

Voiceover: This program is sponsored by the members of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The following is a production of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library. Bringing citizens and citizen soldiers together through the exploration of military history, topics, and current affairs, this is *Pritzker Military Presents*.

(Applause)

Clarke: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* with Medal of Honor Recipient Gary Beikirch interviewed by Dr. John Allen Williams. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's made possible by the support of our members. This program and more than four hundred others covering a full range of military topics is available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. Vietnam veteran and Medal of Honor Recipient Gary Beikirch enlisted in the US Army in 1967, completing basic training at Fort Dix New, Jersey before moving on to airborne school at Fort Benning, Georgia. From there he was assigned to Fort Bragg, North Carolina where he completed the first and second phases of both special forces and medical training, deploying in Vietnam in 1969 as one of the nation's elite Green Berets. An ordained minister of the United Baptist Fellowship and a graduate of the University of New Hampshire and the State University of New York Brockport, Beikirch recently retired after a thirty-year career as a middle school counselor in his hometown of Rochester, New York. Since leaving the military he has worked in hospital, prison, and youth ministry and has served as a teen counselor with the Veterans Outreach Center. Gary has remained involved in supporting veteran and military organizations throughout his life, including among others the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, where he serves as chaplain. He is joined by Loyola University Professor John Allen Williams, a retired captain of the US Navy Reserve, who currently sits on the Museum and Library's Board of Directors. Specializing in political science, Dr. Williams' writings include works on military strategy, military culture, and strategic policy. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library Gary Beikirch and Dr. John Allen Williams.

(Applause)

Williams: In the summer of 1969 twenty-two year old sergeant Gary Beikirch deployed to a remote village just north of Dak To in the central highlands of Vietnam as a medical and light weapons specialist with the US Army's 5th Special Forces group. For nearly in the war he served as team medic to the men of Camp Dak Seang, established to monitor movement along the Ho Chi Minh Trail and with the objective of recruiting and training the indigenous people of the region. Known collectively as the Degar or Montagnard, from the French for "Mountain People", the highlanders of Vietnam comprised thirty different tribes in the early 1960s, totaling nearly one million people of varying backgrounds and ethnicities. Because of their long history of conflict with the Vietnamese majority, intricate knowledge of the landscape and skills related to hunting and tracking, these groups were identified early on as potential allies of the American war effort, with some 40,000 trained in unconventional warfare and serving alongside American forces by war's end. Through their mutual toughness, versatility, and resolve, a unique bond was formed between the Special Forces and the Montagnards, a bond that was evidenced by the actions of Sergeant Beikirch on April 1, 1970 at Dak Seang. It was there that he would distinguish himself in combat, when in defense of the camp from a surprise attack by a large contingent of North Vietnamese soldiers, he selflessly rescued numerous American, Vietnamese, and Montagnard casualties without regard to

his personal safety or the multiple wounds he sustained in the process. For his actions that day Sergeant Beikirch was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Richard Nixon in October 1973. He's here today to share his story and to discuss the lasting impact of his experiences. Thank you for your service, Mr. Beikirch, and welcome home.

Beikirch: Thank you, John. It's an honor to be able to be here.

Williams: You joined the army in 1967 at a time when this was not a popular decision. It was not something many people your age were doing, and yet you did it. Could you explain why that happened?

Beikirch: Well, I could inject a little bit of humor here and, with all the apologies to my wife, I had gone to college because the girl that I was going with at the time went to college. We went to the same college. We got there. A month later she broke up with me, and so like any red-blooded American guy back in the 60s, when your girlfriend breaks up with you, you join the military.

(Laughter)

Beikirch: I jokingly say that, especially when I'm talking to young people, as a way of trying to relate to them, 'cause guys still laugh and they say, "Yeah, I know the feeling." But really, college campuses back in the 60s when Vietnam was starting to go on was a hotbed of discourse and controversy, and I heard a lot of individuals that were just parroting different kinds of arguments. And I was--growing up I didn't have too many role models. My parents were divorced when I was four, and so I never--I grew up moving from one aunt to another, their house, and living with them. And being like that, I guess I never, like I said, had too many positive role models, so I was always kind of independent. Learned a certain amount of resourcefulness. Learned a certain amount of adventurousness. And so I was trying to understand what all this about Vietnam was. And so many of my--the college students would be talking, and they didn't know anything. And I said, "Well I think I want to find out. I'd like to know by experience." That's a different kind of knowledge, and sometimes it can lead to--as it did with me--can lead to pretty painful acquiring--

Williams: Be careful what you wish for.

Beikirch: --exactly. But I just said, I feel very strongly. By that time I had a couple friends who were killed in Vietnam already. And so I said, "I'm going to enlist." And a good friend of mine, whose girlfriend broke up with him, he said, "Let's go in the marines together." And I said, "What, are you crazy? I'm not going into the marines. I'm gonna go into the Green Berets."

(Laughter)

Williams: Well, you anticipate my next question, which is, once the army has a hold of you, you're in boot camp and you have various things that you could be doing, and you decided not to be a clerk somewhere. Many people did that. How did you decide what you wanted to do, and how did you make that happen?

Beikirch: I had just finished reading a book called *Dateline: Vietnam* by Jim Lucas who was a news reporter who had been embedded--one of the first embedded reporters--and he had served with a number of Special Forces teams. And I read his book. I read Robin Moore's book *The Green Berets*. And for me it just seemed the way to fight the war. I loved the tactics. And I loved the strategy. I loved the idea of working and living with the people. So when I went down to enlist, I said, "I want to enlist for Green Berets." And the guy said, "You can't do that." He said, "But I think I can get you into airborne infantry," like that's a real hard thing to do, you know. So I went through airborne training, went through infantry training. And then in jump school we had--some people came down from Bragg to put you through fitness tests, and a battery of other tests. And I qualified. So that was the open door to go into Special Forces training, which was something I always wanted to do.

Williams: Now there's a distinction between Special Forces and special operations forces and that I think are not well understood. But special forces, if I am correct, they are not just able to conduct special operations, but they're specialty is living amongst the people and embedding perhaps with another group and training them as well, which we were discussing in your intro. That you stay there a lot of times and you actually shape the environment on the ground.

Beikirch: Yeah, that is one of the major differences is those who were involved in Special Forces were unique in that we had to be able to develop relationships with the people. I was just reading an article by Dick Couch, who was a Navy SEAL trainer, and he was saying that special forces was unique in that you not only had to know how to shoot people, but you had to learn how to build relationships with people. And we were--we were trainers, we were teachers. It was a tremendous experience, living in the jungles of Vietnam for that year and a half that I did with those people.

Williams: What did you imagine it was going to be like, and was it?

Beikirch: I had no idea what to imagine. You know, when you--when we were in Vietnam we used to refer to the states as "the world", being back in the world. Where the real world was. Vietnam was not the world. But for me Vietnam became the world because when I was there I learned so much, and things that mattered to me back here in the states all of a sudden didn't matter in Vietnam. In our team house we had a--there was a saying on a sign over our--in our team house that said, "To really live, you must almost die. To those that fight for it, life will have a meaning the protected will never know." And during that time I lived with the Montagnards I began to learn more and more about life. I learned about what mattered. The success was not so much personal--a personal achievement anymore, but one of the lessons I learned that I shared with my young students, that learned that in life there's a big difference between success and significance. Success is personal achievements. Success is building accomplishments in yourself. Significance is being able to have a relationship with somebody, impacting another person, knowing that that person's life is different because you've had an impact on them and allowing them to have an impact on you. And there's a big difference between success in life and significance. And Vietnam and living with the Montagnards for as long as I did introduced me to that idea of living a life of significance, and I came back from Vietnam believing that only three things mattered: life, death, and people. As I think many men and women who return from war come back changed. But I came back with a new appreciation, and many of the things I used to think about wanting to achieve and collect back here in the world, when I came back from Vietnam it didn't mater. Only thing that mattered was life, death, and people.

Williams: Let's discuss the environment in which you were living back the. You fly in on whatever it was, the C141 or whatever planes they were using then, and you get off the place and they take you to this remote village by helicopter I presume--

Beikirch: --by helicopter--

Williams: And you get off the helicopter, and then what?

Beikirch: Our camp was located about three miles east of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And the camp was specifically started back in the '66 area to monitor traffic on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Many of the camps in II Corps along the tri-border area, in the highland area where the special forces camps were very strategically located because the highlands were always a hotbed of action. So our camp was located about three clicks from the Ho Chi Minh Trail. We had 450 individuals that were twelve years old-- male, and twelve years old or older. I knew that because I had just done an inventory of any of those that were gonna be called combatants. Anybody twelve years old or older in the Montagnard village was a combatant. We had an M60 machine gunner who was twelve years old. There was 2,300 men, women, and children in the camp. It was a beautiful, beautiful

place. It was my Shangri-La. I loved being in there. You could look out over the mountains. Whenever we would go on operations, you're going through the highlands, you'd come across beautiful waterfalls, lush vegetation. And if it weren't for the tigers and the snakes and firefights, it'd be a beautiful place to be.

(Laughter)

Williams: Except for that.

Beikirch: Yeah. That kind of puts a damper on your vacation.

Williams: What were the Montagnards like? And what was their motivation for helping you?

Beikirch: The tribe that I worked with--I worked with the Sedang, which had the reputation of probably being the most warlike. Montagnards used to--sometimes they'd fight among themselves just to keep in practice. But they were very warlike and fierce-like. Some of them had been reached by French missionaries. So a lot of the Yards, before we'd go into a battle, they'd be crossing themselves, they'd put a Buddha in their mouth. They'd be doing anything that was of spiritual significance to them that's helping them make it through the battle. But they were a wonderful, wonderful people who--living there in the jungle I began to experience what I called the camaraderie, which I've come to experience as being able to trust somebody enough that you can take your life and put that in the person's hands next to you and having that same person put their life back in your hands, and knowing that that person would die for you, that person would do anything for you. And the twelve Americans that were on that team and each of the Montagnards that we lived with, we had that kind of bond, that experience. Our survival out in the jungle depended on our ability to be able to trust one another, to be able to know what that person was going to do, to know what that person was thinking, to know the skills, the strengths, and the weaknesses and to be able to be able to help that person develop--

Williams: And to be able to do it despite a tremendous cultural difference.

Beikirch: Yeah, that was a big thing. There would be days when I would speak any English, and some of the guys on the team wouldn't see me for days because I'd be in out in the village of in the bunkers with the Montagnards just having fun, getting to--it was just an experience being somewhere with a different culture. And being the medic, it was my job to develop a relationship with the witch doctor. Every tribe had a witch doctor. So as a twenty-four-year-old kid, here I am working with Montagnards being their medical--source of medical aid, but also trying to develop a relationship with a witch doctor, which was a real challenge.

Williams: Well, you mentioned before, and I didn't get the story before we came here on the stage, but it's a story I'd like you to tell because I know it's important to you, and I think it will be to us. One of your men had a very special impact on your life. Who was Dao, and how did this work out?

Beikirch: One of the things that each of us Americans did--I seem to remember it this way, is we picked a Montagnard that we would develop a special friendship with, and that person would be our bodyguard. That person would be the one that when you go out on an operation, he'd be there. Dao would set up my hammock in the trees. He'd be telling me where the snakes were. He'd be telling me where to avoid the tigers. He'd be pulling up bushes and things to say, "Yes, this is good to eat. Bac-Si. This is no good. Number ten. Don't eat that." But Dao and I developed a tremendous, tremendous friendship. And I remember I had Levi jeans sent from the states from my mother, and he used to wear some Levis. He had a cowboy hat. I bought him a 38 pistol, special pistol from an air force guy, and he used to wear that all the time. He was just a tremendous fifteen-year-old kid, and I was twenty-four. And everywhere I went, Dao was. And I don't know if I can probably go into it right now, but the day that the siege

happened, it was early in the morning, and the first time I got--first time I got hit was from a 122mm rocket, and I could hear it coming in, and it hit the school house right near where I was, and the next thing I know I'm lying in the four-deuce mortar pit, which was by the dispensary, which was my alert position. And it was about twenty-five feet away from where it was. And the shrapnel had gone into my back and my spine, and I tried to get up, and I couldn't walk. And the next thing I know is I feel these hands picking me up, and I look and it was Dao. And I said, "Dao, what are you doing here? How did you find me?" I mean, it was three or four o'clock in the morning. Incoming had been going on, and things had been pretty crazy. And I said, "How did you find me?" And he said, "Bac-Si, this is where I belong. I belong with you." And he picked me up, and he carried me throughout that battle. And I was wounded twice more. Dao was--Dao was shot once in the leg. And after my second wound, he took me down to the medical bunker, and they said it didn't look good, my wounds. And I told Dao, I said, 'Look, if I'm gonna die, I'm not gonna die down here, Dao. Get me back up.' So he picked me up with another Yard and they carried me back out into the battle, and we continued in the battle for hours. And we heard another rocket coming in, and Dao threw himself on top of me and was--after that explosion, I said, "Come on Dao, let's go." And he didn't move, and I felt, and he was covered in blood. And I was pretty sure he was dead, but I didn't find out 'til years later that he actually was killed because I never saw him after that. But he was a--he was a tremendous young man who was a very important part of my life.

Williams: And I think you're gonna pick up the importance of young people, some of the things you did after Vietnam. So I think we'll leave that hanging for a moment 'cause it's a very important part of the story. Moving away from some of these earlier background things, I wonder--we will talk about the defense of Camp Dak Seang, but could you tell us anything else we need to know about the camp to make some sense of it?

Beikirch: The camp--most special forces camps were--well, ours was built on a square. There were very few buildings above ground. Most of the Montagnards lived underground. We had trenches built in, and then the Montagnards would dig holes into the ground, and you'd put reinforced bamboo and maybe some air force skids on top of that for reinforcement. But that would be the wall. Ours was a square, and then that would be the outer wall. And then you would have fields of fire cleared out maybe one/two hundred meters with concertina wires, secondary wires, and phu gas, and all these other--and booby traps and stuff, to give you a good field of fire in case your camp was ever under siege. And then about 200 meters after that it was just pure jungle.

Williams: And you'd have no idea what was going on in the jungle.

Beikirch: No. We were--the LLDB, the local Vietnamese were supposed to-- we had twelve of them with us, and they were supposed to be running local security. It was their job to see what's going on maybe one or two clicks beyond, out into the jungle. Other--if it weren't for that, and sometimes you'd have listening posts and observation posts that would keep some track of it, but for the most part the jungle was just so dense that you--you couldn't see. But the camp was--we had only a few buildings above ground. One of the most significant and noteworthy things in our camp was, we had a John Wayne tower right in the middle of the camp, which was a camp that was the highest point elevation, and we used to go in there and call in air strikes, or we'd call in artillery fire from Ben Het. They had 175s and 155s. We'd have competitions to see who could hit trees from--calling in artillery from Ben Het or--but the John Wayne tower, we had a 50 caliber in there, but that was--that was right in the middle of the tower, and it just stuck right out. So it was a big target. And actually it was one of the things they zeroed in on when they started the artillery barrage and the incoming.

Williams: Well, with that background, I think we're ready to understand what you're about to talk to us about, with the events of April 1, 1970. And why don't you walk through that story however you think would be best?

Beikirch: I'll try to keep it brief, too, keeping time in mind. I said the camp came under siege pretty much maybe around four, five o'clock in the morning. At that time the only people that were usually up were women and children. Women would be starting to prepare the meal. And we started taking incoming. And we had probes before and some incoming once in a while, but nothing like this. Immediately it was just artillery, and we could tell that it was heavy artillery.

Williams: So you knew something was up at this point--

Beikirch: This was different immediately. Within the first thirty minutes, most of the buildings above ground were leveled. They had knocked out both 105 Howitzers that we had. They knocked out our generator. They knocked down our Com tower. There was no communication available only through direct communication with any planes that were flying above us. So we knew something was really, really happening. So it was about two or three hours of just intense--and again this is as my memory has it. During things like that, things go crazy, and it's like I have certain events that I remember. I don't know the order to it. Still haven't really had a chance to talk to other guys that had been there. There were twelve other Americans, to try to put some sequence, correct sequence. But as I remember it this is the best to my recollection. We had hours of incoming. And most of the people that were getting wounded at that time as I said were women and children. And I knew that, that's why I immediately started running over to the--well, my first alert position was the four-deuce mortars, so I went over there to see if--I was heading there to see if I could be of some help there. Plus it was by the dispensary. And I knew all my medics that I had trained would be there, so I was gonna distribute medical gear so that they could go and take care of the people that were getting killed. It was during that time that as I was running there, that's when I saw one of the Yards that was wounded. And so I stopped, I fell down, and I was trying to help him when the rocket came. And I remember the blast hitting me, and it was like being kicked by a horse, and that was when the shrapnel hit my spine, and I was paralyzed. My spinal cord was knocked out, paralyzed from the waist down. And that's when Dao picked me up. And from then on it was--we went to the--to bunkers, the trenches where the Yards were fighting in different positions, to take care of them and then see if we could distribute ammunition and to see what was going on. After a couple hours, that's when the, I think, the ground assault started, 'cause as I did some reading afterwards, it seemed like the North Vietnamese had dug tunnels underneath the much of the wire, much like they did at Dien Bien Phu, and so after the artillery barrage stopped, they just popped to the surface, and they were inside the wire. And that's when we would--I can remember being on the wall firing a 30 caliber, and just fighting, and just seeing waves of people coming over. And during that time I got shot in the back here. And that was when Dao took me down to the medical bunker, and they patched me up. But I said, "Get me back out."

Williams: Could you walk at all at this point?

Beikirch: No. Dao and my other medic, whose name was Thot, both of them carried me, one arm over each of them. And from then on it was just--bringing different people back who were wounded. Our EXO Chris was in the John Wayne tower, and apparently he had got blown out by a B40 rocket. Somebody said that he was out there, and so Dao and I crawled out there in the middle of the field, and we got him and brought him down to the bunker. And we just kept on going back out until I collapsed. I don't know exactly how long it was. In talking with the other guys who were on our team, he said he thought I got medevac'd the first day, but I remember events that happened, and he said, "Well,

you couldn't have been there, 'cause that didn't happen until two or three days later," so I'm not sure how long I was there before I was able to get medevac'd. But I do remember lying in a crater from one of the explosions. And I do remember seeing and hearing B52 park lights coming in, Puff coming over, Spooky and watching all that.

Williams: You said C47s with Gatling guns.

Beikirch: C47s.

Williams: Must be your best friend in a situation like that.

Beikirch: Yeah. To hear what repulsed the siege on the--after the second day I think they counted 1,500 enemy dead in the wire. 'Cause it was pretty hairy. When they broke through, they were only thirty/thirty-five meters away from our wall. So if it weren't for the air support, gunships, we would have been overrun very, very quickly.

Williams: How long did it take the Puff to get there, the magic dragon?

Beikirch: Again, I'm not sure. I would say probably a couple hours, hour or so.

Williams: Yeah. Now at what point were you able to walk again? Was this long after the action?

Beikirch: No, this was not until I was back at Valley Forge, Pennsylvania I started walking again.

Williams: Well now, as this was going on, this is an unnatural situation. And did it occur to you--here you are making numerous conscious decisions to expose yourself and go out and do these things. What were you thinking? (Laughing) It's very well to praise it, and I did, but it's hard to imagine myself in the moment. I guess we never know what we're going to do. I hope one would do the right thing. But what were you consciously thinking about?

Beikirch: A little while ago, I was asked, what's the most significant thing I remember about that Medal of Honor action, and for me it would be extremes. Intensity and extremes. And I've been in firefights before, but nothing like this. And I've been in air strikes before, but nothing with such the intensity as this. And the extremes of the situation where there are just so many enemy running all over you, and watching helicopters, lying in that crater waiting to be medevac'd--I watched three helicopters, different times, medevac choppers trying to come in to rescue me and get blown up right out of the sky. And I remember thinking just the craziness of the situation, and it was the most extreme situation of war I could ever imagine. But yet even in those extremes, people still made choices, like those pilots making the choice to come in and rescue me, lying in that medical bunker on that stretcher shot three times with, you know, wounds that meant that I was gonna die, saying I'm not dying down here. I want to die out in the battlefield. What I came away from all that with is, even in the most extreme situations of life, people still have that choice. We can make choices to do according to what we believe or do according to what's important to us, or in many of us in the military do according to what we've been trained to do. So many men that are medal of honor recipients have told me, "I didn't do anything more than what I was trained to do." The same with me. I was the medic. I was training to do what I did. When somebody calls Bac-Si, I go. You still have the choice to do what's important to you, to do what's instilled in you, to make that choice. Or you can just say, "I quit."

Williams: Yeah.

Beikirch: And I don't think that I'm a person who says I quit. I know that those men who were in those helicopters, those nine men, made a choice of, no, I'm not going down there. I could die. They made a choice of, it's important. It's what I'm trained to do. There's somebody down there that needs me. I don't care what the danger is; I'm going in. Those are things that, I think, as I've had forty-five years to think about it, those were the things that were going through my mind. Yeah, forty-five years and a day, 'cause it was yesterday that it all happened again. But even in the most extreme of situations I've

carried away from that that no matter what I face in life, I always have the ability--I never lose the option of being able to choose what I'm going to do, according to what's important to me and what I believe in. And that's what I took away from that.

Williams: So it's not as if the fear switch was turned to the off position, it's that despite it you decided to make the choice to do what you did.

Beikirch: Yeah, I've often been asked, "Did you feel any fear at that time?" And as crazy as that sound, and I know other guys, recipients, if you say you're not afraid in situations like that, you're either lying or crazy, but I honestly don't remember fearing or being afraid during that time. I think that when fear hits, your training does take over.

Williams: Yeah. I think there will be an opportunity in questions and answers if people want more details about that particular operation, but I wonder if you would tell us what happened to you then. You finally got medevac'd. Give us the history of what happened then between that and becoming a civilian.

Beikirch: Yeah. Well, it's funny to preface that with this whole thing of fear, because I've learned that you can choose where you want to die. I chose not to die down in that bunker. I chose where I wanted to die. But to me the greatest battle that I fought, and where I did face a tremendous amount of fear was seven days later when I woke up in that hospital bed in Vietnam. I was dying, and I like to say I was in a hand-to-hand combat with death. And I took everything that I had been taught, everything that the military had taught me, everything that special forces had taught me, and I was gonna do battle with death. My independence, my resourcefulness, my strength, my courage. I was not gonna let death defeat me. But I kept on going unconscious, and that's scary. I mean, I had been unconscious before in college, but this was different.

(Laughter)

Williams: I have students in the audience. I'm sure they have no idea what you're talking about.

Beikirch: I'm sure, I'm sure. Especially when you--when I've gone unconscious, and I listen to a guy dying next to me in the hospital bed. And then you find yourself slipping away, and you're going, "I don't want to die, I don't want to die," but you slip away, that was fear. And everything that I had been taught, everything that gave me confidence and success and achievements in the past, death was just going, "Tss, not a chance, Gary. You're mine, and you're gonna lose." and that was fearful. And what happened on one of those times when I woke up changed my life forever, was I woke up and there was an army chaplain there. And he just said, "I'm glad to see you're awake," and I said, "Sir, I'm glad to be awake." He says, "Well, I've been praying for you. Would you like to pray?" And I said, "I don't know how to pray. I don't even know who to pray to." and he said, "That's okay, son." And I know chaplains are supposed to do this, but this was important to me. He said, "That's okay, son, 'cause God knows how to listen." And I didn't even know about any kind of a God or anything before. I had no religious upbringing. But I remember my first prayer that I ever made was in that hospital bed; I just said, "God, if you're real, I need you." And something happened. The faith was born in me that there was something greater than death, greater than myself, that was something that was there but that was just as real as death. And not only that, but it cared about me. It loved me. And faith was important in my heart, and that had a big influence on what happened to me from that day forward.

Williams: So it sustained you in these dangerous times through the rest of your hospitalization and that. And at the same time provided some direction for your career after the army.

Beikirch: Yeah, it sure did.

Williams: So you ended up in a hospital in Vietnam, then you went to what was the next place you were?

Beikirch: Camp Zama, Tokyo in Japan.

Williams: Japan.

Beikirch: And from there Valley Forge. And then I was assigned to the 10th Special Forces group at Fort Devens.

Williams: At what point did you realize you were actually getting better?

Beikirch: Getting better?

Williams: Well, you look pretty good right now, I must say. Putting you back into Special Forces.

Beikirch: Well, it depends on who you talk to. If you're talking to my wife, she'd probably say she's still waiting for that getting better to happen. But I would probably say, emotionally better, I still struggle. Physically better, maybe about 1980 or so, I started doing things physically again. It was almost about ten years before I was--I still have some tremendous pain. I have--I don't have any feeling below my legs. I have arthritis of the spine from the shrapnel. I still have about fifteen pieces of shrapnel in my spinal--if you look at it, shrapnel is embedded in all the boney parts of the spine. It didn't go through and sever the cord, but every piece hit a piece of bone and is embedded in the spine, the boney part of the spine. So that's all developed into an arthritis.

Williams: So you get well enough that they decide to send you to 10 Special Forces. You were at Fort Devens. Did I understand you to tell me in the green room that they then decided to make you a clerk?

Beikirch: (Laughs) A clerk--they carried me as access in the company, assigned me to headquarters company, and I worked as a dental assistant.

Williams: I'm guessing that wasn't your preferred choice.

Beikirch: No, not what I had reenlisted for when I--cause I was on my second enlistment, and I said, "No, this is not gonna work." Plus also, given the profile they had put me on, I was aware that they were probably going to transfer me out of Special Forces and not allow me to stay in that unit, and I didn't want to end up in any other conventional unit, so I got an early out to go back to college.

Williams: Right. Now, there are very credible stories about the treatment of veterans that left Vietnam, and some people doubt that these things actually happened, but I'm guessing they actually did, and you got some of it.

Beikirch: Like many veterans who returned from the war, I came back changed. I knew I was different. Anybody who's been in a war or any kind of traumatic situation realizes that that trauma can change how you feel about yourself. It changes how you see yourself. It changes what you value in life. It changes how you deal with feelings and emotions and how you deal with your relationships with other people. I came back changed and different, and I had nobody to talk to about that change. I got out August 31st. September 3rd I was back in classes. Three or four days later, I was in college campuses. It wasn't--I didn't have much money. I slept in my van. I wore my army fatigues. I was only getting 160 bucks a month to pay for college and all my support, all my living expenses. So I wore my army fatigue jacket. One day I was walking by the college unit, and I walked past a group of guys, and I heard them say, "Hey, there's one." And then the derogatory remarks started coming out--baby killer, all kinds of things. And I could feel them walking behind me. And the next thing I knew a couple of them started spitting on me.

Williams: Were you tempted at that moment to revisit some of your special forces training?

Beikirch: Very much so. I knew that if I turned around, either I was gonna die or some of them were gonna die, because that's--I had very little impulse control, but I was doing everything I could to control that. I remember walking right to the parking lot, I got into my van, and I drove—I quit college again, and I drove off to New England.

Williams: Now, you made some reference to a rude awakening when you returned after the war, and also something about the unexpected actions that happened as a result of that. And also something very intriguing. And I didn't ask you this in the green room, but what is this cave that you were living in, and what's up with that?

Beikirch: Well, as a result of the hospital bed experience, when faith was born I'd become a Christian, and I decided that I really needed to get to know this God that I knew was real now better. And there was a small little bible college up in northern New Hampshire that I thought, what better way to get to know him than just going and attend some of the classes. But I didn't like people. I knew that God had forgiven me, but I had a hard time forgiving myself. I had a hard time with still with feelings and stuff. So I went into this town to take some classes, but I wasn't feeling comfortable being around people, so I started driving on Route 2, which goes between Lancaster and Berlin over into Maine. Lancaster is right on the Connecticut River, right across from St. Johnsbury, Vermont. So I found this road, Route 2, and a parking lot. And I started--I parked the car, and I started walking up this trail. It was called Valley Way Trail. And the further I went in I heard this beautiful waterfall, just beautiful sound, and it was just so peaceful. And it reminded me of Vietnam and the highlands. And so I walked up there, went up to a place called Dome Rock, and I found a nice little cave to live in, and I said, "Yup, this is it. I'm gonna stay here, I'm gonna read the Psalms, go into town once in a while, go to classes, and I'm just gonna journal and play my guitar and try to get my life together. I'm gonna try to put some sense to the chaos that was created in Vietnam, try to get some meaning back to my life." I meditated on that, that first--that saying that we had, to really live you must almost die. So I said, "Okay, I almost died in Vietnam. Now it's time for me to really start living." But life has a meaning the protected will never know. Okay, what does life mean to me now? And so I meditated on that verse and went through the psalms trying to get some insight into what life is all about and what's this mean. And I remember being in the cave. I went to the cave in September of '73, and I said--I remember saying, "God, you gave me my life back in Vietnam. I'm giving my life to you. Whatever you want, that's what I want for my life." Two weeks later I was notified I was being awarded the Medal of Honor, after I said, "God whatever you want for my life." And that's why many times--most of the time now I say that I wear this medal, I've come to learn some things about this medal. In the cave after I got the medal, I remember saying, "What are you doing? I'm in this cave hiding because I'm trying to forget everything that's happened, and now all of a sudden I'm getting a medal for that? What's this all mean?" And I remember reading on the book of Psalms, Psalm 49, there's a verse that says, "Man that's in honor but understands not is like a beast that perishes." And over the years God has taught me that this medal is not about me. It's not about anything that I've done. As any recipient will tell you, it's not about just me. There is an honor that comes with this medal, though, and that honor is that it represents something that is greater than one person who did one thing on any one day. The honor that comes with this medal is that it represents the selfless sacrifice of thousands of men and women who loved this country and loved freedom and loved the truths that this country was founded upon more than their life. And because of that love they are willing to serve and to sacrifice. That's the honor that's embedded and shown through this medal. It's not about a person. I'm not special; the medal is special. And the honor comes because we are allowed to wear something that's very special. But it's not about us. And for me on a more personal level, I've realized that when I wear this I wear this for His honor, because it's only because of God's grace that I survived Vietnam.

Williams: You made an interesting comment earlier speaking to me, talking about all of a sudden you have a medal for something that was an individual thing. It seems a bit ironic.

Beikirch: Yeah, that was a thought that came--it really was put into words just a couple weeks ago by a friend of mine who said, "You know, I've often wondered that those who do acts that are recognized, they don't do them for any kind of recognition or self-satisfaction. Actions that are done in war are done because they're selfless. They're considering the other person, not you. And yet all of a sudden, you're now being recognized; self is being recognized for something that was selfless. How do you deal with that?" And I guess for me that's one of the burdens that comes with this, is how do you reconcile all that? And for me reconciling comes with realizing that it's not about me. The burden that comes with this is a battle of not becoming arrogant, not becoming confident in yourself, not becoming susceptible to the belief that you're anything special. The burden that's with the Medal of Honor is to remember what you were trained to do, to remember the love that you had, to remember what was important to you and why you did what you did. And that sometimes can become a very difficult battle for those of us who wear this or wear any kind of medal that recognizes their service, because those kinds of things are given for selfless acts, and then all of a sudden you are being recognized. And that is a real contradiction and a real burden.

Williams: A lot of people who have gone through a period of the military have lived too to see that the military is now a popular and people are always thanking you for your service. And for those of us that really got far more out of it than was ever asked of us and were never in any real danger, a lot of people think, "Well, gee, I wish they wouldn't do that." But you did deserve it. You do deserve it, and you get people all the time thanking you for your service. And just a head's up, I'm gonna do it again at the end of this show. Does that bother you, or how do you see that?

Beikirch: I think anyone who goes to war likes to think that they're appreciated. I think anyone who goes to war and comes home needs to have that experience of those who you were defending, those who you were thinking about, those who were important to you, have the experience of feeling that they appreciate you. I think that that's one of the reasons that many of us that came back from Vietnam had so many difficulties. It takes a lot to heal from war because of what we go through, because of the guilt, the anger, and all those things. And many times you feel that if I can just forget it, I'll be better. But I've learned that forgetting isn't getting better. I will never forget the things that happened to me in Vietnam, but I've gotten better because I have found people who said even though they couldn't understand--they wouldn't be able to understand, but they were able to support me and care about me, sometimes cry with me and listen to me as I shared some of the hurt and some of the anger, some of the things that I couldn't understand or accept about myself. There were people who were there who listened, and through the years that hurt, that guilt, has been healed because these people have been there until I could become strong and heal. And to hear somebody say--now when they say, "Thank you for your service," to me that means a lot, because you need to have that in order to deal with all the guilt that war creates in your life, because war is a terrible thing. And to be able to come back to a country and have people say, "I'm sorry you had to do that, but thank you. It's because of you that we now have these freedoms." That helps. That helps deal with the hurt. And for those of us in Vietnam, we didn't have that, and so we were left to our own. And so I am always willing to say to those who are from Iraq or Afghanistan, and I mean it with a real heartfelt sincerity, I thank them, and I try to be as specific as I can in why I thank them, because I know the hurt that they are going through.

Williams: After the war, you dedicated yourself to a life of service. And you became an educator. And I wonder--and we do need to move to questions now, but I wonder if you would finish the circle that we began talking about, your work with the young

Montagnards and how that related to what you were trying to accomplish as a guidance counselor in junior high for, what, thirty-three years.

Beikirch: Thirty-three years.

Williams: What was your goal? What were you trying to do, and how did that relate to your experiences in Vietnam?

Beikirch: One of the things that haunted me for so many years was that--what was special about our relationship between Dao and myself that enabled him to be willing to die for me. And after I became a Christian I began to really understand more about caring for something more than yourself. I began to understand John 15:13, where Jesus said, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." and here was somebody, not only the example of Christ himself, but here was another living person that laid down his life for me, and he was only fifteen, fourteen years old. And I can remember thinking, "My gosh, if a fourteen year old, a fifteen year old can believe in something, believe something so great and believe it so strongly that they'd be willing to die for it, maybe I can convey that to young people." And so I wanted to work with young people to share that message, again going back to, "To really live, you must almost die. To those that fight for it, life has a meaning the protected will never know." I used to have a class that I would call my Life Skills, and I would teach--I would share with them what life means. Life does have a meaning to me now, and two of the most important lessons--and I had about sixteen or twenty different lessons--but two of the most important to me was that there's a big difference between success in life and significance in life. And to me that's what life is all about-- making a difference, living a life of significance. You don't have to wait 'til you're twenty-one to start living a life of significance. Young people, all of us, whether you're fifteen or whether you're eighty, if your feet hit the floor and you're breathing, you can today begin to live a life of significance, and that the message that I tried to share with young people.

Williams: Great thanks to Gary Beikirch. Welcome home.

(Applause)

Clarke: Thank you to Medal of Honor Recipient Gary Beikirch and Dr. John Allen Williams for their insightful discussion, and to the members of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library for sponsoring this program. To learn more about the Museum and Library, become a member, and explore all it has to offer, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on Pritzker Military Presents.

Voiceover: Visit the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. Explore original exhibits on military history, or be a part of a live studio audience. Watch other episodes of *Pritzker Military Presents*. Find out What's On, at PritzkerMilitary.org.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: *Pritzker Military Presents* is made possible by members of the Pritzker Military Museum and Library and its sponsors. The views and opinions expressed in this program are not necessarily those of the Museum and Library.

(Theme music)

Voiceover: The preceding program was produced by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.