

Donald Kujawa Oral History

[00:00:00] Dean Wetzel: All right Don, I just want to say thank you today for sitting down with me and doing this oral history and talking about your service and that. It's always great to listen to you veterans and what exactly it is that you guys saw and what you guys experienced over there. We're just going to start out with some real simple questions, just basic biological, biographical information here. If you could tell us all where you were born and a little bit about your parents, who they were and what they were doing for their livings.

Don Kujawa: I was born in Chicago, Illinois in 1947. My dad was a carpenter, and my mom was what was considered a housewife back then.

Dean Wetzel: Awesome. Now, did any, did they serve?

Don Kujawa: My father was in the Marine Corps at Guadalcanal.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. Did you have any aunts, uncles that served at all, or?

Don Kujawa: Yeah, my one uncle was in the Navy, the other uncle was in the Army. He was a state commander for the VFW, a lot of cousins in the Air Force. And the Army. I think. I forgot about them.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. It's easy to forget about them. How was it like having a dad that went to some place like Guadalcanal?

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Don Kujawa: Back then, I gotta say, he and my uncles didn't talk about it much, for whatever reason. My one uncle on the aircraft carrier saw a lot of action. My dad saw a lot of action. Him and his friends didn't talk about it.

Dean Wetzel: So, as you grow up what's it like growing up in the Cold War? You were at the heart of it there in the fifties. What kind of things went on at like schools training? Did you ever feel like Russia was actually going to attack?

Don Kujawa: No, and I never did the under the desks thing or anything that I saw on the news. But no, I never even thought about it. To me, we had a good life. We played baseball. We came home at night when the streetlights came on. We got up in the morning, went out and played with our friends. It was a different time than today.

Dean Wetzel: As we enter into the 1960s there, some crazy things happened both at home and also abroad. Do you remember the Berlin Wall going up? Was there, having veterans in your family, were they alarmed by that?

Don Kujawa: You know, going to family reunions, get togethers, Sunday dinners with the families, relatives. The dads would talk about it. But the kids were not, the kids were out playing. We weren't involved back then. Even as teenagers. You finally got to meet your cousins and what not. You were talking

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kids' stuff. And the adults were talking about it. I don't think that one, I don't think anything really came up until Kennedy got assassinated. Then everybody got involved in politics, the Vietnam thing, the Cuba thing. Then it started to surface from there.

Dean Wetzel: Do you still remember JFK's assassination?

Don Kujawa: Yeah, I was sitting in the chemistry class in high school. Everything stopped. And the whole world cried.

Dean Wetzel: Was that maybe your time where you were like, Okay, this is the shot fired across the bow, we're going to war now?

Don Kujawa: It made me realize there's something else going on in the world besides. Fast cars, trying to sneak beer out at night and go into the drive-in movie with your girlfriend or something going on out there. Yeah, it did, it changed.

Dean Wetzel: Now which branch of service do you enlist, or do you get drafted?

Don Kujawa: I was away at college and the draft was on. I had a very high number. The odds of my getting drafted were slim, but I did not want to get

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drafted. And my dad was in the Marines, and he talked about it, what it, how it helped him grow up. And I decided I wanted to join the Marines,

Dean Wetzel: Not just because of the dress blues.

Don Kujawa: I did the uniform. You got a point there.

Dean Wetzel: Awesome. Now, when is it that you get into the Marine Corps?

Don Kujawa: As far as what?

Dean Wetzel: As when does, you ship off to boot camp. Let's start there.

Don Kujawa: August of 67 I was living in Chicago at the time. I went and visited a recruiter. And he told me all about it. Didn't sugar coat it. And I says, okay, I sign. And got on a plane with him, with a bunch of other Chicagoans. And we actually formed our own platoon. Usually when you go to boot camp, they bring guys from all over the country, you put them together, you get to meet new people. We were the Chicago mob.

Dean Wetzel: The Chicago mob.

Don Kujawa: Every time we screwed up on the drill field, we made them put our collars up and put our hands in our pockets and shuffle.

Dean Wetzel: Oh. Did you have to stand on the yellow footprints?

Don Kujawa: Oh yeah. First experience. I went in, I had, because I just got out of college, I ran out of money, that was another reason I joined. Is I could just set one foot in Vietnam; you get four years of college. Little did I know what happened when you set that foot in Vietnam. But I went to O'Hare Airport, got on an airplane with these other guys, and then I had a pair of gray slacks on, corduroy wingtips, a double-breasted blazer, and hair down the middle of my back. And everybody warned me to get it cut before I went, but I wasn't gonna do it. And they didn't mess with me after I got off the yellow footprint. They just shaved it off and the rest is history.

Dean Wetzel: How was that experience? They talk about boot camp being a wakeup call almost because of how different it is once you get there versus life as you were living.

Don Kujawa: We talked about this. Full Metal Jacket was a mild version of boot camp back in the 60s. I don't know how it is for Marines today, but they didn't take no shit. I mean they let you know who was boss and you better toe the line.

Dean Wetzel: You ever have a moment where you thought, is this worth it while you were at boot camp?

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Don Kujawa: What the hell was I thinking?

Dean Wetzel: Yes, one of those. Every day.

Don Kujawa: Yeah. Come on, anybody who's been in the Marine Corps, and yet come graduation day you couldn't be prouder. And the fact that you made it through all that crap, excuse my expression.

Dean Wetzel: Oh no, you're fine. Yeah. What about funny moments? Now I know you probably couldn't laugh at the moment, but looking back at it, you go, Man, those guys did that to us, and I can't believe they did it.

Don Kujawa: You had experiences like when you screwed up during the day or something happened, they got a bad report, and they tell you to get out on the tarmac. And you're in your underwear, your t shirt and baggy white underwear. And they tell you to get back in there and bring us your pillow. And you come out and get your pillow. And throw it on the ground. And he says, put it back. Go back and make your bunk. Then he said, "Bring me a blanket". And everybody brings their blanket out. And then the last thing he says is, bring out your mattress. And every time you're going back in there, you're remaking your bunk. And then he said, "Bring out your mattress". Hold it over your head. It wasn't two inches thick. You're holding your mattress over your head. We're going to do jumping jacks. It was the most ridiculous crap in the world. Or let's

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see what else happened that was funny. You had to warn your people when they sent you a letter. Do not put, they used to stink chewing gum in there. With the foil wrapper. And if you got that, they made you eat the foil wrapper. And if you had fillings, it hurt. Or you had the guy that got a box of chocolates. And the drill instructor made him bury it in the gravel. And then he said, "I changed my mind", you can have it. Dig it up and eat it. Just weird stuff like that.

Dean Wetzel: I guess I should have asked this maybe a little bit earlier, but what exactly was your MOS going into the Marine Corps?

Don Kujawa: Actually, back then, they didn't assign it until after you took all the tests.

Dean Wetzel: Oh, okay.

Don Kujawa: Yeah, so we didn't get it. And we actually did not find out our MOS until graduation day.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. What was your given MOS?

Don Kujawa: 0311, Rifleman.

Dean Wetzel: Huh. Everybody's a Rifleman in the Marine Corps, though.

Aren't they?

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Don Kujawa: Yeah. I got interviewed by the local paper one time and I said, my punishment came graduation day due to some circumstances that I was an 0311 rifleman, the lowest form of Marine there is, but the backbone of the Marine Corps. And he didn't put backbone of the Marine Corps in the article, I caught a lot of crap over that. Everyone is a rifleman, you're right.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, we always make that joke, they say that until you go to the rifle range. And then you see who's really the 11 and not. Did you, so what happens after you're done with boot camp? You survive, what is it, 8 weeks? 13 weeks? How long was your boot camp? Do you remember?

Don Kujawa: 12 weeks.

Dean Wetzel: 12 weeks. So, you survive the 12 weeks of hell of the boot camp. You get, become a Marine. Which actually, I should maybe ask about that. How does that process go? Do you just After 12 weeks, become a Marine? Or is there a ceremony? Do they.....

Don Kujawa: We had graduation day. I happened to be able to tune on him, which was one of my goals when I went in. Because my recruiter said the only way I'd get dressed blues is if I became the top man in my platoon. So, I told him I would see him with the blues at graduation. Found out our MOS and then we went off to infantry training. And there's actually no ceremony. It was just I

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had to dress blues, I've got a picture here in my book of me marching in front of the platoon, everybody's in greens with a rifle, and I got the flag. But circumstances made me an 0311 rifleman, we can talk about that later.

Dean Wetzel: What was infantry training like? Because I'm sure at this point you get the MOS 0311, it's, I think 1967 you said you were in. I'm sure you connected the dots; you realized real quickly you're going to Vietnam. So, did you start, did that training, do you feel like that training was helpful in preparing you?

[00:10:00] Don Kujawa: O yes. Boot camp gave you the discipline and then infantry training, Camp Pendleton where you went on maneuvers, night maneuvers and what not. You were told to guard a hill, not let anybody up the hill. And I got, we got in trouble for that one because we were guarding the hill. And another platoon was coming up the hill. How are you going to stop them? We started throwing rocks at them. A lot of people got hurt. Our commander, he says, did a good job, but yeah, no, it was just, night training, marching, carrying your buddy, up a hill, pretending he's wounded. It came in handy. They did a good job training wise.

Dean Wetzel: Did you say it's definitely a physically demanding MOS or military job?

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Don Kujawa: You know why they want you to do pullups and pushups and everything and be in shape. You went through it, so you know it, it paid off.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. Yeah. I always say the elevens got out a little light because you guys got to go on all the hikes with just an M4 in our, at our time while I'm over here as a machine gunner and we have fifties and marks and all this lovely, heavy stuff we're carrying.

Don Kujawa: That's like graduation year when we went to final drill competition. I've been carrying a flag for ten weeks, now you want me to play with a rifle, it was different. Granted I would do it, but they're doing it every day, port arms, order arms, everything. I'm carrying a flag doing this, so that, that was the toughest part for me.

Dean Wetzel: It's always hard when you go with the rifle and you feel it start to slip as you're going from left shoulder to right shoulder, and you're not supposed to move your head, but naturally you move your head and every time you get caught Yeah, every single time.

Don Kujawa: And the fact that I was left-handed made it even tougher, because I had to be different.

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Dean Wetzel: Oh, Don you had to make it hard on yourself, huh? Where was ITB was that in the Area 52 that they have out there in Camp Pendleton Out there, so did you ever go up on like the alpha shelf, that little ridge or anything like that? Okay.

Don Kujawa: No, it changed with the new Marines. Yeah. They had to get different training; they call it.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, we there was a lot of hiking around that alpha shelf for us.

Don Kujawa: The other thing I noticed about training is, you're out of Camp Pendleton when you went to Vietnam. Different atmosphere, different terrain. But it just got you in shape, is what I would say. Sure.

Dean Wetzel: Alright, so when you finish your ITB training and you get your MOS 0311, you completed all of that, is that when you ship out to Vietnam, it's right then?

Don Kujawa: Actually, they gave us a break, it happened in the middle of training, they let us come home for Christmas. Okay. And then we went back to finish our training and shipped out to Vietnam.

Dean Wetzel: So where then, and when I should ask do you get to Vietnam? Where's your first place in Vietnam that you arrived?

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Don Kujawa: Da Nang.

Dean Wetzel: Da Nang? And that would have been early of 68?

Don Kujawa: Yeah. And then they decide which unit you're going to be attached to and plan on getting you out there.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. Which unit were you attached to and where were you?

Don Kujawa: 26th Marines at Khe Sanh.

Dean Wetzel: Okay. Khe Sanh. That's I've heard that come up in a couple different oral histories. That was a rough place I hear. Okay.

Don Kujawa: Yeah, if you watch some of the videos they say what is it, 15,000 Marines surrounded by 120, 000 Vietnamese. I wish I would have seen that video before I went there.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, I'm sure.

Don Kujawa: I would have said it changed my mind.

Dean Wetzel: I'm sure yeah, I think everybody would have at that point. So where exactly was Khe Sanh? What was that? Was it way out there in the jungle?

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Don Kujawa: No, it was, we were at, my first assignment was at the air base, which is directly south of the DMZ. Okay. And then I was there a couple of weeks at the airstrip, and then they put me on a hill, the most northernmost hill, 551 I believe it was, the most northern hill. We used to watch through telescopes, watching rocket rounds on elephants being escorted through the jungle. It's kind of different.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah.

Don Kujawa: But yeah flew from Da Khe Sanh airstrip, which is a funny story because they put us on a AC-130. With an Air Force pilot, and he warned us that if we take sniper rounds, we're not going in and all of a sudden you hear the pew, pew pews, the rounds are going by us as he's coming into the airship and straight up and out of there and back to Da Nang. Next day, the same thing. Took a couple runs straight up and backed to their name. Next day we got a marine pilot. He says, hang on. He says, when I hit the runway, he says, I'm gonna open the door. He said, get the fuck off my airplane. Pew, pew. Rounds are going off. He's going in hard. He hits that deck. Gets to the end of it. The door is going down as he turns around. He goes off the runway. Now he's stuck. So, he revs up the engine to get back on the metal plates. We're rushing out the back. I'm seeing sea bags and bodies flying by me because he's got those

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engines cranking. One of my best friends fell, broke his ankle, and he was on a plane the next day and out of there. One day you spent in a Khe Sanh.

Dean Wetzel: That's I think that's the new definition for coming in hot.

Don Kujawa: And that's when I saw the AC-130. It got hit and it's sitting off to the side. The wreckage was there, but then you knew what you were getting into.

Dean Wetzel: I'm sure that was a great, welcome to Vietnam experience.

Don Kujawa: Well smart pilots versus combat pilots, Air Force, hey, shooting at me, I'm out of here. Marine says, hey. You guys gotta get here.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. And like you said, you've seen the crash wreckage of a AC-130 there. You're coming in under fire. You're probably at this point in your head, and rightfully it's going, where the hell did I just get sent to?

Don Kujawa: And no weapon.

Dean Wetzel: Oh. Left that out.

Don Kujawa: Didn't get a weapon until I got there.

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Dean Wetzel: Yeah. There's nothing better than getting shot at and having no way of returning fire. No way that

Don Kujawa: you've got it.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. Okay, so we got definition of coming in hot and definition of being up shit's creek without a paddle. Welcome to Don's first 24 hours in Vietnam. Oh, so after that, what just exactly, I'm guessing, were you constantly under attack then? Being out there?

Don Kujawa: No, not at that point. The first thing they do is they got you, they put you in an old timer. A salty Marine. And they had me making sandbags and what not. And all of a sudden you hear the warning device go rocket round or mortar round, come, coming in. So, you jump in a hole and hide. And the guy I was with, he was so seasoned it was ridiculous. Cause every time the alarm, I jump in a hole, he's like up there smoking a cigarette, filling a sandbag, whatever. Finally says, you ain't gonna hear the one that's gonna get you. So, after a while. We're sitting on top of the sandbags, there's no alarms going off, all of a sudden the alarm goes off, he's smoking a cigarette, we're sitting there watching him come in. So that was like my first third or fourth day there. And I just sat next to him, I said, if it's gonna get him, it's gonna get me, but then you just blend in, it's just.....

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Dean Wetzel: Did you get to do a lot of patrolling then as an 11?

Don Kujawa: Not, no, not the first couple of weeks when you're online watch every night. The one thing I didn't like was, you could have a, how do I say this nicely? You could have a magazine in your weapon, but you couldn't chamber a round. You're on night watch, and, if you heard a noise, you had to call up to the hill. They would say lock and load. So, one night I heard some noises coming in and the officer, they jumped in the hole, around the perimeter around the base. He jumped in the hole. I almost shot him. Scared the living shit out of me. And he's, you don't have a round chamber, do you? Yes, sir. That's when I found out you had a call to the top of the hill. They didn't tell me that ahead of time. But I almost shot him because he snuck up behind me. I was scared to death.

Dean Wetzel: That shouldn't, that doesn't sit well with even me. Cause it's almost like having your hands tied in a situation where, the enemy could attack and now I have this extra hurdle to go through in order to engage in it's not nighttime. Like it is here. You couldn't see the I don't know how hand.

Don Kujawa: Whether it change that today because they were taking a lot of crap, but yeah, and maybe it was cause I was a new guy.

Dean Wetzel: May. Okay.

Don Kujawa: And what happened? Happened. Yeah. You know what I'm saying?

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. Yeah. If you ever watch the Pacific there, that's a great show. You can see night combat going real south. In your other case, one of your buddies goes out for a, the bathroom or something like that, and you end up shooting him. I get what they're trying to prevent, but it's man, we're right here at the front lines in the DMZ. I think you can untie my hands a little bit and allow me to chamber round, Huh? When is it that you get to change your MOS, so to speak, to a radio man?

Don Kujawa: When they assigned me to the hill, and we marched out there, now I have a weapon at least we march, we go up to the hill, and I met Colonel O'Connor, Corporal O'Connor, my squad leader, and he asked me if I knew how to work a radio. And like a dummy, I said, yes. Not knowing what he was planning because he didn't have a radio man. So, I ended up being his radio man. I knew how to turn it on, I knew how to change the frequencies and what not. So, I ended up being the 226 radio, Fox 226 radio man.

Dean Wetzel: How do you still remember your call sign? No?

Don Kujawa: No. All I remember is going on ambushes at night. And my first ambush, I'm scared to death. And we walk out from the hill, and we go out on

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boom. And the next day you get the binoculars and you look out there and everything's gone, but pretty far from us. Wasn't even close to us, but that was interesting.

Dean Wetzel: I bet that was awesome to be around a B-52 strike.

Don Kujawa: Oh, and Puff, I call them the paratrooper planes, the C 17s.

Dean Wetzel: Something like that, yeah.

Don Kujawa: And they're flying along and they got the lights on. What the hell? They're waiting for a sniper round. And as soon as that sniper round comes up, they turn that plane on its side. And all you hear is, ehhhhhh. And you see this red streak hit the ground. It just covers the football field. Beautiful.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. That's awesome. There's a, I had another gentleman talk about Puff and he loved Puff too. There was nothing better than seeing Puff out there. It was interesting hearing about Puff. So, proceeding forward in your as you spend more time in Vietnam, do you feel more and more confident with your skillset then, as you become more acquainted with the routine of Khe Sanh and the environment?

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Don Kujawa: Every day it was something different. So, you got to acclimate to the environment. You do, you knew what to do and some of the stuff you saw, you just, some guys just didn't give a shit. You know what I mean?

Dean Wetzel: Sure.

Don Kujawa: But yeah, every day it was a learning experience.

Dean Wetzel: Could you go into detail or could you start possibly explaining a little bit of what happened the day that you were injured?

Don Kujawa: Yeah, we got the call. The night before, they had gone out, another unit had gone out on a mission and got hit, and they left three bodies out there, and the Marines will not leave anybody behind. So we got told we were going to go out that next morning, early in the morning. So I was O'Connor was the lead, he was the point squad leader, so I was his radio man. So we've got the point squad, the two flanking squads, tail squad, and officer in the middle while we're moving out. And the officer's radio took a puke. Now everybody's loaded up with mortar rounds and machine gun rounds and I got a radio and M-16 and a 45. And the officer comes up to O'Connor and says, you guys are a point squad, we'll follow you, you don't need a radio, give me your radio. So I didn't have a radio. And I also just had a 45 and a m-16. So anyway, we got to the position where the Marines got hit the day before, found the three guys, they

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were all alive. So they were going to call in the medevac choppers, but before they did that, our officer, I don't know his name, unfortunately, decided he wanted to see what happened. So we decided to try and take that hill, and that's when all hell broke loose. And every radio man and squad leader either got killed or wounded, and O'Connor walked off the hill and I got wounded, but I didn't have a radio on, shoot the antenna and the guy next to him cut off the communication. So my best friend Ricky Marshon got, he took a direct hit, the guy between Ricky and me was Odin, when he hit Ricky, took Odin's scalp, took the meat off his forehead. And at that point, I didn't know I had gotten hit in the throat, the hip, and the hand. But I was bandaging up Odin when a round hit behind me and threw me through the air and that's when my leg caught it, so they decided to call in medevac choppers and first of all, I got up after I got wounded and I fell, I couldn't stand up. Didn't know I got hit in the leg. I went to stand up again. And by the way, there's battle going on at the same time. I'm probably, fog, the concussion or the round, the mortar round behind me. And finally, I realized that we were still fighting. And when I hit the ground, I couldn't stand up. So I grabbed my rifle and I started rolling down the hill and I started rolling down and all of a sudden I realized I was rolling up the hill. And I turned around, I rolled all the way to the bottom, and I found a kid. He'd taken a piece of shrapnel in the glasses, because his glass was shattered, but he was okay. And I asked him to get me the hell out of there, because I couldn't walk,

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so he tried to grab me by the shirt and drag me to the rear. And the battle subsided. I think we took the hill. And they were calling it medevac choppers, and I could hear the choppers coming in and grabbing people and throwing them on the choppers. And all of a sudden I heard the gunnery sergeant go, okay, let's get the hell out of here. And I realized there was me, two guys behind me laying in the grass. And I started screaming it. I remember this. I started screaming at the top of my lungs, Guny Guny get me the fuck out of here. And he came through the grass and there was three of us laying there. One of them was one of our top sergeants. And I don't know who the other guy was. The one guy died on the way back, but they called him a chopper at night which they normally don't do, because it was dark. And chopper came and got the three of us out of there. Next thing I went to Fubayu, I call it a mash unit. From there they took me to Cam Ranh Bay, which is heaven. I don't know if you've ever been to Cam Ranh Bay, it's a beautiful area. The Air Force guys walking with their surfboards and stuff going out surfing. So I was at Cam Ranh Bay for a week, Then I went to Yakusha, Japan. for surgery, and then they sent me to Okinawa to Camp Smedley Butler for rehab, and then they sent me back to Vietnam.

Dean Wetzel: You ended up back in Vietnam?

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Don Kujawa: Yeah, that's, the 26th Marines was afloat, so I ended up with the 5th Marines. So, I went from Fox 226 to Fox 25.

Dean Wetzel: How did it feel going back to Vietnam? Were you a little hesitant at all?

Don Kujawa: No it wasn't because what happened was I was in the rear at Okinawa, there was a bunch of us, they gave me jobs, I was working in an office. I had a nice billet and everything. I had a locker and hot showers and everything. When they came back, I think it was, some officer came through the building one time and said, anybody six months or less left to do, or six months or more, I'm sorry, back to Vietnam. Interesting story there. We're on the tarmac getting around. Oh, the other thing is we're in our tans. So now we got to get jungle utilities. And if you've ever been to Okinawa, guys that go home, they get rid of their jungle utilities, get their stateside uniforms and go home. There was a field between some of the barracks, there was a pile of jungle utilities. 20 feet high, I forget how wide, that they were going to re lawn, re cycle, so we started going through those. I had the whitest set of jungle utilities you've ever seen, they've been washed so many times. I look like I've been in Vietnam 10 years. So, I look like Billy's bad ass. So, here's all these guys that were in rehab in Okinawa, waiting to go back to Vietnam. We're standing in line. Some of the guys got guns, they got knives. They got marijuana in their pockets. We're the

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salty, bad ass guys. And we're going to get back on the plane. And one of my good friends, I don't want to mention names because there's history here. But one of my good friends, here's a group of Green Berets coming back through Okinawa for whatever reason. Here's his brother who's a Green Beret. So, he gets out of formation, goes over and hugs him. And what are the odds of that? We get on the plane, here's all these kids from the states on the plane. We're getting on with them. He runs into his baby brother on the plane, who's in the Marines. So, it's about three brothers. Kind of reminded me of the movie about the Sullivan brothers in the Navy in WWII. Where two of his three brothers were within 100 yards of each other for 10 minutes. That's weird. So he got on a plane, flew back to the Navy.

Dean Wetzel: In your time in service did you ever receive any promotions?

Don Kujawa: I received my, I got PFC out of boot camp I was the honor man in my platoon in 1088, and I received my lance corporal while I was over in Okinawa.

Dean Wetzel: Which, which one of the two would you say you're probably most proud of?

[00:30:00] Don Kujawa: My PFC strip, because I went in with the intention of getting promoted. the PFC Stripe and the Dress Blues, because they only gave

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out five PFC Stripes per platoon. And normally it was the squad leaders, but not necessarily, and the guide. And the guide, you got your PFC Stripe and the Dress Blues.

Dean Wetzel: Nice. That does make it a little bit more special there.

Don Kujawa: Yep.

Dean Wetzel: Now, I know we've talked a little bit about some of the horrible things that we saw, or you saw over there in Vietnam. Do you have any funny memories, any funny recollections of what you guys did to maybe de wind from all that stress? You guys ever pull pranks on each other?

Don Kujawa: Funny things, when I was at the airstrip on night watch, I was online, and there was always a hole dug off the trench with sandbags and a metal roof where there was two of us, so one of us would be on guard duty, the other guy was in that hole sleeping. It was my turn to sleep, and he came, the other guy came out and he's on guard duty and I'm lying in there sleeping and I'm like this with my head on my elbow here.

And I hear this noise and I'm feeling really warm. It's really weird. And a rat had crawled in there with me and I got this scar right here. He was just like nuzzling my arm. And all of a sudden I realized there was something fuzzy right

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here. It was like a small dog. Pitch black out. I'm out of that hole. This thing is hanging here. It finally drops off. I'm screaming. Okay. And we used to have a hole dug in the trench. So, if somebody threw a grenade in, you'd drop it down in a hole. Because when it explodes, it goes straight up. The rat went down there. And the guy always shot the thing in the hole. He had a round in his chamber. So, then they had a call of a corpsman over there and he checked me out and he just barely broke the skin so they decided they were going to medevac me out in case of rabies and whatnot. And I don't know who the officer was, all they said was, we ain't calling the chopper for that. He says if he starts foaming at the mouth, shoot him. I'll never forget that. So nothing ever happened. I was fine. I never got rabies. But I, that was a funny moment. What else was funny? I have a distaste for ham and lima beans, which was part of the C rations back then. And when we were on the hill, the most northern, most hill, we used to switch from one position to another every couple days. And we ended up in the top position. It was a beautiful bunker, protected with sandbags, it had a hole drilled in the side where the water would drain out, it had a plywood floor, so it was nice, it was comfortable considering where you were. One day I realized that plywood floor, there was something under there, cause something to support it. I lifted it up, there had to be a hundred cans of ham and lime with beans, cause nobody would eat it. That was just funny.

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Dean Wetzel: Probably still there today. Still somewhat edible.

Don Kujawa: They used to trade them to the Vietnamese. For trinkets and what not. Hey, they'd give you ten cans of ham and lime a piece because nobody ate them.

Dean Wetzel: Now, going through your service, what might have been the hardest part for you to adjust to? Or adapt to? Looking back at it, I know having family members does make boot camp a little bit easier to go into and what not. Just cause you kinda know what to expect. So maybe it was going to Vietnam or coming back to Vietnam after you're being wounded. That you're just like, this was really hard.

Don Kujawa: Probably the worst part was I went through infantry training with Ricky Marson. He became one of my best friends and he ended up getting killed. And I didn't know until I was in the hospital in Japan, when I tried to check on him. And they gave me a notice that he was killed that day. That was probably the worst thing for me. He was John Wayne. In fact, when we were going up the hill, I'll never forget, because everybody's on the ground, staying as low as you can be. He's standing up. He's charging up the hill, like John Wayne. It's just You know, he would kick over, he, I remember the one thing he did, kicked open a spider trap, because there was a guy in there, pop it open and

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shoot, coming down, kicked it up, he's getting so low to the ground, I am underground, I'm Mr. Chicken Shit, he's John Wayne. And when he got killed, I took that pretty hard.

Dean Wetzel: Let's move on to a little bit lighter of a subject. Did you have a good luck memento?

Don Kujawa: Yeah, I do have one 50 caliber shell we made for our whole unit, and then, I think I mentioned to you, we had a captain in the 5th Marines, he handed us a dog tag that happened to say, if you're the enemy recovering my body, fuck you. And I still have it today.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah. It's nice to have something like that, it gets you through those hard times. What might have been the best experience you had in your service?

Don Kujawa: I'd have to say the people. I was not a very big person. Boot camp, the camaraderie of 75 guys. And the fact that most of them became my friends. I only stay in touch with a couple of them. But I remember my drill instructor saying one time. Nobody touches our guy. So, if we were competing in something and somebody touched me, my guys wailed on them. And we became good friends bootcamp in infantry and a few that went off together. Just a camaraderie. It's just, there's nothing, I'm prejudiced, there's nothing like

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the Marines. There's former Air Force, Navy, and Army, but you're always a Marine.

Dean Wetzel: Do you recall the day that your service ends?

Don Kujawa: Oh yeah.

Dean Wetzel: Where were you and how did that go?

Don Kujawa: A couple things happened. First off, I had three weeks left to do. I was in An Hoa in the rear. And a gunnery sergeant came to me and said, we've got an R& R at Okinawa. Nobody wants it. You can go to Hawaii, Hong Kong, Australia, Okinawa, Singapore, whatever. Who wants to go to, Okinawa? I had been there for a few months in rehab. So I figured I'd go back there because I could get out of Vietnam for a week. So, I get on a C 130. I'm sorry, a chopper from An Hoa. Get on a C 130 from Vietnam to Okinawa. Spend a week with my friends that were still there, working there. I got three weeks, less than three weeks left to do overseas. I get on a C 130 back to Da Nang so I can get back to An Hoa to get my paperwork to go back to Da Nang to go back to Okinawa to go home. So I get back to Da Nang to go to An Hoa and they've been shelling my base for two weeks or a week and a half now and I can't get back there to get my paperwork so there's no choppers going in. So they put me on a six by. No weapon, no nothing. We're going to escort a gas truck convoy

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back to An Hoa. One of the gas trucks breaks down. I'm in the tail end truck with no weapon. We're in the middle of a dirt road. Level ground on all sides of us. We're a prime target. I'm scared to death because I've got two weeks left to do overseas. And I'm sitting there in a six by five. Finally a tow truck shows up. We get the gas truck where it's supposed to go. What happened was, the day I left on that chopper to go on my R& R, my buck took a direct hit. That's one of the pictures I still have, because it didn't get destroyed. Because the plywood buildings we were in with the metal roofs took a hit. And everything I own, my pictures, everything was gone. So if I hadn't taken that R& R, I might not be here today. I got back there, got whatever I could recover that wasn't blown up, and hid for a week. And then I got on the chopper, went back to Da Nang, got to dine, got on the C 130 to Okinawa, got on a plane, came back to California.

Dean Wetzel: Awesome. It is. What a way to end, right? So, you get out in 69 and that's right when the anti-war protests are spiking or hitting their peak, I guess you could say. Did you experience any of that? And if so, how did that make you feel?

Don Kujawa: Actually, no I had a pretty good experience because when I got out with a bunch of Marines. And when I got to the LA airport, there was a bunch of sailors waiting to go standby. And I walked into the LA airport with a Chinese carbine on my shoulder. I had my Tom Cruise mirrored sunglasses on

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and I looked like Billy Badass. Since I was with the 5th Marines, I had a rope on my shoulder with my uniform, which only the 5th and 6th Marines have, from Belleau Woods.

Dean Wetzel: French Fourragere.

Don Kujawa: Yep. I had a gunnery sergeant come up to me and he said, no Marines have ropes. So, this guy didn't know his history.

Dean Wetzel: Nope.

Don Kujawa: But I explained it to him. And I got up to the, I'll never forget, I got up to the desk and the young girl asked me if I got back from Vietnam. I said, yeah. And there was literally hundreds of sailors waiting to get on a plane. And she handed me a piece, I had a good experience, she handed me a piece of paper, and she said, if anybody asks you, you've been here for two days. Okay. They called two officers and me to get on the plane, and the sailors looked at me like, who the hell is this guy? So, what she gave me was a number three, technically. So I got, walked down to the plane, handed the rifle to the pilot, he shook my hand, sat down, had a cocktail or two. Got back to O'Hare Airport, he handed me the rifle, shook my hand again. I get off the plane, there's two of my high school friends sitting in a bar waiting for a flight. And my girlfriend, who happened to, who became my wife six weeks later, she was going to pick me up

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at the airport, and anyway, I get off the plane, I see these guys at the bar, so I'm sitting there having a drink with them, and my wife walks up, and while **[00:40:00]** she's coming into the airport, and she's got this mini dress on that barely covered her ass. And I saw her, she saw me. And I had the rifle on my shoulder so I took it off and I just threw it to one of the guys and luckily he caught it. And I came running up to her, she's running towards me, and if you've ever seen the Dial commercial where the guy, they grab each other and they spin around. I'll never, luckily she had underwear on. Cause I spun her around cause her minidress was like in the middle of her back and we were spinning around in the airport. It was fun. About six weeks later we got married.

Dean Wetzel: Awesome. That's a good way of coming home there.

Don Kujawa: Yeah, so I, I had none of, and I've seen it on the news, you know where they're calling them baby killers and what not. I didn't have that cause mine was like Camp Pendleton, L. A. airport, O'Hare airport, home. And I wore my uniform for a couple of days for, because of relatives and what not. But other than that, I didn't, and I was dealing with military families, all my uncles and aunts and what not, so I didn't get into that.

Dean Wetzel: I was, I'm sure they were also supportive when you went in.

Don Kujawa: Oh yeah.

Dean Wetzel: That also is helpful too, coming home. Even

Don Kujawa: my relatives didn't like me then, because I served the country,

Dean Wetzel: so was it. Easy then for you to adjust back to civilian life?

Don Kujawa: Yeah, it helped me in my personal life afterwards because of the discipline that the Marine instills in you. I ran, I ended up running a plant in a printing company I worked for. I had one of the largest customers because of the discipline. I was disciplined. I still am today. Maybe a little bit overboard.

Dean Wetzel: We have that tendency as Marines, don't we? Now, when your service ends, were you, I'm sure you knew of the VA in particular, because again, you had family that served, but were you aware of all the benefits that were available?

Don Kujawa: None. All I knew was I could go to school. Being from Chicago, Roman Puczynski, who was an alderman in Chicago, gave every veteran a hundred, every veteran a hundred-dollar check for coming home. The state of Illinois paid for your school, and then the VA gave you the money. So technically that was money to live on. So, I got my associate's degree, I was heading towards my bachelor's when I ended up having a baby, and my job, I had to make a decision, school or work. So, I was like nine hours short of my

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bachelor's degree, and I went back and tried to do it, but work got involved, and family, so I ended up working.

Dean Wetzel: What about the medical side of things? How long did it take before that started going in for you?

Don Kujawa: Fifty years.

Dean Wetzel: Wow.

Don Kujawa: Yeah, it was weird because, originally I said I got hit in the hip. I didn't know it really because what happened was with all the wounds I had a band aid on my hip. And my wife was diagnosed with cancer, so we were in and out of hospitals with her, working on chemo and whatnot. And my hips started bothering me. So, I ended up going to Great Lakes Naval Hospital. And they did they knew I had shrapnel in my legs, so they took x rays, MRIs where they could and whatnot. And the Navy surgeon, I'll never forget, comes in the room laughing. He says, he showed me the pictures, he says, See all these little black spots in your right leg? And I go, yeah, that's shrapnel I couldn't dig out. He goes, he says look over here. And he shows me my left hip. And what, that scratch I had, one piece of shrapnel went in, embedded itself in the ball of my hip socket, and after 50 years, scraped a lot of the cartilage away. And one day I hit bone on bone, and that's when I realized I had a problem. So I have a new

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left hip. And let's back up this story a little bit, away from the hospital. When I got mustered out, I was at Camp Pendleton. And I wanted to stay in. I liked the Marine Corps. The killing part, that's a little rough, getting shot at, but I thought it would be a good life because I liked what they instilled in me. And one day, I walked into the office, the guy says you got six months left to do, what do you want to do? I said, I want embassy duty. I thought, guard the president. Laugh today. And the guy looked me in the eye and he says, you ain't tall enough. Back then you had to be six foot tall. Today they probably couldn't get away with it, but I think if you weren't six foot tall, it would make your life rough.

Dean Wetzel: I think because that's embassy or that's eighth and I that would guard the president. That's the corner of eighth and I street in Washington, DC. And I think if I remember right from when I was in, it was five foot nine and you had to be, Like a hundred and eighty or a hundred and eighty five pounds. Everybody had to look exactly the same. That's when, that's why people got, a lot of lance corporals would get corporal real easily when they're an eighth and I, because again, they want everyone to have the blood stripe, everyone to be in the same dress blue. So when you looked at that whole battalion or that whole platoon of Marines, it was, everyone was the exact same.

Don Kujawa: He told me you're not tall enough, so that kind of burst my bubble. And it, the sad part is because of it, I copped a bad attitude because, I

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didn't go into reserves after I got out, and I really wanted to, but it pissed me off because I wanted to try embassy duty. Maybe not the president, but embassy duty. And so I said, what's my other options? He said we can give you a bonus and re-up. And I said, what's going to be my MOS? Where do we go? We'd have to do some testing and whatnot. Okay, what's my other option? He goes, we can give you some shit duty here at Camp Pendleton, and for six months you just screw off. He said that. I said, what's my other option? He goes, I'll cut your papers. I said, cut them. So I was in 18 months and 21 days or 23 days I was trapped. So, I went home.

Dean Wetzel: And how much of that was spent in Vietnam? Or how long were you in Vietnam?

Don Kujawa: You gotta take out my hospital stay and all of that, but probably total 8 months. Yeah, because they're getting wounded hospital, Okinawa and then back.

Dean Wetzel: So basically

Don Kujawa: eight months total, probably in combat.

Dean Wetzel: So basically between SOI bootcamp and your time in Vietnam, you were either in country or training Three quarters. 14 months, 12 months,

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something like that. That's wild. The thing had just how crazy, in 18 months your life changed from this college kid to combat veteran. No, one thing I've been wanting to ask and I keep asking in all my oral histories is about the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. As you guys were fighting, not Russia directly in Vietnam or nothing, again, that was your larger enemy. That's the face behind the Vietnamese. Everybody knew that was what was going on. What was your personal feelings in 1989 as you watched the wall fall? and you watched the Soviet Union collapse, did you finally feel like you achieved victory?

Don Kujawa: No, because I never got the feeling it was final. Yeah, that happened, but then, look the way it's turned around. I guess I always assumed, unless we see something in the bigger picture where it really changes. Yeah, that happened, Germany's a different story. The wall went down. I've been there a couple of times now with the company I work for. It's a beautiful country, Russia is still China, look at China, now I, it didn't hit me like the world's going to change. And it didn't, unfortunately.

Dean Wetzel: Do you have you ever attended, or do you still attend any reunions?

Don Kujawa: No, in fact, no. The Khe Sanh reunion is in Louisville this next week. And I wanted to go, but I'm moving. I bought a house, so I'm moving. So

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I just don't have the time for it, unfortunately. I did go to a the VVA, the Vietnam Veterans of America Conference in Florida. And we've got a pin we're wearing now which says, Last Man Standing. Who's going to close the door on the organization? The Iraq, the Afghan vets and what not. There are organizations. And I don't mean to be cold about this, but they don't do anything.

Dean Wetzel: No, we don't.

Don Kujawa: And it's sad, and the Vietnam Vets tried to combine it all into one veterans group, you got the Legion, you got the VFW, you got the DAV, you got the Marine Corps League, you got, there's so many different, and for some reason we don't connect. And we're all fighting for the same thing, and When you start asking for donations, or you have a raffle or whatever, where do you put your money? It's tough, but the Vietnam vets, they really wanted to make one organization, and it seems like the younger vets didn't want to do it.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, my veterans, my peers, is I think it's still too young. We're too fresh. I'm hopeful that within 10 15 years we can change that. But only time is going to tell if, a lot of these veterans nowadays, they just want to be alone. I don't know if that's always the best of things, but that's where their mindset is right now. At least that's what I've seen.

Don Kujawa: Yeah, and it's interesting because I volunteer over at the hospital, and my region post does bingo over there. And the PTSD thing is scary.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah.

Don Kujawa: I know it's a different war and whatnot, but. My opinion don't take offense at this. I think we coddled our kids, and I don't think they were ready for war.

[00:50:00] Dean Wetzel: No. I, and I would agree a hundred percent with that. We, between that and then the fact that we were almost misled with what we were doing in Afghanistan and Iraq. I feel like we weren't prepared fully for what we were going to fight. We went in there thinking like we were going to have an armed force battle. We were going to fight a unified force. And we ended up fighting civilians with bombs and rockets.

Don Kujawa: Along those lines, something, when I first got to the Khe San Air Base, my first night on night watch. To make it simple, the way I looked at it, the base was four squares. And the Marine Corps line was here, and here. This fourth square was Vietnamese soldiers. And I'm on this line facing them. And they got one old timer with me. I says, hey, this is wacky. What happens if we get attacked? I'm going to be shooting our guys, the Vietnamese. He goes, they're going to turn and run. Shoot them. That's what he said to me. That was

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the only time I said, what am I doing here? These guys are on, I'm fighting for them. They're supposed to be on our side. And as soon as they get attacked, they're going to want to leave. And I'm supposed to shoot them?

Dean Wetzel: Puts you in a weird place, right? I know you touched on this a little bit, but maybe go a little bit farther into it. Just exactly how you feel that your service changed you. I know you talked a little bit about the discipline that comes with being a Marine and the honor, courage, and commitment of the Marine Corps. Do you feel that it changed you in any other ways?

Don Kujawa: It made me really appreciate our country and what we had, when you see other countries and what they have and what they're fighting for or what they live with, we've got to made, I saw women over there cooking with vegetables and stuff I wouldn't even step on and they're cooking it, you know what I mean, back then. And, the way the people, the clothes they wore, they didn't have shoes. And the life they were living, what they were living in, I felt we had it made. And I wanted to make sure my kids had it made, and now their kids are making sure they,

Dean Wetzel: exactly. After experiencing frontline modern warfare, violent warfare has your opinions, thoughts of war changed at all?

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Don Kujawa: It's a shame we have war. Vietnam, look at the VFW, they didn't consider it a war, it was a conflict. War is war. If you're shooting at each other, it's a war. I'm sorry. I wish we didn't have it. Between the bodies, the materials, the, oh, look at the Palestine thing right now in our country. That shouldn't be going on. That's my opinion. We don't want to get into that, but no, we shouldn't have war. Why can't we all get along?

Dean Wetzel: It's a great question. I wish that we had an answer. I've thought that myself all along. Especially nowadays, cause it's not like you just have a few hundred guys meet up in some field outside the village and we're gonna hack it out and whoever wins is the leader. It's today, we fight a war and your town's gone. Thousands, hundreds of thousands of people either dead, dispersed, or completely missing.

Don Kujawa: What happens if some one pushes that button.

Dean Wetzel: some ways, I almost feel like that would be the easier solution, cause then it's just, okay, everybody's gone. At least then no one has to be left to pick up the pieces at that point. This war, I mean look at what's in Ukraine. I mean what's left is just rubble piles. Someone's gonna have to claim those and rebuild those cities, but who? Is it Ukrainians? Is it the Russians? NATO? Who's gonna be the ones to do it? Someone's gonna have to. And that's the,

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that's what happens with modern warfare. Like you bring up Gaza. That's a great point. Like you sure you're angry. You want to bomb them into submission. You want to destroy Hamas in doing so you're bombing the most heavily densely populated place on the planet. And you're displacing millions of civilians in the process who all still need food, shelter, and water. Kids need to go to school. What do you do with all that? Well Don as we get closer to the end of your oral history here. I want to. I'll turn the microphone over to you and allow you to, talk about anything we haven't covered here, looking back at your service and then also if you want to maybe put out there a little message for future generations, to learn from your experiences.

Don Kujawa: If I had to do it over, I would and I have to admit, it's the Marine Corps that brings that to light because of what they've done. I'm sitting across from another Marine here and look what you're doing. I don't want to be cold because I deal with a lot of veterans. Marines are a little bit different. I said it before. Former Army, Navy, Air Force, but there are no former Marines. You take it to your grave. I don't know where you want me to go with that.

Dean Wetzel: Just thinking like your grandchildren or something like that, maybe your great grandchildren, someone that's not even here yet. If you wanted to give them a life lesson, a life from your story, what would that be?

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Don Kujawa: We've given you this country with everything you could want.

There's, it's not the best in the world, but there's none better. We're screwing with that right now. But, you've got to protect this country, and you've got to help maintain it, to bring it back to where it was. And I don't see that in a lot of the kids, I watched a girl in a bank the other day. It took her ten minutes to do her name in cursive. She was signing a check. Kids counting on their fingers. We've got to get back to where we used to be. I'm not saying it was perfect, but our kids have no clue.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah.

Don Kujawa: Again, we've coddled them. We want them to have everything we didn't have, but we're handing it to them.

Dean Wetzel: I, yeah. Now I know you've mentioned you were a post commander at your American Legion I know you've worked with a lot of veterans. So maybe you can answer this better, but what do you wish people knew more about veterans in general?

Don Kujawa: How much we care about this country? We're having a lot of trouble getting younger vets in. And I understand why, because I've been to a few posts where you get the Korean War vets in, and a few World War II vets. They sit around telling war stories, which is good because we need the history.

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But some of them can't handle their liquor, so the younger vets don't want to bring their families in there with the kids and what not, because, it gets a little rowdy. And yet, there's the vets that want to take, the younger vets that want to take it over, but they want to get the old guys out of there, they want to make it a family thing. Most of the vets I deal with, cause I'm on the honor guard too at Fort Custer here. We care about this country, and we care about our veterans. And that's why we do what we do. We've got to take care of them. The reason we have this country we have today is because of the veterans. Like it or not, and big business, let's go there. But the vet the veterans are our country.

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, I think it's something like what one or two percent of this country serves. It's a very small portion. I always tell people freedom is not free. There's somebody that's paid that price. And just because you don't know who paid that price doesn't mean that it's free.

Don Kujawa: All my Vietnam vets keep saying hey if went to war we might have to go back.

Dean Wetzel: there's, yeah. Another thing I wanted to ask before we end your oral history is do you Being up there in Khe Sanh, do you ever remember Agent Orange or Agent Purple or Agent any of those colors?

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Don Kujawa: It's funny you say, the B 52 strikes came in, we could see them spraying, outside of Khe Sanh around our hills, to bring the foliage down so we could see what was going on so there was no open attack. So, I was probably laying it, and I'm always waiting for that shoe to drop. You're on the ambush, you're lying in this grass.

Dean Wetzel: Sure.

Don Kujawa: Granted, maybe it's not dead, but there's got to be overspray from a few yards away. I've got a friend in Kentucky who was in the Marines, didn't even know it until I found out he was sick. He was handling Agent Orange, and he takes 40 something pills a day to stay alive, and diabetes, cancer, going blind you name it, he's got it. And the VA and the government's taking care of him, but what life does he have?

Dean Wetzel: Yeah, it's it was a great product for what it did. It just, it's really bad for the side effects it had, right? Agent Orange did exactly what it was designed. You wanted trees to go away, they went away. You sprayed it with Agent Orange, there's nothing to alive. The downside like you said is great, you sprayed that area, then you sent the next day or two days or a week later, sent my platoon through on a patrol and now we're all sick with Agent Orange poisoning, even though we're technically not around it. It's something I want to

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bring more to light. I think a lot of people understand that Agent Orange was used pretty loosely in Vietnam, but just understanding how loosely is very important.

Don Kujawa: I personally, I think it killed my wife because she loved her lawn and her garden, and she used weed killer. And always had sandals on, no gloves. They didn't know back then. Yeah, so I think that added to her cancer.

Dean Wetzel: Don, is there anything else we should talk about that we haven't covered yet before we end your oral history?

Don Kujawa: No, I don't think so. I just, I wish, personally I wish we could stop being so woke in the military. The military builds character builds men, women. Nothing against women in the military. I think we need 'em. I don't think they should be in combat, but we need a better military.

Dean Wetzel: I always tell people tell people at least maybe this is just the marine mindset, but to me, I never saw color. I never saw queer straight. I never saw. Any of that, if it was in, if we're going to be out on patrol, we're going out to a foxhole, I just need you to be the Marine. I need you to be, that's all I cared about. Is are you going to shoot back?

Don Kujawa: Not your case, you were tan, but in my case, we were all green.

Interviewee: Don Kujawa
Interviewer: Dean Wetzel
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[01:00:00] Dean Wetzel: Yeah. Yeah. That, that, that's what I care about. It shouldn't matter. We shouldn't have to have policies that allow or not allow or laws that prohibit or allow different things in the military, I was a part of the lovely 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, and they got arrested for, moving illegal immigrants. That was always a fun time, and I was like, this isn't what the Marine Corps should be. I don't think so.

Don Kujawa: I agree.

Dean Wetzel: Don, I want to say thank you again for this oral history. Thank you for sitting down with me today. My pleasure. It's been enjoyable listening to you retell your story, your experiences over there in Vietnam. I'm sure somebody else has said this to you already, but in case they haven't, I want to be the first to say it, welcome home. So, thank you.

Don Kujawa: Appreciate it.