talk to the athletic director at the high school and some people, and maybe I'll do something."

Paul Bucha

The athletic director "named Steve Wilson, who'd been an Olympic swimmer from Iowa" said, "If you go for one day, you will be a better person the rest of your life. You should, if you have the opportunity, avail yourself, even if it's only for one day and you decide it's not for you." And I said, "But what about other people?" He said, "I'm talking about you. It's not what other people might not get "this is an opportunity for you to literally change the person you might be."

Paul Bucha

And so I applied and I got a presidential appointment, and we needed to see the congressman. And I started to sit down, and he said, "Don't sit down, son." And I said, "Well, what is it?" He said, "What does your father do?" I said, "My father's an Army officer." He said, "Then there's no hope." I said, "What do you mean no hope?"

Paul Bucha

He says, "I do this for what is in it for me as well as what's in it for you. That's what these appointments are here for—for us to take care of people in the community. You're not part of the community—you just got here." and I said, "So I don't get to sit down, sir?" He said, "No, you don't. Interview's over." I walked out, and my dad said, "How'd it go?" I said, "Well, it didn't go very well. I didn't get to sit down." So I just threw my fate into the presidential appointment, and Kennedy appointed me, so

Interviewer

When this coach said to you, "Go there one day, and you'll be changed," what do you think he meant by that?

Paul Bucha

I'm not sure what he meant.

Interviewer

Well, how did you take it, then?

Paul Bucha

I took it had to do with passing over a threshold, not being welcomed in by going to a fraternity party, as I had been welcomed at all the schools I was being recruited to.

Paul Bucha

But as I'd been welcomed to West Point, I was welcomed by a very formal process, brought into a mess hall of men—even though they were boys at the time, they looked like men to me—and there was a camaraderie that literally permeated the entire body that I saw before me. I hadn't seen that at any college, and I thought that's what he was talking about. You would be part of the group, that if you're a part of that group for one day, you're a better person for it.

Paul Bucha

As opposed to you're going to a school that's an institution, about which the library and the buildings and the history are more important than the students at the time. Where at West Point, no one talked about the buildings—no one talked about the library. They talked about the corps, and that was what was important. So I think that's what he was talking about—at least that's the way I interpreted it. Never really asked him why it would be different, because as a young kid, sometimes that's not the question you want to ask and have answered.

Elements of Leadership

Interviewer

Sure, but then I guess the next question would be “we don’t know what he thought. We now know what you might’ve thought, but now looking back and remembering your time there, and the corps, what does it mean to you? What does it mean to you to be part of the Long Gray Line?”

Paul Bucha

Well, West Point to me is a very special place that is the only institution or academic institution or professional institution, depending on one’s perspective, that’s sole purpose is to produce leaders.

Interviewer

Leaders.

Paul Bucha

Leaders’ period. Not combat people, not soldiers, but leaders, and when

Interviewer

In the broad sense of that term” leaders, meaning leading men through

Paul Bucha

No.

Interviewer

And women, and

Paul Bucha

In the purest sense of that term.

Paul Bucha

When I was asked to write the foreword to the bicentennial book on West Point, I remember thinking to myself that this is going to be really quite fun, because as a young officer teaching at West Point, we always knew everything that was wrong at West Point, and had been wrong forever, and if they’d only change it, then it would be a far better place. And that was the role of the junior officers, especially in the department of social sciences.

Paul Bucha

But as I was asked to write the foreword, I had to think more in terms of where did it begin and where was it now. All of a sudden, it hit me that no matter what West Point claims, everything in the curriculum, from the requirement to box, the Honor Code, the don’t let anybody fail in your squad, and why aren’t you helping, as a plebe, helping your buddy make the run” all of that focused on one thing: leadership.

Paul Bucha

And I had been asked to give a speech at the Merchant Marine Academy, 25-30 years ago, and the Merchant Marine Academy has a dinner each year where they remember an event in World War II where 250-260 cadets [of the Merchant Marine Corps] died when a German

U-boat sank a Merchant Marine vessel. And they told me they wanted me to speak about the significance of the history of the Merchant Marine, about which I knew nothing.

Paul Bucha

So I studied it and found out that they suffered more casualties in World War II than any other group, other than the chaplains. And I got to be quite impressed by them, and a lot of these were 17-16-year-old kids that kinda got themselves into the Merchant Marine. And as I was being introduced, the first captain of the Merchant Mariners of the room said, "And Mr. Bucha tonight will talk about the elements of leadership." And I said, "I think I'm doing the history of the Merchant Marine." And over the mic, the guy said, "Not tonight, sir. I'd like to know what you think of leadership, not what you might've read others think of leadership."

Paul Bucha

And in front of 1,000 people in this black-tie dinner, my first reaction was, "This country's in good hands. That young man has the courage and the confidence to do that because he had an agenda that he wanted done, and a purpose." And then I thought to myself, "Okay, what are you going to say?" And that night I decided to just speak about elements of leadership as they came to mind, and I had five of them, and I still have those five. Not four, not six, but five. And since that day, I've probably given 20-30 lectures a year on leadership to various groups, from Harvard—I spoke to the Harvard swimming team, and that's what I chose to speak about.

Paul Bucha

I do it at the Air Force Academy twice a year. And when I was writing the foreword, those five elements jumped out at me, and everything that there was at West Point, it fit into one of the five—not into a sixth or a three. I didn't have to stretch it. And now, to me, that's the message that the cadets at West Point want to hear. I've been asked to speak by cadets. I don't go to West Point very often, but I've been asked by cadets to come speak, and that's what when I ask, I said, "What do you want?" They said, "Can you go over the leadership for us?"

Interviewer

So tell me the five.

Paul Bucha

The first is honor, upon which the other four rest, and without which there is no leadership.

Paul Bucha

Next is confidence—you have to learn that you can do things that you, perhaps before you go to West Point, doubt you have the ability to do. And that's, for example, boxing. Why does everybody have to box? After you do it, you have the confidence you can do it. Why did you recite at the blackboards? Why couldn't you be like anybody else? And just because they know that one of the greatest fears each person has is publicly speaking before a group. And the worst of the groups are groups of your peers.

Paul Bucha

And yet, here you are reciting in class, and oftentimes you're reciting a wrong answer, 'cause you know it's wrong as you look around the room. And that helps you deal

with this questioning crisis of confidence that can affect any of us. Then it's competence. That's where you go through the courses. That's why they pick the courses. I used to I remember I said, "Why are we aiming dumpy levels, and running around drawing maps?"

Paul Bucha

Well, when I became an Army officer, and we look back at those times, my men say to me, "Sir, the one reason we enjoyed being in your unit, you never got lost. You always knew where we were." And as you're walking around the boonies of Vietnam, that's something you really want to know your commander has: [the] ability to read a map well. That came from an understanding in that ES and GS department "all the elements, not of what a map looked like, but where it came from" to understand contour lines. Why were they there? What's the contour of? And things at the time I kept saying, "Why are we doing this? I'm in college."

Paul Bucha

Well, it had to do with the competence required for the position to which you were going to graduate. The third one is "fourth one" I did honor, confidence, competence "compassion. And that's the one that seems to be the most controversial, because a lot of people have this image, "I don't need friends. I don't care." There have been books written by West Point graduates that when I read them sometimes I'm concerned, because it seems as if the battle in which they're engaged, and about which they're writing, is a football game. "We tried a single wing to the left. It didn't work, so I tried a quarterback sneak."

Paul Bucha

And along the way, they mention 5, 6, 9, 10, 15, 100 people died, and that doesn't fit. There's a disconnect. You didn't learn something. You didn't learn that you were asked to carry your buddy at West Point because he, like you, is a human being with needs and helps, deficiencies, and needs someone to care about him. And men, as I've found, and women, in combat in particular, know if you care about them. They need to know that you really do want to bring them home, and their parents, who have entrusted them to you, and their loved ones, are entitled to know that as well.

Paul Bucha

Well, that's where compassion comes from, "cause we're leading people, not machines. And any day they can have a bad day. And all the screaming and yelling and posturing doesn't matter. It's not going to change the fact they had a bad day. It doesn't make them worthless. It doesn't make them bad. It doesn't make them wimps. It just means they're human. And then the last one is humility, which oftentimes people said doesn't seem to fit with leadership "proud. It's nothing to do with not being proud, not being strong.

Paul Bucha

It has to do with the fact that you should recognize you've been entrusted with the most valuable resource this nation or any nation has. That's the youth. The future of the country and of the families, the people. So when I look back at my men, it's not that some died. It's that we, as a collective populace, didn't have the privilege of whatever it might've been that they would've become. And as a 23 and 24-year-old person, someone gave that to me to safeguard, and if that doesn't make you

humble, and almost overwhelmed with humility, then you're not qualified to be a leader of men. And those are the five, and it hasn't changed.

Paul Bucha

I've gotten—I mean I gave a speech at Stanford, Stanford Business School. I was giving an award—they said, “Can you talk about leadership? We've seen some of your speeches.” I said, “Okay.” And one of my classmates, who I guess saw the YouTube version of it, or someone sent it to him, wrote me. He said, “I have a sixth: determination.” And I said, “No. It doesn't fit with me. I haven't a sixth.” Not that it's not appropriate, but if you look at it, it'll fit within one or two or three of the other five. But every aspect of West Point fits into those five things.

Paul Bucha

And sometimes failing to recognize that the product is leaders, not college-educated university graduates—I mean which is basically what other people do—but rather leaders. Regardless of whether they remain in the military or not, they are committed to leadership, whether that might be in a Little League group where they decide, “I'm taking this over for the kids,” or President of the United States, if they aspire to that, or to teach those who would become President the requirements of being a leader. And so that's it.

What's the Weather Like?

Interviewer

I want to—even though we go somewhat in chronological order, jump somewhat ahead because of what you just said, too. The experience in Vietnam for which you were awarded the Medal of Honor, and to match it up with those five elements that you just described. Can you tell the story first, and then we'll examine it?

Paul Bucha

The story—I don't think the story really has anything to do with the three days. It goes back to when I first reported into the 101st [Airborne Division], and it's an important fact because that just was the culmination, if you will. That would've been—that was the final test.

Interviewer

So let's go right through that, then, to the 101st. I'll come back to West Point eventually.

Paul Bucha

I leave West Point and I decide I'm going to go to this Stanford Business School.

Interviewer

You leave West Point—you're class of?

Paul Bucha

'65.

Interviewer

â€™65, and you go to Stanford Business School.

Paul Bucha

Because ofâ€™

Interviewer

Youâ€™re commissioned, though, right?

Paul Bucha

Oh, yeah, youâ€™re commissioned, and West Point had adopted a policy, because I believe the previous class, Air Force has the policy, and a lot of the top five percent of the class opted to go Air Force. And that was if youâ€™re in the top five

Interviewer

So you didnâ€™t branch thenâ€™is that right?

Paul Bucha

Oh, I was Infantry.

Interviewer

Reallyâ€™okay, but thenâ€™and thenâ€™

Paul Bucha

My first assignment was Stanford Business School.

Interviewer

Okay, right.

Paul Bucha

I applied to Harvard and Stanford, I got in at both of them, and Harvard wrote me a letter, â€™Youâ€™re expected to matriculate on this date. We will see you here.â€™

Paul Bucha

Stanford wrote me a letter, â€™We hope you will consider us favorably. We look forward to having you.â€™ I read both letters, I called on the phone and I asked at Harvard what the weather was. It was March 30th, and it was raining at West Point with wet snow on the ground. It was 30 degrees and still raining, and Harvard, the lady at Harvard said, â€™You want to know what the weather is?â€™ I said, â€™Yeah, whatâ€™s the weather like at the business school?â€™

Paul Bucha

She said, â€™Where are you?â€™ I said, â€™Iâ€™m at West Point.â€™ She said, â€™I would suspect itâ€™s pretty similarâ€™30 degrees, raining, been that way for about a month.â€™ I said, â€™Thank you.â€™ I called Stanford, where the director of admissions from West Point was on a sabbatical, Colonel Day, and I called him. I said, â€™Whatâ€™s the weather like?â€™ He said, â€™Buddy, itâ€™s 70 degrees, not a cloud in the skyâ€™been

that way six months. So I decided, "Why not?" If no other reason, take a change of scenery.

Interviewer

Why business school?

Paul Bucha

It's one thing I knew absolutely nothing about, and that was the "I went through everything that you could go to. I said, "I've had some English, I've had some math." Because of the West Point curriculum, you pretty much get something of everything.

Interviewer

So you wanted to broaden your

Paul Bucha

I wanted to repair a deficiency that I saw in myself "fill a hole that was existing.

Interviewer

But what "did you think you'd become a businessman, or

Paul Bucha

No. I just thought that based on everything that I'd heard about Army officers, and based on my father's experience, who also had his MBA from Stanford, by the way, and ended up teaching a general officers course at Fort Harrison, Indiana,

Paul Bucha

And it's accounting, it's financial management, it's objective stating, things like that. So it was very plain and simple, just an attempt to broaden myself and to repair a hole that I had seen. And I went there "so I went in lieu of going to all the classes my classmates went "I didn't go right to Ranger School, I didn't go to the platoon training. I went to business school "finance and all the things.

Interviewer

Did you ever go to Ranger School?

Paul Bucha

Yeah, in the summer of my two years in Stanford, when everybody else goes to work for banks and things, I went to Airborne

Interviewer

And a lot about the men you eventually have to be an officer for.

Paul Bucha

Yeah. And the SEALs "there were some SEALs there, and things like that, so I didn't go with a group of West Pointers like we had done recon training as cadets. And to me, in

hindsight, that was something good. I got exposed to all of those people who really make up the backbone of the Army—the young E-5s and E-6s who wanted to become Ranger Cavalry. That’s what they were going for. So I came back to business school, I graduate from business school, and I’m assigned to the 101st. I report in to the 101st two days before they’re going to Detroit for the race riots.

Paul Bucha

And everybody told me, “You’re going to” when they explained, “You’re going to report in to the 101st. You’re going to go over to Vietnam with the entire division when it goes.”

Interviewer

101st is at Fort?

Paul Bucha

Campbell.

Interviewer

Campbell.

Paul Bucha

Kentucky.

Interviewer

Kentucky.

Paul Bucha

So I report in, and the first thing the S-1 of the battalion says, “Thank God you’re not a West Pointer.” I said, “I beg your pardon?” This is Stanford now. He says, “We’re fed up with the West Pointers.” And I said, “I don’t understand.” He says, “Well, we have a battalion commander who’s a West Pointer. There’s another West Pointer, but not a lot of West Pointers in this particular battalion.” And I said, “Well, that’s kinda interesting.”

Paul Bucha

Didn’t say “I wanted to say to him, “Excuse me,” you know, “look.” I said, “This is kinda funny.” And he said, “Tomorrow when you report to see the brigade commander, be in your uniform, do this, and just see him at 6:00 in the morning.” So I went out to Grandpa’s or whatever it was, bought some fatigues” because I had no uniforms—cause I was at Stanford. I never bought one uniform. When I was there, they assigned me to their ROTC, and “oh, we’re going to have to quit this for a second. She’s coming in, our cleaning lady.

Company Commander of One

Interviewer

So you were talking about being commissioned.

Paul Bucha

Yeah.

Interviewer

lâ€™m sorryâ€”you were reporting to the 101stâ€”lâ€™m sorry.

Paul Bucha

And I didnâ€™t have a uniform, because at Stanford, when they said, â€œYouâ€™re going to work in the ROTC department,â€ I went to Moffett Naval Air Station and bought a Marine tropical worsted blouse and trousers. Took the eagle, globe, and anchor off the buckle and shined it up, and had low quarter shoes. Didnâ€™t buy a hat â€”cause I didnâ€™t need a hat. I was going to be at Los Altos Junior College, park my GTO right outside my door, and that was the uniform I had.

Paul Bucha

So I went to the 101st, I went to Grandpaâ€™s, which is this place you could buy [military] stuff, and I bought my first lieutenant bars, and got some spray starch, had low quartersâ€”didnâ€™t think that maybe that wasnâ€™t appropriateâ€”and made the cardinal sin of putting the rank on the wrong collar. So when lâ€™ Colonel Larry Mowery â€”lâ€™ll never forget him, eitherâ€” I was supposed to see him in the morning at six.

Paul Bucha

I knocked on the door, and he said, â€œYes?â€ I said, â€œSir, lâ€™m Lieutenant Bucha.â€ He says, â€œI know who the hell you are. lâ€™m just trying to figure out what you are. Get outta hereâ€”go stand by the bush.â€ I said, â€œI beg your pardon, sir?â€ He said, â€œStand by the bush. lâ€™ll call you when I want you.â€ I stood there all day, and everybody passed, I could see that I was terribly out of place. Everybody with jump boots, spit-shined, perfectly clean, starched fatiguesâ€”just really a strack-looking unit, and into this comes this rather sloppy first lieutenant. And after everybody had left, about 6:30, he called me in, and I gone and taken bathroom breaksâ€”that was it. No food, nothing. And he said, â€œWhatâ€™d you learn?â€

Paul Bucha

I said, â€œWell, sir, lâ€™m not really attired the proper way.â€ He said, â€œThatâ€™s the first lesson any fool would understand. Letâ€™s go through yourâ€”â€ and he went through his background. And he said, â€œAnd you have your masterâ€™s degree from Stanfordâ€”I bet you think thatâ€™s pretty impressive.â€ I said, â€œYes, sir, I do.â€ He says, â€œWell, youâ€™re going to meet a guy in this brigade thatâ€™s got three masterâ€™s degrees, and he wonâ€™t frankly give a damn.â€ I said, â€œWell, sir, when I meet him, maybe I can convince him that I have something of merit, too.â€

Paul Bucha

He says, â€œYou just met him, and lâ€™m not impressed.â€ I said, â€œOkay, sir, I got it.â€ And he said, â€œNow, get out of here, put your damn rank on the right collar, go out to Grandpaâ€™s again, tell them you want to have an overnight pressing and starching of these fatigues. Get yourself some jump boots, spit-shine the damn things, â€”cause you learned it at West Point, and come back in here tomorrow morning and lâ€™m going to make you an Army officer.â€ And I didâ€”I came back in, and he said, â€œOkay, youâ€™re going to be a platoon leader for one monthâ€”then lâ€™ll figure out what to do with you.â€

Paul Bucha

And I was a platoon leader for one month, and when I came back to see him, he said, "Now you're going to become a company commander." And he explained to me that there were three rifle companies in every battalion, and the Army was going to four. And at the 101st, which was following the 82nd in doing this, the third brigade, his brigade, was the last brigade to do the expansion. And within his brigade, the 3rd Battalion of the 101st was the last battalion to do the expansion, and that expanded company was Delta Company, that did not exist, and that I was now the company commander of.

Paul Bucha

He said, "And I just want to emphasize," and he used all kind of four-letter words to describe it "what was flowing downhill. He said, "I just want to make sure that you're at the bottom of the hill, and I got to get people from somewhere. And I just want you to understand, the people you're going to get are the ones that no one else wants, so you better learn your job well." And for one month I was the only one in it. I marched alone, I carried a guidon, did all the commands "you know, "1st Platoon all present and accounted for" all of them. And I "Sir," and then I turn around and salute myself and do this "and he made me do it. I opened up the supply room. I checked in all the weapons.

Paul Bucha

I did the pinpoint distributions of the publications. I typed the morning reports "even though there's only one person in the company. He made me do all of the jobs, and he would ask me, literally, every two or three days, "How you doing? What have you learned?" And I learned things about being in the Army that I don't know anybody as a young officer learns, because they're already there. And then he said, "You get your first eight men tomorrow." I said, "Oh, that's great, sir." He said, "No, it's not "they flunked Basic Infantry Training. We're getting them straight from [Fort] Benning."

Paul Bucha

Having never been to Infantry training at Benning, other than Airborne Ranger, I had no idea what he was talking about. And he just said, "Look "you heard the thing about walk and chew gum? Basic Infantry Training is either/or, not both, and they flunked." And in came these guys, and they were mine, and they were all E-1s, and they were all quite "quite in the dark of what everybody thought of them for having failed in this basic. They were draftees and they were going to Vietnam "they didn't look at it that way, and each one told me what they were good at.

Paul Bucha

You know, one of them came in, and he's an E-1, and I said, "What do you do?" He said, "I make cars go fast." I said, "No, no "what do you do?" He said, "That's all I do." I said, "What do you mean, you make cars go?" He says, "I work on cars." I said, "Well, I got a motor pool "how'd you like to be the motor pool sergeant," not knowing if I'd ever get a motor pool sergeant. He says, "Where are they?" I took him down, I said, "This is it," and he stayed there "he never left. I could come down at midnight, he'd be working on his jeeps, just working and working and working. Yet he had flunked this basic threshold of accomplishment, in the eyes of the Army, and that's essentially what the unit became.

Paul Bucha

A few of themâ€”Johnny Rushman came, who was the first captain down at the Georgia Military Academyâ€”he was in our platoon. And Mowery said, â€œIâ€™m giving you one or two good guys.â€ But most of them were people who were considered rejects, and in many ways, I was a reject. Everybody else who was a company commander had been to Vietnam at least once. Here Iâ€™d been to the Stanford Business School, teaching surfing and scuba in my spare time, coaching the swimming team, and learning about balance sheets and income statements.

Paul Bucha

And if you were a soldier, and you said, â€œThatâ€™s going to be your company commander,â€ you would say, â€œOh, my Godâ€”what have I done wrong to deserve that?â€ And I realized that we were made for each otherâ€”I was not the type you would pick to take a unit and train them from scratch, and Mowery said, â€œThatâ€™s the only way youâ€™re going to be able to do anything, â€”cause wherever else you go, youâ€™ll have no credibility.â€ And I started doing things that, in hindsight, matched those five rules.

The Bottom of the Hill
Interviewer

But did you know to do them right away, orâ€”and alsoâ€”feeling yourself a reject, and getting a bunch of rejects, did you have any optimism about what you could do with this group?

Paul Bucha

I never thought I was a reject. Later on, I realized, when I assembled this group.

Paul Bucha

Iâ€™d learned at West Point, one of the things that helps you in impressing people in a very base kind of organization, what a platoon or a company is. And when our second cadre took over Camp Buckner [at West Point], we decidedâ€”â€”cause second cadres are always kinda lazy and fat, coming in afterâ€”that we were going to be in better shape. And what we would do is take the sophomores and the yearlings on our first run, and we were going to run until every single yearling dropped. And if they didnâ€™t drop, we would start doing push-ups until they couldnâ€™t do that, and thatâ€™s what we did, and we were in really good shape.

Paul Bucha

Well, one of the things I was, was in good shape, and I took my first eight guys out for a run. I went and I ran until everybody was sick, and as people would come, Iâ€™d bring more, and Iâ€™d go run with them, and thatâ€™s what I would do. And pretty soon they go to the point where, â€œHeâ€™s kinda crazy,â€ and that was a good thing, â€”cause I fit with them. But I never looked at myself as deficient, so one time I looked at the whole group, and I saidâ€”the whole groupâ€™s a 164 of them.

Paul Bucha

Iâ€™ve got some with masterâ€™s degrees in Elizabethan literature and things like that, who were drafted to be speechwriters for the Commanding General of the 101st and Commanding General of the 82nd, who were no longer needed, so they were sent to me. I got another group of guys out of stockadesâ€”some of them with ten years of service and

were E-1s. In fact, there was a majority of them of that type—real losers—bad guys. And then I've got a few of the draftees that filled it in who were just nothing—no one wanted them. I got a first sergeant, who my classmate Fred Smith, said is the best first sergeant there is, but who was right there, possibly being court-martialed for beating up the sergeant major of the 101st.

Paul Bucha

I have two other sergeants that no one wanted, and I've got a couple lieutenants that the first one who was assigned to me said he'll talk his way out—his uncle's a senator. And he came in, and he was gone—maybe two weeks he was in, and I got—Washington pulled him right out. So I looked at this group, and I started thinking, "Well, if you're going to war, you have 80 percent big, mean, tough, bad guys, you got 10-15 percent really smart guys, and then 5 percent others. That seems pretty good for war."

Paul Bucha

And then I said, "And what'd they get? I'm an MBA, and I went to Airborne Ranger as a summer vacation." And I just say, "You know, if I had to pick, I got the good deal—they didn't." So I was—I didn't look at myself as I was unqualified or a reject—I just took the very realistic position that if any third party were evaluating me as a company commander, at that point in time, I was kind of a joke compared to all the others, who had Silver Stars and CIBs and such.

Interviewer

That's my point—and weren't you intimidated by that? You have all these other company commanders who have already been on tours in Vietnam, right, a lot of them, and they had more experience. They have led men already—you have not. You've been going to classes and surfing. That's kind of a challenge, it would seem to me.

Paul Bucha

But I'd been at West Point.

Interviewer

Alright, so tell me what the West Point experience gave to you that made that—

Paul Bucha

West Point gave me all—

Interviewer

The confidence.

Paul Bucha

All the things that I was just saying—the five things, every one of those. I didn't know it at the time, but as I look back on it, I had confidence. I didn't figure—there wasn't a guy in the company that if I had to I couldn't fight. I wasn't afraid of that. They might be [0

Paul Bucha

I thought I was as smart as anyone I would get. I had been through all this academic thing. I also knew I could read a map, and I knew that I could win their respect, and I would start it by just showing them that I'm physically as good as any of them, and I worked at that. And that I didn't care what other people thought of them, and I didn't really give a damn if someone said they were losers—they were mine.

How an Airborne Ranger Kills a Chicken
Paul Bucha

And I didn't care what they thought of me. And one of the things that happened, I take this group of losers, that I'm the only Ranger-qualified officer in the battalion. And Mowery says, "I want you to teach survival training one weekend" since you're a junior, you're getting a job. I had a sergeant who was a Ranger—he was named Dickie Quick—who's still one of my good friends. I said, "Dickie, we're going to teach the battalion survival." And he said, "How many officers and NCOs?" I said, "That's it—I'm the only officer, and you're the only NCO. All the others got the weekend off."

Paul Bucha

So we're sitting with the battalion out in front of us—almost 1,000 people here, 600 people—and I'm talking and no one's listening. And we've gotten some chickens—we're going to do the thing where you kill the chicken, you cook it in a can, to show them how you can do it. And Dickie's just raising his eyebrows, knowing, he says, "Sir, we gotta get their attention. You're nobody to them." And I'm talking—not a soul is even looking at me, let alone listening to me. So I said, "Dickie, give me a chicken."

Paul Bucha

He gives me a chicken, and I said, "Hey, how does a leg kill a chicken?" And the first few rows, they're all sitting on the ground, they said, "Ah, he cuts the head off." I said, "You got it, man." I took my bayonet and whacked the head off the chicken and threw it down. I said, "Give me some more." Did like eight or nine chickens, and I whacked their heads, you know—pretty soon these chickens are running around without heads and bloody and all that, and I'm starting to get people at least looking—what the hell is going on here? I said, "Alright, now, how does an Airborne soldier kill a chicken?"

Paul Bucha

And a guy yells, "He wrings the head off." I said, "That's right," and I got another chicken, and I snapped it like this and it goes flying into the crowd. I did like nine chickens that way. I said, "Now, there's two of us in this whole crowd that are Airborne Rangers. I mean Airborne Rangers, not just a jumper and not a leg, but Airborne Rangers. How do they kill chickens? Dickie and I are the only two in this whole crowd." And so now they think they're going to—and one guy yells, "He bites the head off the chicken." I said, "You got it—come on up here." And the room went quiet. The guys said, "No, sir, I'm not Airborne Ranger—just you and Sergeant Quick are Airborne Rangers."

Paul Bucha

I said, "Dickie," he said, "No, sir." I said, "Give me the chicken," and I bit the head off the chicken, and I did like nine of these chickens, and I'd bite it and I'd

throw it off in the crowd. Then the room was quietâ€”absolutely silentâ€”and I said, â€œEverybody, stand up.â€ Boom, they stood up. And Dickie starts laughing, and he said, â€œWhat are you going to do?â€ And I said, â€œWeâ€™re going to give everybody chickensâ€”theyâ€™re going to kill them. Iâ€™ll tell them to use their bayonets, you knowâ€”weâ€™re going to actually eat the chicken you boil in this can.â€ And heâ€™s laughing, he says, â€œWeâ€™re not going to bite chickens.â€ I said, â€œNo, sir, weâ€™re not going to do that.â€

Paul Bucha

That weekend, when everybody goes back, on Monday we have officers call out at the brigade, and I walk into the brigade, and Mowery says, â€œBucha, get up here.â€ I said, â€œYes, sir, whatâ€™s the problem?â€ He says, â€œDid you bite the head off a chicken?â€ I said, â€œWell, not really, sirâ€”I did nine or ten of them, I guess.â€ He says, â€œThatâ€™s the most [0:42:00] disgusting thing Iâ€™ve heard.â€ I said, â€œYeah, but it worked.â€ He says, â€œWhat do you mean, it worked?â€ I said, â€œI had to get their attention, and all of a sudden, I had this credibility with them.â€ He says, â€œCredibilityâ€”we have requests from people to transfer to your unit.â€ I say, â€œYouâ€™re kidding me.â€

Paul Bucha

He says, â€œNo. This isnâ€™t what I wanted. I wanted your professionalism, not biting the head off a damn chicken. You go out for a run, you take your company, you pass everybodyâ€”thatâ€™s not good.â€ I said, â€œYeah, but itâ€™s good for my menâ€”itâ€™s really good for my men.â€ â€œWhen they pass everybody, you know, they feel like theyâ€™re winners, but everybody calls them losers.â€ He said, â€œYeah, but biting the head off of a chicken?â€ I said, â€œWell, that had to do with me. I was a loser to those people. I didnâ€™t think of this overnightâ€”it just came to me that thatâ€™s kinda the tough thing to do in their mind, and it worked.â€ And it did.

Paul Bucha

He says, â€œItâ€™s disgusting.â€ And that was all he said, but interesting enough, the running, the chickens, always being last but never wanting to stay thereâ€”I told my men, â€œYou wear your hats slightly cocky, and when you see an officerâ€”I donâ€™t care how far it is awayâ€”officers hate to have to salute you all the time. It drives them nuts. You yell, â€œDelta Company all the way,â€ and hold that salute until they return it. I donâ€™t care if itâ€™s across the parade groundâ€”just do it.â€ They say, â€œYeah.â€ I said, â€œItâ€™s your way of getting back at guys like me, officers. They donâ€™t like it. Theyâ€™ll pretend they do, but they donâ€™t.â€

Paul Bucha

â€œItâ€™s a nuisance, especially if theyâ€™re carrying things and you said, â€œAll the way, sir,â€ and you hold it, and they got to adjust their books and things. Just do that.â€ And pretty soon, that made us separate, but unique, and that became their reputation. My first day in Vietnam, my first sergeant wasâ€”had the company assembled out, and I was trying to find my bunk. And this big guy was standing on my bunk, and I said, â€œExcuse me, thatâ€™s my bunk,â€ and he was obviously drunkâ€”he was getting ready to muster out.

Paul Bucha

And he said, â€œCome late, go to hell,â€ and I said, â€œNo, son, you have to get out of

it, and I grabbed him by the things and I stood up—he was huge, but he fell backwards over the sandbags, and he’s trying to hit me, and we roll out into the dirt. My company’s formed, and here I am on top of this guy. He’s hitting me, I’m hitting him—not that—he’s too drunk to hurt anybody. And the first sergeant says, “Company, ten-hut,” because I was there, and they’re all watching me, basically rolling around in the dirt with this big enlisted guy.

Paul Bucha

And then the first sergeant said, “Get the man off,” and dusted me off—the guy goes and reports me, and it was one of the West Point graduates came over, they basically take me away. What do I think I’m doing having a fight? And I said, “That wasn’t really a fight.” But all it did was further the image of this company, and when we were at the 101st, we trained all the time, because if they were in base camp, they got in fights. They were always calling people out. So they were really good at what they did, and I stuck to what I learned in Ranger School.

Paul Bucha

I said, “When we went security out on a flank, I mean out, 50 to 150 yards. If I can see you, use your ears. When we get to a clearing, we’re going to go around it and cross one at a time—I don’t care if it takes us all day—but no one’s going to be able to pick us off. We’re going to always have intervals of 10, 15 meters. I don’t care what they do—we’re just going to.” That was drummed into everything that I’d learned in Rangers School, and some of the squad and platoon tactics you learned at West Point, but mainly Rangers School. I really just—I accepted that as the gospel, and made all my guys accept it. And we used to practice things.

Paul Bucha

We got in drop zones where there was a crest in the middle, and I would say, “Ambush on the left—first platoon, maneuver.” And that was it—we would just watch. And if they didn’t do it right, we started over again, and we had the company out in front of us. My first sergeant and I could see everybody. And it was a way to really drum into them, “We’re going to war.” And I kept saying, “And I have a contract with you, and that’s my only contract. You trust me, I will never lie to you, and I will bring you home.”

Paul Bucha

And that was the bond that we had. Very strict hierarchy—no one called me, no one slapped me on the back or anything like that. We didn’t put in for that. But if one of the men got in trouble, I was there to defend him—I didn’t care what he had done. I was never—none of them were ever going to get flushed out. First of all, I needed them all. I said, “When I say that you’re going to get in fights, we’ll stand.” So this is this group that arrives in Vietnam, and they say to us, “You got this barracks area, but you’re not going to be in it, so don’t waste a lot of time. We don’t want you around.”

Paul Bucha

And we built the chaplain’s chapel—he didn’t have one. He was Catholic. The only group I could get to volunteer to help me were my guys—they said, “Sure, we’ll do it, sir,” and they went and bribed the guy to steal a Marine Corps mess tent with a helicopter—they just lassoed it. And we built it, and they were great, and it was a lot of work. We built a huge torrey out of ammo cans—it was like 30 feet high, and we did

that to say, "You're coming into the Rakkasan area." And we did all these things just 'cause that kept them out of getting in trouble, and if they weren't doing that, they were getting drunk.

Paul Bucha

But we were always out in the field. We were there two weeks, and guys had contact and stupid me, I came running. I had cleared a couple of paths through the old French minefield at least I thought I knew where they were. And I decided, "I'm going to go out and see how many guys are doing," and I run out there through this minefield to get again, not the smartest thing to do. I didn't think about it at the time. But the benefit was, my guys said, "My God" the old man came out and got the wounded. And that was this bond that we had, and no one was hurt seriously hurt.

Keeping Contact

Interviewer

When did you arrive in country, and what was your mission?

Paul Bucha

As a mission, it was in those days to go somewhere, move around until they tell you to stop going there, and you're going to go somewhere else. That was the essential of the mission in Vietnam. Find bad guys. If you find bad guys, kill them. In those days, kill communists that was it. Unfortunately, not dissimilar to what we're doing today, OK, it's killing terrorists. And that was the mission, and I became a ready-reaction force in a special unit. We were

Paul Bucha

I got a call saying, "You're going to be relocated. I'm giving you a scout section and a tank platoon." So we were a very big unit, and we were there for like three weeks, and basically we cut most of the rockets down while we were there. Then we were sent out on other missions, on our own, usually detached.

Paul Bucha

We rarely went in battalion or brigade-type operations we were always by ourselves, and usually with some kind of special group attached to us LRRP, armor, if we were going to go in an area where they thought we might need armor, a translator group, scout dogs that were special but we were always in the field. And we didn't have anybody getting killed, and it was strictly due to the way those guys performed, and during Tet, before this leads us to the we were brought in to comb a snipe B by Westmoreland. Westmoreland knew I was the company commander, and

Interviewer

This'd be William Westmoreland, the general.

Paul Bucha

Right.

Interviewer

The Commanding General [of American forces in Vietnam]

Paul Bucha

And heâ€™d been Superintendent a few years at West Point, and Iâ€™

Interviewer

Oh, you mean Superintendent while you were there the first two years at West Point.

Paul Bucha

His wife was the fan extraordinaire of the swimming team. She used to sit in the balcony and cheer us onâ€™the freshmen in particular, she would come to that meet.

Interviewer

Did you know them at West Point?

Paul Bucha

Yeah, we had dinner, and I was also the chairman of the hop committee as a plebe, and as a result, I had to introduce him all the time, and I got to know her real well. And when there were award ceremonies, for example, she would say, â€™s your mom and dad coming,â€™ and my dad said, â€™Look, Iâ€™ll see you when you graduate.â€™ And he never came for anything, so for All-American review when you got your All-American thing, she would come and stand behind me as a parent. So I got to know her really well, and I got to know him really well, and he made this call.

Paul Bucha

I mean we were out in the middle of some God-awful place, in this elephant grass, right at the border with Cambodia. And we had had a couple of ambushes and killed some fresh-out-of-the-north guys whose weapons were in Cosmoline and their web gear was actually crimped, still, in a packet, and weâ€™d killed some of those. And weâ€™d done what we were supposed to do, as we normally did, and no one was hurt, and even when the wounded, the first time I got hit was a minor woundâ€™he got fixed up in a couple weeks and was back.

Paul Bucha

I get this call that says, â€™Helicopters incoming. Be at this site. Youâ€™re going to be extracted.â€™ And we got on, a guy pulls out a clipper and starts cutting my hair. I said, â€™What are you doing?â€™ and he said, â€™Here, clean yourself up,â€™ and itâ€™s happening to everybody in all the helicopters. And he says, â€™Youâ€™re going to COMUSMACV to take over security during Tet.â€™ And I said, â€™Well, why?â€™

Paul Bucha

He said, â€™The Wolfhounds [BKGPB10] were there four days and they dumped a basic load of ammunition in two days, so we want you in there.â€™ So we came in, and typical for what we did, we walked around the first day, and I said, â€™Alright, all the air raid shelters, convert them to DePuy fighting bunkers.â€™ And they were these pastel things that I guess were air raid shelters, but there was no air force on the other side, but thatâ€™s what it was. And we took all the old sandbags, pastel, turned them upside-down so that the dark side was now out.

Paul Bucha

And we made DePuy bunkers and interlocking fire all the way around COMUSMACV. And then I said, "Guys carrying M16 machine guns, on front gate security. Everybody that comes in, I want their weapons taken away." My fear was is I saw around people carrying pistols that were like Tom Mix. I said, "Check your weapons at the gate" that's the deal, and we went through all these rules. And my chain of command was Colonel McDonald, Special Forces, Major General Ware, Medal of Honor recipient, Westmoreland that was my chain of command.

Paul Bucha

And McDonald said to me, "I'm just here to tell you it's a stupid idea. I'm not going to tell you what to do," and he says, "Cause this is not a winning job. It's a bad job. But you got to escort the people back" you got to help make sure the embassy's secure. We were involved a little bit in a little bit meaning we were a reserve force for taking it back, getting rid of them. But we escorted everybody in and out of the COMUSMACV and got them to where they were going each day, anytime anybody had to leave. And we didn't fire a round, and they kept us there for ten days.

Paul Bucha

And then after that, they said "Westmoreland came down and said, "I want you to go out and find this group that's withdrawing from Saigon. Make contact with them, and don't let them get away." He said, "You're going to be operating again beyond artillery support, and you're going to have some air support, but you're going to be doing what you've been doing in these ops" go find them, and see what you can do. I just we've got to maintain contact with them. We've lost contact with them. That's what your job is. A very simple, very" he said, "When you're there, just don't let them pull away. They're breaking contact every time we get in touch with them. I want you to stay in contact."

Interviewer

How many are we talking about?

Paul Bucha

How many what?

Interviewer

How many?"

Paul Bucha

Oh, bad guys?

Interviewer

Yeah.

Paul Bucha

Thousands, cause it was the entire force that was pulling back out. But my presumption was it would be a company about our size, which was, if you take the R&Rs out of it, you take the heat, and you take some of the standard stuff, a 164 unit would probably have 30

back in the base, so the most you could have is 134.

Paul Bucha

You take another 30 out of that for other things, so you're about a 100-man company when you're actually in combat.

Interviewer

It's all NVA.

Paul Bucha

Yeah, VC regular and NVA, because that's

Interviewer

Never—it was always intermixed, okay.

Paul Bucha

Especially if it were a serious unit, you'd have NVA with regular, not just local [crosstalk] kinda VC people, who were your friends during the day, and at night would shoot some rockets—these were the serious groups

Paul Bucha

And they set us down in the field and said—I said, "Which way we going?" They said, "We don't know. Head north." That's basically what it was. We were probably two hours we made contact—they'd obviously seen us coming—and then we were in contact for three days, basically, off and on. And the standard operating procedure in Vietnam was that Infantry units would do these night defensive perimeters, and they would bring in barbed wire and all this stuff, and you'd build this base, and then you would sit there and hope to be attacked, and then you would shoot people.

Paul Bucha

Well, we didn't do that. I said, "That's one of the dumbest things I've ever heard. I mean if there's 80 or 100 of us and there's 400 of them, we're finished. This doesn't make a good idea." So we used to move at night, and one of the few units that did that, other than the LRRPs and some of the Ranger groups. And so we never, ever did a night defensive perimeter—we were constantly

Interviewer

If that was the standard operating procedure

Paul Bucha

Mowery said I could do it, 'cause I was out, always, on my own. Rarely—I mean I wasn't with, accompanying

Interviewer

You were going against conventional wisdom to do that, right?

Paul Bucha

Their conventional wisdom, not mine. They had another oneâ€”they used to do these things where you would find an enemy force, and you would cordon itâ€”you would take your companies and spread out around it. And I rememberâ€”and thereâ€™s an unfortunate example when one of our first West Point graduates, one of my classmateâ€™s brothers,

Paul Bucha

They told me they were going to do it, and I said, â€œI donâ€™t want to be a part of that.â€ And they said, â€œWell, why not?â€ And I said, â€œItâ€™s like the cat-and-mouse game with kids, where you form a ring around one or two people and they try to break out. Well, now turn the lights out, and instead of one or two, put 100 in there. And theyâ€™d pick any spot, youâ€™re finishedâ€”theyâ€™re going to run right over you. It doesnâ€™t make any sense.â€

Paul Bucha

Theyâ€™d done it, the British had done it, Clutterbuck did it in [British] Malaya, and all thatâ€”it just didnâ€™t make sense to me, and weâ€™d studied this at West Point. Those kinds of things, to me, just didnâ€™t make sense. What made sense to me is what Iâ€™d learned in Rangers School, which is move, move, move, move.

Interviewer

Wait, let me make sure I understand. So at West Point, youâ€™d learned what you thought was faulty reasoning.

Paul Bucha

We were learning what the British had done inâ€”

Interviewer

Right, right, but you wereâ€”but the doctrine was to follow on with it.

Paul Bucha

No, not necessarily, â€”cause we werenâ€™t engaged anywhere at the time, remember? We wereâ€”

Interviewer

Okay, alright.

Paul Bucha

It had become [common] practice because people looked back, and â€œHowâ€™d the British do it?â€ So hereâ€™s different thingsâ€”the hammer and anvil things, the cordon off the enemyâ€”then someone came up with the night defensive perimeter idea.

Paul Bucha

The DePuy fighting bunker as a concept from General DePuy, to me, was logicalâ€”if youâ€™re going to set up a base, you put in these bunkers, interlocking fire like a real line, and you never had an exposed flank, and that made sense.

Paul Bucha

But thatâ€™s not what you do at night, and move out in the morningâ€” thatâ€™s when youâ€™re setting up a base. And lâ€™so these were things that I had chosen for our unit to do, and we would not have known what to do if someone said, â€œWeâ€™re doing a night defensive perimeter.â€ Guys wouldâ€™ve said, â€œWell, I donâ€™t like this. Itâ€™s not what we do.â€ And we didnâ€™t have any casualtiesâ€”we hadnâ€™t lost a person.

Interviewer

Not lost a single person.

Bullets Everywhere

Paul Bucha

Not a person, so we were pretty set in our ways, and there were other guys in other companies asking to be in this company, â€”cause like when a company would come back from Song [Nga] Bay and maybe lost 50 people, or 30 people, and weâ€™d come in from our operation having lost no one, then the guys talked. There were some pressures from some of the men, â€œLook, I donâ€™t want to be with C Company or B Company. I want to be in Delta.â€ And we said, â€œWe donâ€™t want you. Weâ€™ve got our group. We donâ€™t want any more.â€ And so that was that mystique that was there, and I remember we asked if anybody wanted to go on R&R at one time and no one wanted to go.

Paul Bucha

Everybody said, â€œNo, we donâ€™t want to go.â€ And when we were clearing the roadâ€”I remember clearing the road, and we were down on our hands and knees with bayonets, and the first group done, they said, â€œSir, itâ€™s clear.â€ So I called the convoy leader and I said, â€œIâ€™m going to walk the roadâ€”weâ€™re clear. Just have one of your trucks do some half-pull on the water jugâ€”have them behind me, and weâ€™ll go.â€ Iâ€™m walking down the road that my men had cleared, with my RTO whoâ€™s still one of my best friends. The two of us are kinda laughing about what a great job this was. Weâ€™d done this.

Paul Bucha

And as I walked past this little hooch, all of a sudden, I hear this explosion, and I look up, and the deuce and a half is in the air. Falls down behind me, twisted. My footprints go into where the rubble was and come out the other side through the rubbleâ€”none of us hurt. But obviously, there was something, C4, way down deep, and we found the trigger and what it was, was one of these things thatâ€™s bamboo. No one controlled it. And as the bamboo deteriorated, pressure, it would go off. Accomplish something like an IED, but with absolutely no control, but it led to this mystiqueâ€”not about me, but about us.

Interviewer

That you were charmed in some way.

Paul Bucha

Yeah.

Interviewer

That things worked for youâ€™yeah.

Paul Bucha

For all of us.

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s what I mean, yeah.

Paul Bucha

Yeah. And so when

Interviewer

18th of?

Paul Bucha

March, 1968. 16th, 17th, 18th are the three days. I put some guys who had from heat, put them on the plane, had them medevaced out, resupplied with water and ammunition, and I said, â€œMove out.â€ And we were down to 89 people, and that included some LRRPs that were assigned to us as well. We moved probably about 3-400 yards into the jungle, and it was thickâ€no name, just a location, which is coordinates. No artillery support, totally relying on air support. But we had done this time and time and time again, and the LRRP group was way out front, probably 100 meters, 150 meters ahead of our point. The guy radioed in with a clicking, and he said, â€œI see water carriers.â€ It was just at dusk.

Interviewer

What are wapa carriers?

Paul Bucha

Water carriers.

Interviewer

Water carriers.

Paul Bucha

And in Vietnam, [Crosstalk] they had cansâ€|

Interviewer

Sure, yeah.

Paul Bucha

And he said, â€œThereâ€™s six or seven of them.â€ I thought, â€œThatâ€™s a lot of water, which means thereâ€™s probably a lot of people.â€

Paul Bucha

And he went a little bit further, and he says, â€œYou know, weâ€™re in some kind of

we're on the edge of a camp. I'm not sure what's here, but I request permission to recon by fire, which we had done a couple of other times earlier and identified them. That's when we found the rear-guard, and that's what we thought we'd bumped into was probably the rear guard again, which would be a platoon-sized group or something.

Paul Bucha

Although nine or ten water carriers would suggest more, but here we are, 89 of us, reconning by fire probably wasn't a bad idea. The worst case that normally would happen is they would, you know, disconnect and move out. He fired about four rounds, and the entire place just broke up, from everywhere—bullets flying, 50 calibers, everything flying. And all I could think of was, "My God—it wasn't an ambush in the sense that there was a specific spot that we were—it was from everywhere. And he said"

Interviewer

They were surrounding you.

Paul Bucha

No, it was almost a U in front of us. And I said, "There's—we had to get back, so I said, "Third platoon, reinforce the first platoon up there—LRRPs, how you doing?" They said, "We're bad," and I said, "Move up." My medic, Doc Moore, said, "Sir, gotta go."

Paul Bucha

And then, all of a sudden, I heard boom, and it was to our right rear, and the kid on the radio said, "Sir, we ran into another group coming up to reinforce them. We're cut off. We've got casualties." And the kid's name was Calvin Heath. I said, "Stay in touch—I'll have some people over to you," and I decided that we're not going any further. We're going to go where we are, and it was a little clearing about—probably 75 feet by—not even that—60 feet by 20 feet. I said, "Everybody gather in there and let's go," and I went forward with—to see the contact that was going on up front, and I got them to withdraw.

Paul Bucha

And what we had done is we'd stumbled into a base camp, and they had stumbled into us as well, and what they had was a man in a tree, in the Y of a tree, like a lookout, and behind were sort of crude and rudimentary old bunkers, which I guess were left over from previous battles. This guy was in the Y of the tree, and that's the one that took out our first four people.

Paul Bucha

And as I was running up there, one of the men carrying the wounded said to me, "Sir, watch out for the guy in the tree. There's a Y in a tree, a big Y, and there's a guy in it with a machine gun. Just be careful." And we got up—and that's allegedly in the citation, says "a bunker." Wasn't a bunker—it was a guy in a tree. And very simple to throw a hand grenade, he comes down, and the machine gun nest is gone—it wasn't any great bravado or anything like that.

Interviewer

You threw the hand grenade.

Paul Bucha

Yeah.

Interviewer

And killed him.

Paul Bucha

Yeah, and two or three others, but I didn't hang around to count them. I mean they the fire was no more, so we then it was just one RTO and I, upfront, and then I said, "Everybody out," and they all had gotten beyond me and were into this perimeter.

He Knew He Wasn't Coming Back

Paul Bucha

And the thing that is interesting, each person that evening, when I asked them to do something, did it. They didn't question, they just did it, and they asked Sergeant Straus, they said, "Where do you want me? Where do you want my squad?" I said, "Ray, take the M60s, get them." "I want three M60s over on the right flank. I want them over there. Go as far out as you can try to get at least 50 yards if you can get there." He, too, would always say, "Got it see you in the morning." That would be, was always what he said. He said, "Right flank" got it, sir. He knew he wasn't coming back, 'cause that's where the bulk of the fire was coming.

Interviewer

And he didn't come back.

Paul Bucha

Pardon?

Interviewer

And he did not come back.

Paul Bucha

He did not come back.

Interviewer

Your medic didn't come back, either.

Paul Bucha

No. Doc died performing four tracheotomies, in front of that Y in the tree. When I got there, there they were, and he was mortally just half his head, and this damn machine gun up there.

Paul Bucha

And you know, you look at those things and you say, "What could you have done differently?" And that's the thing that hangs with me—that what came out of it in the morning, I got a radio that night, there was no fire support.

Some helicopters showed up, and when the helicopters showed up, my God, I'd never seen anything like it—it looked like 4th of July. That's when I said, "We are in really bad shape now. There must be hundreds of these guys out there."

Paul Bucha

And interesting enough, we have a group cut off that's by them, six people still alive, so we end up retroactively knowing exactly who we were up against, 'cause they were there. And I just came up with this, again, crazy idea. I said, "Look, if they know there's 89 of us, including the dead and the wounded and everything, and there's 100 or 200 or 300 of them, we're finished." So I said, "Everybody down. I want everybody on the perimeter. I want M79 ammunition in my hands."

Paul Bucha

"I want everybody's grenades distributed among the squads, and then I want any extra brought back to me. But mainly, I want the M79, and I want all the flashlights here. And the idea was that if I ran around with flashlights and stuff and that's all you could see, and someone's acting—and this may not have been the smartest—acting as if there's nothing to worry about, you may be reluctant to say, "I wonder how big a group this is?"

Paul Bucha

You'll try to probe it. And if you probe it, if I can get—if I had mines, I would be in great shape, if there was a minefield out there, or if I could bring in artillery, but I couldn't do that. So I said to everybody, I said, "At random intervals," to the fire team leaders, "tap the heels of your men, and I want that person to throw a grenade. I don't care where it goes—just throw it."

Paul Bucha

So we boom, boom, around the perimeter would be these randomly discharging grenades. And I said, "I don't care if I have to do it all night long." And then at the same time, I would be using the M79, and I made sure any trees that I saw were never allowed to remain without something—and that was what we did. And they would fire at us, and when the first group of helicopters came in, I said, "Oh, my God," when I saw the fire that was coming through—I realized then that the odds here weren't very good.

Interviewer

Where was all this promised air support, and why wasn't it up?

Paul Bucha

They told me I would be beyond artillery support.

Interviewer

Right, I knew that.

Paul Bucha

And then air support, youâ€™re in lineâ€™”youâ€™re in a queue with what other people have. And the helicopters were far away, so that they donâ€™t have loiter timeâ€™”they fire their basic load, they gotta go back and get ammunition, otherwise theyâ€™re nothing. Dust-offs didnâ€™t come, but my brigade commander came in. He got on my [radio] net[work] and said, â€™œLet me know when I can come inâ€™”Iâ€™ll bring out the wounded. I said, â€™œWell, not now, please.â€™

Paul Bucha

And then I had all these people coming on my net, and I had no idea who the call signs were. And then Westmoreland came on the [radio] net[work]: â€™œThis is Bald Eagle. Everyone get off the net except for Blue Eagle,â€™ which was my brigade commander. And I said, â€™œThatâ€™s kinda cool.â€™ You have someone monitoring this net, and I guess we were the big engagement at the time because we had finally caught up with this group. And then in the intensity of the battle, my battalion commander said, â€™œIâ€™m going inâ€™”see you in the morning.â€™

Paul Bucha

Which just was sort of the way Delta Company wasâ€™”we werenâ€™t really part of the battalion. And he left, and Mowery came on my net and said, â€™œLet him go. Thatâ€™s just one less to confuse us.â€™ He says, â€™œIâ€™m here to support youâ€™”Iâ€™m trying to get you some air support.â€™ And thatâ€™s who was there, all night long, he was above us. He took threeâ€™”kicked his entire crew out, except for the pilot and copilotâ€™”and loaded his command and control chopper with wounded, and did three loads of those.

Paul Bucha

He kicked out the guy we build the chapel for, the padre, and I said, â€™œWhat are you doing here?â€™ He says, â€™œIâ€™m here to do last rites.â€™ I said, â€™œWith all due respect, weâ€™re not ready for that. Get a rifle and get out on the front line.â€™ And he turned around, he said, â€™œGot it, sir,â€™ and he went to the front, and if you looked, the faces of the guys when they see this chaplain with a gunâ€™”heâ€™s squirreling up on his belly right next to them, but heâ€™s just like the PFCsâ€™”it just meant a lot. And the fact that Louisvilleâ€™s chopper came inâ€™”even if it had to chop the trees to get through, it came in. Everybody knew he was with us.

What a Shitty Place to Die

Paul Bucha

And the guys all did what they were told, all night long, and then one time I remember sitting there saying, you know, â€™œThis isnâ€™tâ€™” we canâ€™t keep this up.â€™ Weâ€™re firing every weapon we have, weâ€™re doing everything, and the grenades weâ€™re running out of, and itâ€™s only a matter of time before all of those bad guys decide that, â€™œWeâ€™ve have enough of this,â€™ and just overrun us. And the thought in my mind was, â€™œWhat a shitty place to die.â€™

Paul Bucha

All of these guys have parents. You canâ€™t say, â€™œMy son died in Normandy, you know, at the Battle of the Bulge,â€™ or Omaha [Beach], or Khe Sanh. He died at coordinates X, Y, Z, and thatâ€™s itâ€™”no name, nothing. And I thought, â€™œWhat a lousy, lousy thing for a parent to think.â€™ Thatâ€™s what Iâ€™m thinkingâ€™”Iâ€™m sorta pissed that I let this happen. And then a young kid that, unfortunately, had been kicked off one of Moweryâ€™s things and had just reported. And Mowery said, â€™œYou stay. They need all

the men they can get.â€ He comes crawling by, says, â€œSir, weâ€™re kicking the hell out of them, arenâ€™t we?â€

Paul Bucha

And all I could do is laugh. I just said, â€œJesus, in the eye of the beholder,â€ â€˜cause he heard all the firepower going on. He had no idea what was on the other side. And then I get this call on my net that says, â€œThis is Magpie 31.â€ And I says, â€œWho are you?â€ And he said, â€œMate, Iâ€™m an Aussie buddy of yours.â€ I said, â€œWell, who are you?â€ He said, â€œOh, you donâ€™t know me, but Iâ€™m a friend.â€ I said, â€œLook, I havenâ€™t got time, Iâ€™m busy.â€ And he says, â€œIâ€™m a Canberra jet with two 500-pound bombs left over from a previous run. Where do you want them?â€ And Iâ€™m looking at my men, and theyâ€™re reallyâ€”theyâ€™re down, theyâ€™re in the ground, and theyâ€™re fighting, theyâ€™re tough.

Paul Bucha

But you could see theyâ€™re thinking the same thing Iâ€™m thinkingâ€”that, â€œJesus, how can we make it through the night on this?â€ Weâ€™re not going to quit, but you could just see there wasnâ€™t optimism like there was in all the other times. Like we were the proverbial dog chasing the car, and damn, we caught it. And I said, â€œDo you see the two hills, and then this part from whatâ€™s the original part?â€ and I said, â€œJust take the tops off each hill, will you, please?â€

Paul Bucha

And he says, â€œYou know exactly where you areâ€”can you mark it?â€ I said, â€œI canâ€™t mark it. Itâ€™s night and you can see the fire, but Iâ€™ll give you exactly the coordinates where I am,â€ and I did. And he said, â€œGot it, mateâ€”the hills will be gone.â€ And when these things dropped, the earth bounced, and everybody started smiling, like, â€œOkay, MFsâ€”mess with Delta, look whatâ€™s happening.â€ And then a couple of the Air Force guys came. Puff came, he says, â€œI can light the sky up from you.â€ I said, â€œIâ€™m not sure I want thatâ€”wait.â€

Paul Bucha

And then a guy, his buddy with the Gatling guns came, and he said, â€œYou got beanbag lights?â€ And I said, â€œFor Godâ€™s sake, I donâ€™t carry beanbag lights.â€ And he said, â€œOkay,â€ and a chopper, Air Force chopper, dropped some beanbags in a bundle, so he said, â€œMark your positionâ€”I want to see the perimeter, exactly where it is, about 15 feet, 10 feet out from where the men are. But tell them to get away from the bean bags.â€ They shot the bean bags outâ€”just poof. He said, â€œI got you markedâ€”I know where you are.â€ And I said, â€œI got some guys cut off,â€ and I gave him the position on the map that I thought they were, and I prayed to God they were, and I said, â€œJust donâ€™t fire in there.â€

Paul Bucha

And he said, â€œWell, Iâ€™m going to be able to keep this up for a little while,â€ and literally, he just dug a trench around us with these guns. Then I got a call from Mowery, he says, â€œI can send A Company in to reinforce you.â€ I said, â€œDonâ€™t do it.â€ I said, â€œThey wonâ€™t get here.â€ I said, â€œI donâ€™t know if weâ€™ll last, but we at least have this under control, and itâ€™s too risky to send anybody else in.â€ He said, â€œOkay, go with your judgment.â€ And I had never heard in that radio transmission, until I went to the Ranger Hall of Fame and I pushed the button, and there it was.

Interviewer

Now, had the Aussieâ€”did Mowery order up the Aussie, he found him?

Paul Bucha

He put the word out to the Air Force FACs, â€œI use anything

Interviewer

Did you ever meet the Aussie?

Paul Bucha

Nope. I mentioned it to a Special Ops medic from Australia who was in the audience when I spoke to the Americanâ€”or the Association of Military Surgeons of the United Statesâ€”AMSUS.

Paul Bucha

He came up to see me, and he said, â€œIâ€™m Australian,â€ and Iâ€™d swum with the Australian Olympic team when I was living as a kid in Japan, so I had some friends in Australia. And he said, â€œI just want to introduce myself. I understand you had someâ€”whatâ€™d he call itâ€”â€œyou had a mission with one of my mates.â€ I said, â€œWhen?â€ And heâ€™s like 20, and he said, â€œOh, no, no, noâ€”I wasnâ€™t even an idea at the time, but one of my mates. Youâ€™ve told a story about the bomber bringing in the first bombs, and I just wanted to say, you know, who I am, and thank you for whatever youâ€™ve done.â€ And it was really neat, but Iâ€™ve never met the guyâ€”just knew him as Magpie 31â€”that was his call sign.

Paul Bucha

And he was first, but then after that, all night long we had things. And then the next morning, I hear this voiceâ€”it says, â€œSir, Calvin. Weâ€™re okay.â€ And we went out and got them, and Calvin had been the guy with the RTO whoâ€™d said, â€œWeâ€™re hurt,â€ and I told him to turn the radio off and play dead. He laid across his lieutenant all night long, Jeff Wishik, and Jeff is this phenomenal officer, one of these great, exciting guys you have, and Jeff got the DSC for that night.

Paul Bucha

But in that group, Jeff was a platoon I sent to reinforce them. I was trying to evacuate the wounded from the original, and several died. Estrada died. Billy Sherrill died. Nazario died. So they were killed there, and the thing was that Calvin, all night long, I just said, â€œThis is terrible. Iâ€™m actually killing them,â€ â€”cause of the bombs. But whatever guess I had, with providence or luck, we were charmed in that we were able to keep the fire away from where they were.

The NVA Had Breakfast on Me

Paul Bucha

And I asked Calvin, â€œWell, howâ€™d it go,â€ and he says, you knowâ€” and heâ€™s all butchered up and beat up. He said, â€œThe NVA sat on me this morning.â€ I said, â€œWhat?â€ He said, â€œThey ate breakfast on us,â€ and then he was dusted off, and I saidâ€”I started thinkingâ€”

Interviewer

You mean NVA literally sat on his body?

Paul Bucha

Sat on him.

Interviewer

And he is playing dead.

Paul Bucha

Yeahâ€”well, heâ€™s bloodyâ€”

Interviewer

I understand.

Paul Bucha

I mean the Claymore went off, and he knows that if he in any way breathes deeply or anything, or makes a soundâ€”but Jeff Wishik, whoâ€™s underneath him, thatâ€™s where theyâ€™re sitting, was also alive.

Interviewer

Heâ€™s also alive.

Paul Bucha

And I said, â€œWowâ€”whatâ€™d you do?â€ He said, â€œWell, there was one leftâ€”I killed the other one with the bayonet, â€”cause I couldnâ€™tâ€”I had to move.â€ And he said, â€œAnd that left one guy behind, and youâ€™ll find him over there,â€ and heâ€™d killed him, too. Well, he gets medevacedâ€”and who is he?

Paul Bucha

Heâ€™s a Nipmuck Indian, 17 years old, no high school education, RTO, who did as I askedâ€” which Iâ€™m sure he thought, â€œThis is stupidâ€”turn my radio off? What are you, crazy?â€ But he did it, and he disappeared into this mysterious thing called military medicine channel. Commanding General Barsanti was supposed to pin a Silver Star on his chest, and a Purple Heart at the hospital, along with a list that were all supposed to be so decorated. And I hear from Calvin, 12 years ago, asked me if I knew where he could get some help for some psychological problems, and I said, â€œJust go to the VA.â€

Paul Bucha

Itâ€™s, â€œSir, ainâ€™t got no VAâ€”nothing.â€ I said, â€œWhat do you mean, you donâ€™t have VA?â€ And he said, â€œWell, I had to give it up.â€ I said, â€œYou got a Silver Star and a Purple Heart.â€ He says, â€œI didnâ€™t get no Silver Starâ€”I never got a Purple Heart.â€ And hereâ€™s this group of heroes, to me, and Iâ€™m hearing from one of them, who may be among the most significant of all, that he didnâ€™t have a Purple Heart, he didnâ€™t have a Silver Star, and in fact, had been discharged dishonorably from the military for going AWOL, because his wounds were in his back from the Claymore that

went off as he was carrying people back.

Paul Bucha

Went all around, except for the pouch where his radio was—his wounds were everywhere. His dad died, it turns out, thinking his son was a coward—had refused to talk to him. And then after 30-some-odd years, he just needed some psychological help. A guy that the NVA had sat on and eaten breakfast. So the only reason is you asked in the very beginning, “Tell me.” This is this group of losers—losers—who went to a battle, a chance meeting battle, with a group that was estimated to be a battalion sized, reinforced with two regular VC companies—so that could’ve been anywhere from 5 to 700 people. They engage in a battle with them and prevail, meaning they survived. And they were losers.

Paul Bucha

Eventually, they go on to be one of the highest-decorated company-size units in the entire United States military during that war. And that is the answer to the question you said earlier, “What did you learn?” Well, it’s not what I learned about them that day, that night—it’s what they were when they came to me, and how society—and I, and everybody—had misjudged this collection. Ray Coffey of the [Chicago] Sun-Times wrote this article the day after this battle about the clerks and jerks of Delta Company, which was a moniker we wore with pride from that moment on.

Paul Bucha

We didn’t do anything anybody wanted us to do, but this group of guys, long after I left, continued, and ended up being this highly decorated company. And the thing I learned out of all this is that in this world in which we live, we are so quick to judge people, by circumstances we don’t understand. These guys from the ghetto, and poor whites, poor Latinos, poor blacks, poor Native Americans—they’re the ones that got drafted. It wasn’t the rich kid going to Harvard—he had a deferment. These were the guys that got drafted, and sure, they had problems with authority.

Paul Bucha

They came from a part of our society where, you know, the authority doesn’t work anyway, and if it’s there, it’s there to oppress and abuse you—and especially the African-Americans and Latinos at the time, in the middle of these race riots. And yet this group came together, by chance, and eventually to prove themselves to be the winners of all winners. And I look at that, and I say, “Wow.” That’s a lesson for the rest of your life.

Paul Bucha

And it’s a lesson in many ways that those five elements of leadership, the last one is humility—and the egalitarian nature of West Point in how you suffer together as plebes. You go up this hierarchy. And even when you’re first classmen, the pressure’s still on to perform, and you find yourself badmouthing the place—Hudson High, with all its problems—and it’s kinda the same way the soldiers do.

Paul Bucha

And out of that comes this respect for one another, and the miracle of what can be accomplished, and that’s what I learned that day—all this heroism stuff is irrelevant.

There are ten guys on a shiny wall [the Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C.] that are mine, that because of me, are there, so I'm no hero. The heroes were this entire 89 guys, that night, and those that were back at base camp supporting us.

Paul Bucha

My first sergeant, we couldn't get reinforced, he came out of one helicopter, and the guy kicked out the box of grenades, and they went right where the NVA and VC guys were, not where we were. And I could see it, and I said, "Oh, my God," and I'm thinking, "That's all I need now," they're coming this way. The next helicopter comes out, and he's my first sergeant riding on the skids and he kicks the box out between his legs and drops. I said, "What are you doing here?" And he said, "I missed the first Alamo."

Interviewer

Clear something up here for me, though. Calvin goes AWOL?"

Paul Bucha

He gets sent?"

Interviewer

Or is declared AWOL, because of what?

Paul Bucha

Okay, he gets sent to Fort Carson, and he's in the hospital. He's assigned to a platoon for hierarchy purposes.

Interviewer

Based on what? What made him "it's just the insanity of war. It's the chaos, the craziness?"

Paul Bucha

There's no evidence that he's what he said.

Interviewer

Why would somebody say that "why would he do?"

Paul Bucha

"Cause there's no evidence "this guy's sitting there?"

Interviewer

Why didn't he get the Silver Star or the Purple Heart "why didn't that happen?"

Paul Bucha

The administrative people were too busy. We put him in, and I'm still now trying to get medals for my guys.

Paul Bucha

Calvin eventually got a Silver Star—other than honorable, back, restored—VA benefits and a \$25,000.00 check from the VA to make up for the lost benefits. And to his heart, that young guy—not so young now, he’s in his 40s—turns around and gives the check to his sister, who had taken care of him. His sister and her husband had taken care of him through all these years when he was having problems. And when we were having the ceremony to present it, the congressman kept mispronouncing words and things, and I asked the congressman, I said, “Look, I can do this. I don’t need the citation.”

Paul Bucha

So I told everybody—and the tribe leaders are there—and so then the congressman pins the Silver Star on him. Calvin takes it off. I said, “Oh, my God—here’s a Delta guy.” He said, “Mr. Congressman, thank you.” He turned around and he said, “Thank you.” And everybody left, except for the tribal guys, with their turquoise and everything else, and their ponytails and their braids, and Calvin: “Sir, could you pin it on me?” And I said, “Yeah, I can.” He just said, “That’s what I want it for, I’ve been waiting for.” And I said, “Wait—I want you to take this, and you keep it, and when I get a two-star general from somewhere, he’s going to pin it on you, ‘cause that’s what you’re entitled to.”

Paul Bucha

And God bless West Point—we had a West Point Society meeting in Connecticut at which they invited the Superintendent of the Coast Guard Academy, for the purpose of presenting Calvin his medal. And he goes to Cheshire, and he says, “Where are you from?” “Cheshire, Connecticut.” And he said he’ll call me one day, and I get a call from him every once in a while, and he said, “Sir, I’m a hero in this town.” I said, “Yeah, what do you mean?” He says, “I get free coffee wherever I go.” And I said, “Well, what’d you learn?”

Paul Bucha

He said, “Sir, what I learned is my real friends are those who didn’t need me to have a medal to be my friend.” And I said, “You know, that’s a lesson none of us learn in a lifetime.” And here’s this guy without a high school education, who the highlight of his life was being in Delta Company. Didn’t call me asking for a medal—wanted some psychological help. And if you think about it, that tug-of-war he went through between the counselors, who believed him, but there was no evidence of what he was saying was true, and his lieutenant, who didn’t want to believe him—just figured he was a typical Vietnam vet full of BS—that reflected society.

Paul Bucha

Of the guys who served together, trusting and believing in each other, and the people who had never served, judging us from afar. And that became my motivation to join all the veterans’ groups, to be a veterans’ advocate, ‘cause one thing that you don’t have at West Point are veterans’ advocates.

Paul Bucha

You’re not a member of the American Legion if you’re on the faculty at West Point. Yet guys like Calvin—that’s what they depend on—advocates. To me, until I can

figure out and resolve the ten guys, maybe someday realize what I could've done" maybe I should've done the conventional stuff"night defensive perimeters and all that " and maybe they'd be here. But I decided that one day a week, approximately, on average, I want to give back to vets, and so I try to see veterans or military groups somewhere in the country one day a week of my life.

It Took Me a While
Interviewer

Do you find yourself"I mean I can"

Paul Bucha

Excuse me for this"I have PTS, and I'm not embarrassed by it, so.

Interviewer

Yeah, I understand, and we should talk a little bit about that, but I'm thinking"and I suppose this does relate directly to it, 'cause PTS probably involves some measure of guilt for you.

Paul Bucha

Tremendous amount of guilt, and that is, according to the psychologists that I know"and it took me 40-some-odd years to go see one"

Interviewer

Even though you're suffering all through that time with all the"

Paul Bucha

Well, not suffering in the sense that it"

Interviewer

Well, I mean you were"

Paul Bucha

I have manifestations.

Interviewer

Yes.

Paul Bucha

But I'm proud of it. When I talk about my men, I cry. My wife will always say"Look, you ought to tell people before, 'cause it makes them ill at ease." So I said, "Look, I've decided"it took me a while to even talk about them."

Paul Bucha

So now I speak at the Air Force Academy twice every year. I talk to the plebes when they first enter"doolies, I guess they call them"about honor"the thing that Bruce Palmer had me doing at West Point.

And then I was asked to come about 20 years ago to talk to the first class a month before they graduate, when they had booed the Chief of Staff of the Air Force off the stage. And I was asked once why I left the Army—“if you have all this going for you, why do you leave?” And it took me a while to tell that story truthfully. And then I had one guy say, “Why do you talk about your men in generalities?”

Paul Bucha

Well, I said, “It’s because I have a tough time getting specific—cause of ten names on the wall.” And he said, “Sir,” “this is a first classmen at Air Force”—“just tell us about them”—“about your guys.” So I did, and I found out that the story of eating the chickens off the head and all—there’s something that in its comedial aspects is refreshing. But it had a substance to young officers, because they will be the same way.

Paul Bucha

They’re going to go into a military, no matter what, where they’re the neophytes, the beginners. They won’t have CIBs and medals. And the question is, “How do I prove my mettle, if you will, before the demands for my proof are there?” So talking about my men and the relationship we had, and about the mistakes that occurred, and how an institution of the United States Army let them down. I won’t stay at the 101st, I won’t stay in the Barsanti house, who was the commanding general of the 101st who didn’t fill the papers out.

Interviewer

For those men that—

Paul Bucha

It got lost in his administrative, and I was told that. I said, “Where the—” “how do I get this stuff?” They said, “Don’t worry, it’s being taken care of. The general goes to the hospitals and makes all the presentations.”

Interviewer

General who—“who is the—”

Paul Bucha

Barsanti.

Interviewer

Barsanti. So—

Paul Bucha

And he didn’t.

Interviewer

Did you ever confront him about it directly?

Paul Bucha

No, because I didn't know about it until Calvin called.

Interviewer

I see.

Paul Bucha

And he was dead then. But now, I mean I've got a guy named Tim Hurley who didn't get his air medals. Like air medals were a quantitative thing, not a subjective thing—you do so many touchdowns and takeoffs, and you get them, and we all got them. He didn't get his. Well, it's almost impossible to go back and get it. My RTO

Interviewer

Leaving humility aside for a moment, why did you get the Medal of Honor?

Paul Bucha

I have no idea, other than my men recommended it. When I was in Highland Falls, and a guy called me—actually, it wasn't a guy—the first call came from Arch Hamlin, General Hamlin, who was my officer superior when I was the second regimental commander as a cadet. He was the second regimental, so I got to know him. He was then the Inspector General of the Army, and he said, "Buddy, I'm just calling to let you know you're going to get some notification." And I said, "For what?" "You're going to get the Medal of Honor." And I said, "Yeah, but why?"

Interviewer

You really didn't have an inkling.

Paul Bucha

No, I had already received the Distinguished Service Cross.

Interviewer

For that.

Paul Bucha

For that,

Interviewer

Well, it could make sense that if you had not done what you did, you could've had 40 guys dead and countless guys injured.

Paul Bucha

Could've, should've, would've, but it's not the fact. The facts are ten are dead, and what might have been is not, in any way, as persuasive above what was, and what was, was ten guys died, who I had entered into a contract with.

Interviewer

But I was going to come back to that—you mentioned that contract earlier, yes.

Paul Bucha

You trust me and do as I ask of you, I will bring you home, and at no time, no matter how intense the battles were, did anyone ever say, “Huh” are you sure? Why? Just said, “Yes, sir. All the way, sir.” And off they went.

Interviewer

So you have a sense they didn’t say that because they knew they were going to die.

Paul Bucha

They knew they were going somewhere that there’s no way in hell they were coming back.

Interviewer

But they’re going to do it anyway, because of your leadership.

Paul Bucha

Not because of the kind of men they were.

Interviewer

But you had helped brand them into the kind of men they were.

Paul Bucha

That would be the height of hubris.

Interviewer

Well, you might say that, except if I go back to those five ingredients you said at the beginning—without those, those men are not coming together.

Paul Bucha

I don’t know that—that’s speculation on my part. I just know what they were was so contrary to what I was told they were and what society had judged them to be. For someone to take credit for what they were is really conceited.

Paul Bucha

I say, “About what, my men? I have a tough time talking about them.” They say “No, about you.” I say, “I’m not worthy of a book” these guys are. The medal—I went through that process, and I said, “I’m going to turn it down,” and I left a message for someone to call me back, and I got a call from a sergeant.

Paul Bucha

His name I can’t recall, because I was stunned by what he said. He said, “Sir, I’m going to talk to you honestly—” who the hell do you think you are? He says, “Your men recommended you for something. They didn’t say you’re a hero. They said they want you to have this, as their leader, period. Don’t get carried away

that this is all about you.â€ I said, â€œWhoa.â€

Interviewer

Thatâ€™s an interesting thought.

Paul Bucha

I said, â€œThank you very much.â€ He said, â€œDonâ€™t ever forget it.

Paul Bucha

So thatâ€™s where it started, was the Vietnam guys who, if you look at the DVDs of the oral history of the Medal of Honor Society, to a person, they say, â€œI wear this for others who never received what they were entitled to receiveâ€”the proverbial two men in a foxhole, and there are no witnessesâ€”surely, something happened. And I wear it for the men I had the privilege of serving with, period, not for myself.â€ Thatâ€™s a change, â€”cause when I first was part of it, a lot of people talked about â€œHereâ€™s what I did.â€

Meeting the Other Side

Interviewer

1973 is when itâ€™s pinned on you, right?

Paul Bucha

1970.

Interviewer

1970, okay. Youâ€™re home here in a country that is torn apart by race issues, torn apart by the war, torn apart by attitudes towards authority. This is the height of whatâ€™s now culturally referred to as â€œthe â€™60s,â€ even though it bled into the â€™70s, clearly. The treatment of returning veterans is one of the great shames of the country in the latter part of the 20th century.

Interviewer

Iâ€™m interested to know how you felt upon returning and receiving this honor for your men in the midst of what was this very powerful counter-cultural experience.

Paul Bucha

When I was teaching at West Point, [1

Interviewer

Letâ€™s just give out that the Berrigan brothers were two priestsâ€”

Paul Bucha

Two priests, right.

Interviewer

Who opposed the war and were very vocal.

Paul Bucha

And they were involved in the burning of draft cards at Catonsville.

Interviewer

Yes.

Paul Bucha

And, so I had the privilege—a local reporter named Chris Fargis said, “I want you to meet these people. I want you to meet the other side.”

Interviewer

This would’ve been what year, now, we’re talking about? This is after you return, right, so you’re

Paul Bucha

It would be 1969, 1970.

Interviewer

Oh, it was before you went.

Paul Bucha

Yeah—I mean [crosstalk] 1970 [after I returned].

Interviewer

Okay, I am sorry after Tet—so around the same time as the Medal of Honor.

Paul Bucha

Yeah, about the Medal of Honor—that was why he met me.

Interviewer

I see.

Paul Bucha

And as I went and met these people, I realized they’re no different than anybody else. They just passionately believe this war is misguided.

Paul Bucha

I said, “Yeah, but the flag there—that’s the North Vietnamese flag upside-down. The American flag’s over there on the other end of the—” “Oh, okay.” They all just left. It wasn’t like that the news said look what the students of Stanford are doing—they were giving blood, and they didn’t really think about, you know—they’re not into that. Yet I was known as an Army officer on the base—everybody knew me on the campus. No one ever said a negative thing to me.

Interviewer

What were your own attitudes about the war?

Paul Bucha

Well, the thing of the war isâ€¦I had an obligation to go.

Interviewer

Right, from your years at West Point, right.

Paul Bucha

Well, my classmates were going.

Interviewer

Yeah.

Paul Bucha

My roommate was a classmate, and as the guys were going to Vietnam theyâ€™d pass through, and weâ€™d take them out for a fling on the town. So we had been exempt, and so it was our time to go. Duty, if you will, but more important, the contractual obligationâ€”thatâ€™s what we graduated for, so we didnâ€™t have an option.

Paul Bucha

But earlier, I kept thinking, â€œI wish someone would figure out what it was to bring us home.â€ All of my missions in Vietnam were, as I said earlier, move around and kill somebody until we tell you to stop moving around and go somewhere else. It didnâ€™t make any sense to meâ€”these cordons didnâ€™t make sense, and I couldnâ€™t figure out what it was that we were really trying to do. Iâ€™d studied the stuff about the dominoesâ€”I just didnâ€™t buy that, it just didnâ€™t makeâ€”and I remember as a cadet, my first two years, seeing a film at West Point in which Ho Chi Minh was portrayed as this nationalist colonialâ€”anti-colonialist, fighting for his people, Ã la George Washington. And that the oppressiveâ€”

Interviewer

Whom he admires.

Paul Bucha

Yeahâ€”the oppressive French finally got their butts handed them at Dien Bien Phu. Two years later, this communist Ho Chi Minh, who we have to eradicate now, so as a result, there was a mixed message that had been coming. We sat astride that line when the country went from, you know, the bad French to the bad VC, if you will. And in March, when I wrote those letters to the ten families, I knewâ€”I knew their sons, regardless of what anyone else thought, had to be, for posterity, heroes.

Paul Bucha

Their sons and their families had given their sonsâ€™ lives for us, to a place they could not find on a map, whose culture they didnâ€™t understand, and whose language they didnâ€™t speak. But still, they went. And so what I wrote, I had to encapsulate in that letter, for posterity, the absolute heroic person that their sons were. That was an imperative. But I

couldn't then say to what end they had died" I didn't know one. And I said, "This doesn't make sense." The cleaning lady's going to be here now" I have to let her in now, so"

Interviewer

Okay"and then we'll pick up another time. Thank you.