Clarke: Welcome to Pritzker Military Presents with highly decorated Vietnam veteran and retired secret service officer William Albracht. I'm your host Ken Clarke, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago and it's sponsored Penguin Random House, the world’s first truly global trade book publisher. This program and more than four hundred others exploring a full range of military history and affairs can also be viewed online at PritzkerMilitary.org.

In October 1969 William Albracht, the youngest Green Beret captain in Vietnam, took command of a remote hilltop called Fire Base Kate, held by only 27 American soldiers and 150 local militiamen. At dawn the next morning three North Vietnamese Army regiments, some 6,000 men, crossed the Cambodian border and attacked. Outnumbered three dozen to one and short on water and ammunition, Albracht and his men held off repeat ground assaults and constant enemy fire for more than five days before finally escaping on a daring night march through enemy lines. Now forty-five years after the harrowing showdown, Albracht shares the full story for the first time in his dramatic new memoir, Abandoned in Hell: The Fight for Vietnam's Fire Base Kate. Please join me in welcoming to the Pritzker Military Museum and Library William Albracht.

(Applause)

Albracht: Thank you. It's a real honor for me to be here. This started out--this started out a long time ago. But let me ask one thing. Do we have any Vietnam veterans in the audience? Thank you, sir. Thank you. Welcome home, gentlemen. Welcome home. I'd like to take one moment here and talk about that for a minute. In 1995 I went to a Special Forces reunion at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Bo Gritz was a legend at the time, and I knew him when he was a--I think a major or a lieutenant colonel in Vietnam. I didn't really know him; I had met him in passing 'cause he was pretty much legendary at the time. And he was at the reunion. And I saw him, and I went right up to him. I said, "Colonel," I said, "Bill Albracht." I said I was a young captain in Vietnam. I said I mentioned the fifth group in Special Forces. And he goes-- I said-- I didn't expect him to go, "Oh, yeah, Bill. How you doing?" He goes, "So you served over there, too?" And I said, "Yes sir." He put his hand out, and he shook my hand, and he said, "Welcome home. Welcome home, brother." That's the first time I'd heard it. The first time anybody had ever told me welcome home. And ever since then, ever since that time, any Vietnam veteran I always say, "Welcome home, brother." And I tell you welcome home, brother. And it is something we should all be saying to each other every time we meet. So thank you, and again, for everything you did on behalf of our country, a very, very turbulent time. So I'm eighteen years old. I went to a Catholic high school where the nuns were meaner than bears and highly disciplined. And the priests were actually--took a second hand to the nuns as far as the discipline went. So I graduated, and I was pretty much a--military wise, I knew how to take orders and get things done in timetables. And that was in Rock Island, Illinois. Little Alleman High School. My best friend Joe Murphy, all through high school, we were gonna join the army. Well, we were first gonna join the marines, but my older brother Bob who was already in the Army Special Forces said, "That is not gonna happen in this household." So I went to the army. And he and I went to the local recruiter in Rock Island, and we walked in and said--he goes, "Boys, how can
I help you?" It was 1966. We said, "Sir, we want to--we want to join the army, but only if we can get airborne infantry and go to Vietnam." and he looked at us like we had two heads. And he said, "Well!" He said, "This is your lucky day." He says, "Look at here, I have two slots." You know--the dust on them. He says, "If you take these today I can get you in. I can get you those slots." I looked at Joe. I said, "Joe, we gotta sign up now." and he says, "Yeah we do." so off we do. We sign up. Off we go in the army in October of 1966. Joe and I did end up parting ways after basic. They don't tell you the buddy system is only for basic training. So they throw a barrage test at you in the army. I mean, just one after another, and they just kept coming and coming and coming. Now you're talking to a guy--my crowning achievement in high school was I was on the varsity football team. Grades certainly weren't it. Well it turns out I was as smart as those nuns told me I was, and I kept getting good--passing these scores that were pretty good and some very good. And they said, "You're taking the officer candidate test, the OCT." And I said, "I don't know." I'm eighteen. I thought, you know, all the officers came from West Point. I had no idea that there was any such thing. OCS, what's that? Oklahoma cook school? I don't know. So I take the test. And my heart was not that much into it, but I took it. Joe on the other hand, he really thought this is a good way to go. Scores came out. Passing score was 115. I got 115. And Joe got 114, and that was a little too bad. But they now said, "You're going to OCS, Private Albracht. Pick a branch." And they called us into the captain's office. Now this guy was seasoned, he was hardcore, and he was a monster. He said, "Gentlemen, I got twenty-two men here out of my company of two hundred." he says, "And you're all gonna go to OCS." He said bah dada dada. He says, "Any questions?" So Private Albracht-- "Sir?" "Yes." He says, "What do you need?" I said, "What if you don't want to go to OCS?" He goes, "Okay, let me tell you this. I have a levy for twenty-two slots. I have twenty-two men here. You're going to OCS. Are there any other questions?" "No, sir, thank you very much." so off I go later on to Benning School for Boys, Fort Bragg--I mean, Fort Benning, Georgia, and officer candidate school. And we stayed out there, 220 of us. First day they said, "Look to your left. Look to your right. The man on your left, the man on your right, will not be here on graduation." And don't you know they were right. We lost fifty percent of that company. Some dropped--a lot dropped out, some through grades, some through—couldn't, tactically couldn't cut it. Others just didn't want any part of it. Some medically had broken legs or something. So here I am, nineteen. I--August 9th I was--turned nineteen. You had to be nineteen to graduate. August 31st I was commissioned the second lieutenant. Now, the good news here-- I was always the kid in high school that had to buy the beer. So I always looked older. And this came in very handy because on my first time out when I first got assigned units and everything, and my sergeants, they had no earthly idea how old I was. They had no earthly idea that I was nineteen, then twenty, and then twenty-one years old. So this worked out well for me. Put my hand up. They said, "Where do you want to go?" I put on my dream sheet, "I want to go to Special Forces." Couldn't get in at eighteen, but as an officer you can get in at any age. So they--boom, they snatched me up. I went to jump school. I went to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, and I went through the Special Forces officers course. And it was--it was tough. Physically, I mean, I'd just got done running, jumping, diving and done all this stuff for six months at OCS so I was in top physical shape. That wasn't it. But mentally the testing was really--I mean it was college level, if not graduate level courses in some things. Like, you know, the plane is coming into the drop zone to drop supplies to the guerillas. You got seven door bundles; they weigh 172 pounds each. The wind is blowing this way, and the plane is going this way at this speed, and how big does your drop zone have to be to accommodate? So I'm like, oh my Lord. This is advanced math. This is the kind of stuff that I had to learn, and learn we did. And then we went out tactically and put all this stuff
into play. So it was another three months of intense training. And after that I was in Fort Bragg. And then my first assignment, put my name in for Vietnam. I'm a second lieutenant, gonna be a first. Back then—and this is important, because so many junior grade, company grade, officers were getting killed. And there were so many assignments, we had so many men in Vietnam they accelerated the promotion program from first—from second lieutenant to first, one year. From first lieutenant to captain, one year. I mean, you tell that to people now, they go, "You gotta be kidding me." But that's the way it was then. So my first year as a second lieutenant comes, and I put in my name to go to Vietnam, but they send me to Thailand. Now, it was good duty. We trained the Royal Thai Army, and I spent a year there north and south and on Special Forces A camps doing what I was told as a first lieutenant. Now my time's coming up. I was supposed to get out. I did my two years commission. So I said, "You know what? I still haven't done what I signed up to do." So I went into the S1, the personnel, and I said, "You know what? I want to volunteer for another year, but only—if I can be with Special Forces in Vietnam." He leans over and goes, "Well, you know what? This is your lucky day."

Albracht: Sign off, take some leave, go to Vietnam. I get on the ground in Vietnam. I turned twenty-one August 9th. A couple weeks later I'm a captain—an O3. First assignment, they bring me in, they say, "Where do you want to go, captain?" I said, "I want to go to the Mike Force. I want to go to the mobile strike force of Vietnam." Within Special Forces there are special units. There are two, our SOG, special security—I'm sorry, special operations units. The Recon that go—you know, they were all over Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Five, six-man teams. Hairy stuff. Hairy, hairy stuff. Special operations group. And then there's the mobile strike forces. The Mike Force. This is a team of twelve Americans with four hundred Montagnards. And we're gonna talk about those in a minute. Four hundred Montagnards. All the Montagnards are airborne. They're all paratroopers. They're all highly paid, some would say, mercenaries. I consider them highly motivated. They had battalions of Montagnards in the mobile strike force commonly referred to as the Mike Force, and we'll come back to the might force. They were the best of the best. The seasoned special forces sergeants and officers—that's where they went. They went there or they went to SOG. "Where do you want to go, captain?" I said, "I want to go to the Mike Force." "Ha, I think not. You, my friend, don't have any combat experience." 'Cause that's true. I had not heard a shot fired in anger. I said "Alright." "But we are gonna put you—"you want a hot spot? We're gonna put you in the camp of Bu Prang." This map of Vietnam, you can see here. This is Bambi Tuit, which we're gonna talk about a little bit here too. Bambi Tuit was a provincial capital, and it was—specially with aviation, there was a couple things there. It was a high-end helicopter—I mean, they had more helicopters there than you could shake a stick at. We had a headquarters there in Special Forces. But the ARVN, the Army of the Republic of Vietnam—South Vietnam of course—the ARVN had a division there. Ten thousand men, ten thousand infantry, 23rd ARVN. They were here. They sent me to Bu Prang, which was about down in here, maybe forty/fifty miles away. Somewhere in that particular vicinity. Bu Prang was a Special Forces camp along the border, along the Cambodian border. Now I want you to think like—this Special Forces camps out there, they're like cavalry outposts. They are dotted along the—Laos, down from Laos into Cambodia, and all the way down through the Delta. And they were, like I said, cavalry outposts. They were out there by themselves, and they would go into the villages to the Montagnard villages, and they would recruit Montagnard tribesmen. Now the Montagnards. That's a name given to them by the French when the French fought in Indochina. They're village people. They're shorter, they're squat, and they look more
Polynesian than Asian. They're pretty solidly built, but lean, muscular. And they hated
the Vietnamese. They wanted no part in the central government. And the Vietnamese in
turn hated them even more. They used to call them "Muong", which was "savage". They
had no voting rights, they had no property rights, they had no rights whatsoever. When
we recruited them, many is the time we'd go into the village, and this was prior to me
getting there when my brothers, my Special Forces brothers recruited them, they were in
loin cloths and crossbows. Slash and burn. They were hunter-gatherers type of society,
and the tribe was everything. And there was different dialects and different-- the Se
Dang, the Rhide, and they all spoke a little bit different. And it was quite an interesting
time communicating. But they--some of them spoke French 'cause they had fought with
the French. So the French had named them Montagnards. And the name stuck. So I
went to Bu Prang, and we had a significant amount of Montagnards. We had maybe four
hundred. And when they move in, they would move in with their families. So their
bunkers, their bunkers then around Bu Prang, the camp of Bu Prang, were dug in and
fortified, and the family's in there, okay. So you got your wife and your children. So how
hard are you fighting when you get an attack? You have them right there with you.
You're fighting to the last moment. And they were ferocious fighters, and loyal. They
loved us, and we loved them. And it was a wonderful brotherhood. So the Montagnards
were there, Bu Prang was there, and I get there. There's a senior captain, so I am a
junior captain. I am now the executive officer. That's no problem. And we were getting
intelligence reports. This is in August, September--September of 1969. There's a
massing of two of the finest regiments that the north has. One is the 66th. Many times
we're called--the 66th NVA was called Ho Chi Minh's own. It was like the immortals. I
mean, when they would get down on strings they would immediately be pumped up to
full strength. They were the ones that Hal Moore encountered in the Ia Drang Valley in
We Were Soldiers Once And Young. They were a force to be reckoned with--combat
hardened, well disciplined, well trained, and truly a soldier. They were coming down with
another--the 28th regiment, and an artillery regiment was detached with them. And this
artillery regiment also, we found out later, had anti-aircraft. So they were coming down,
and they were gonna hit Bu Prang about here. Roll that up right to Bambi Tuit. And we're
only talking maybe sixty miles here to the ocean. Hit Bambi Tuit, roll through Bambi Tuit
right to the ocean. Cut the country in half. This was the master plan. This was the plan.
They had the fresh troops. They were equipped, they were trained, they were ready.
They were ready to go. We knew it. We knew that we were their target number one. So,
okay, we're ready to go. We're digging and we're fortifying, we're reinforcing, and I'm in
there everyday sweating alongside my Montagnards and my sergeants, and we're all--
everybody's involved in this. And the colonel comes out from Bambi Tuit for a briefing.
On the intelligence situation and what's going on because enemy activity had picked up
because we had picked up some of their scouting patrols in the area. Now this is in the
central highlands. This is--the central highlands' kind of a pretty area. I would say small
mountains and large hills. This is what it was. They would call it mountains. Mm, maybe
not so much. But it was truly a picturesque type area. It had dense, dense triple canopy
foliage, and also had rolling hills. It had, like, pasture type hills and some of this. So the
colonel comes in, he gets his briefing, and I'm one of the guys that briefs him. And on the
way out he says, "Oh, by the way captain, you're going to Fire Base Kate to run
security." I said, "What?" And he goes, "Yeah, you're gonna go out there. Captain
Barnum is coming out for R and R. He's been out there thirty days, and you're gonna go
out and relieve him." And I said, "But sir..." If you've been in the military you know how
those end up. "But sir, I'm needed here. The target's here. We're gonna get hit here. I
need to be here for my men when the fighting starts." He goes, "Uh huh. Be on the next
chopper tomorrow morning out to Fire Base Kate." "Yes, sir." I am a soldier. So I knew
the fire base duty because there were three. Annie, Kate, Susan. Annie, Kate, Susan were named after the artillery commander's daughter, reminiscent of Dien Bien Phu and the commander naming the mountains around them after his mistresses. So we went out, and these three fire bases all were mutually supporting each other as well as supporting the camp of Bu Prang. And there were dotted in a triangle. Kate was the closest one to Cambodia, and we were like spitting distance. I mean, it was like a kilometer, maybe a kilometer and half to Cambodia. And when you're by Cambodia you're very close to the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Ho Chi Minh trail ran from here all the way down, and it's actually, you can see it on this map, to here. And this was the supply route. And they moved men and equipment and everything else. So I get on the ground and about three o'clock in the afternoon on 28 October 1969. I look around, and I didn't get any briefing. The captain I relieved jumped on a helicopter. "Hey, how you doing? See you later." Boom. Out he goes. So I'm greeted by my sergeant, another Special Forces sergeant, Danny Pierelli. A professional professional. I mean, this guy--this guy, he's one of the reasons I'm standing here today. This guy is the best of the best. "Captain, how you doing?" "I'm fine." "I'm fine." "Danny, what's going on?" He goes, "Well, let's take a walk around." He had gotten there the day before. He said, "Let's take a walk around." In the meantime the artillery guys--and there was twenty-seven of them 'cause we had three tubes: one 105 and two 155 millimeter, bigger ones. The artillery guys are playing, like, volleyball. We walk around there, and the Muong yards are about 130/150 of them around the perimeter. About 150 at that time. Were lounging, not doing much. I looked at their defenses, not very deep. No overhead cover. I looked at the wire, weeds overgrown, fields of fire hadn't been cut. And it wasn't the way I thought it should be. So--and something interesting too, and you Vietnam guys would know this. We had these things called claymore mines. They were like this, and the best part is on the front it says, "Face towards enemy", so you don't actually do it this way. But there's about five hundred thousand little BBs in it. When you depress it and it blows, it will kill anything in its path. And they're wonderful. They're wonderful to use in a defensive position, even in a night position when you're on the move. Well the Yards know that they were detonated by C4. C4 is a plastic explosive. So, yeah, they'd get in there, take a little bit of the C4 out, and if you light C4 with a match it will burn white hot. And you can heat up a canteen of water for a cup of coffee in about a fraction of a second as compared to getting your Sterno can or build a little fire. So they had gotten into it so to speak. And some of the Claymores, I had come to find out when we went to use them, there was nothing. They went--nothing. So there was issues. There was a discipline issue. There was soldiering issues. There were issues there. So I looked at it. Danny and I, I made a list. I said, "Well, what else is going on here?" He goes-- I said, "What about patrolling?" He goes, "There pretty much isn't." The Montagnards would go out hunting, and they'll maybe shoot a monkey or whatever--the equivalent of a rabbit, and bring it back here, but there's no real patrolling like we know patrolling. The cloverleaf will go out there in stealth and set up an ambush. But we do set up an ambush every year--every night." I said, "Well that's a good thing." So we did our little inventory, and we said, "A lot to do." I said, "The first thing, A, number one, first thing is we're gonna do is--tomorrow morning," which would have been--which was going to be 29 October, "We're gonna take a reinforce patrol out there, squad plus, and find out what the hell is out there." 'Cause nobody really seemed to know. Then I had a meeting with the officers from the artillery. I said, "Okay, no more volleyball. We need to dig in. We need to dig in. We need overhead cover." Yada yada yada. On and on, and I laid it all out for them. Boy, did the word spread quick. "This new guy's kind of a hard ass." 'Cause the other guys that were there, they were playing cards and volleyball. And I'm not against any of that stuff as long as all the work's done, and all your defenses are up to speed. I'm not against any of
The plan was made; the patrol was set. "Danny," I said, "we're gonna get this place whipped into shape. I know they're gonna hit Bu Prang, but by god, if they're gonna send an element over here, we're gonna be ready." Right. That night at 11:30 we got hit. Ambush Hill. Let me explain this, 'cause this comes up. Fire Base Kate sat on this knob, and they just kinda scraped it off and put three artillery tubes and then dug a perimeter around it. Steep hill everywhere but to the immediate north. That was more of a gentle slope. Steep hill, pretty easily defended, but the jungle ran right up to it, right up to the edge of it, and it hadn't been cleared back. All around the other end of it and into the gentle slope was this dense foliation. And right there where the gentle slope came to the jungle that rang this was an open area like on purpose. Like somebody had cut this, but it wasn't it was just a natural open area big enough to get like a, probably, deuce-and-a-halfer, like a big semi through this. And then the jungle went out around another grassy area, was it high grass, up to this knob. And on top of that knob there was foliation and a pretty good little bit of jungle up there. Every night we put an ambush up there, and this particular night an ambush at ready. All hell broke loose. Incoming rockets. And these guys came running in, and--the Montagnards--and they go, "beaucoup"--French for "a lot"--"Beaucoup VC, beaucoup VC." We're like, "Wow. So, how about this? What do you got? How many you got?" "Well, we don't know," Alright. So we called in Spooky. Now I'm gonna refer to this a lot--Spooky and Shadow. Spooky was a gun ship. Spooky was, I think, a C-47 or something like this. It was like a boxcar with wings. And it had a mini-gun out the side of it. And it could shoot through gyroscopes and plotting. One--where you told it to--one round, every square foot. The NVA were terrified of Spooky. Spooky ruled the night. And then his newer version was Shadow. But it seemed like Spooky was the one that we worked all the time. I called in Spooky, Spooky came in, and this good old boy was the guy on the other end. His name was Captain Al Dykes. I didn't know that until later. God rest his soul. What a wonderful man he was. He was from Alabama. He was calling me, the Alabama boy, Spooky 41. What's up? And at that time my call sign was Chicken Hawk. I'm sorry, let me belay that. Chicken Wolf. We made call signs difficult for Asians to pronounce. So this was Chicken Wolf. They don't even kinda go together. So my call sign--he said, "What's up, Chicken Wolf?" And I said, "Well, this--" And I had him spray the entire area. We worked that--now we hadn't taken a round inside yet. We had just taken the hit there and some rounds around us. So we worked that until two, three in the morning. I said, "Well, whatever's out there is probably not gonna hit us tonight." So I went to bed. Dan and I went to bed. The next morning crack of dawn, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. I'm in my little bunker there sound asleep, and I'm thinking that it's the cannon--our cannons firing. It ain't. It's incoming. So up we come. The wounded are there. This guy falls into my bunker, and he's bleeding head to toe. He survived. So Danny and I patch him up. We get out there. "What's going on?" And I call it in, and we're trying to get assets in the air, but since we weren't in dire straights at this time they were kinda taking there time about getting to us. So I said, "Danny, what does John Wayne say?" John Wayne says courage is being scared to death and saddling up anyway." I says, "Saddle up, Danny. We gotta go out there and see what it is." he says, "You got it." So we took about twenty guys, heavily armed, down the gentle slop, through the gap, down to Ambush Hill. That's what we called this: Ambush Hill. We got up there. Lot's of blood trails. NVA gear, pith helmet, part of an AK. We had done a little bit of damage. Blood trails were going off continuing north down that slope back into the dense jungle. I said, "Let's go. Let's see where this goes." Now, again, no earthly idea what--how many people we had. So we go out to flank security, point, rear guard, right by the book. We started down the slope, point man got within about fifteen feet of the jungle, all hell broke loose. Boom, caught, and we went down. Now luckily it was--there
is cover and concealment. Cover is when you get behind something they can't shoot through. Concealment is when they just can't see you to shoot you. We had concealment. We had tall grass. We were down. We got down, and I pulled them back. I said, "Let's pull back, regroup." And I'm trying now to get air power to find out--first of all I want to get a helicopter in to see if they can see what's going on. I get a hold of this Loach pilot--Loach is low altitude-something. But it's a one-man aircraft. They're used for observation. Low altitude observation aircraft. And this--and I don't know this guy's name, and I can't remember his call sign. I wish I could, because he was one crazy SOB. He flies in. He goes, "What's going on there?" And I'm talking to him. He says, "I'll get you a forward air controller." FAC, forward air controller, from the United States Air Force. Get you some fast movers, Jets, bombers, fast movers in here. Jet aircraft. "Roger that." He said, "What do you got Chicken Wolf?" I said, "Well, I don't know." I said, "We're pulling back." I said, "Maybe you can tell us a little bit about it." He says--he flying in, he says, "Oh, he says, "You got problems. I can see them moving down there." So I pull back, I drop down to the right of Ambush Hill heading north, to the right. I take my unit into the jungle. We're gonna flank the bad guys who just shot at us. But as a patrol, you know, we're gonna take them on. That's my job. He flies over, leans out, they're unarm--they're not armored, they have no rockets or --they have nothing. He flies over, takes his 45 out and starts shooting at them. I go, "My Lord, who is this crazy man?" And I wish I knew--and when this book comes out I hope he says, "Oh that was me," and gets a hold of me. He was insane. And he says, "I'm low on fuel. I'm gonna have to get back to you. I'll get you some help." So we start moving, we start flanking, and now he doesn't quite leave yet. He does another pass around, and he goes, "Chicken Wolf," he says, "pull back." I said, "What's going on?" He says, "Pull back. There is a massive force down here, and they are flanking you. They're doing a wide flank. They're gonna encircle you, cut you off from the fire base. Pull back. Pull back now." At the same time I start pulling the guys back, I get the call--one of the Yards says, "We're missing a man." So I said to the chopper, "Do a flyover where we came in engagement. See if you can--see if you see anybody." He came back and said, "Yeah, I do. Yeah, I do." He says, "You got a man down." It was our point man. So we pulled back Ambush Hill, pulled back to the side, a little bit higher ground--he was directly out maybe thirty meters. Yeah, about thirty meters out. "Danny, cover me. We're gonna go get him." So I took two, three strong Montagnards, dropped most of our gear, and we bolted down to get this man. He was still alive, shot in the head, still alive. I got him in a fireman's carry, and I was carrying him back. Now, two things. One, carrying a limp body in a fireman's carry is not an easy thing. I've seen movies; I've seen pictures. I said, "This looks pretty good to me." It was everything I could do to get this man back to our--to Danny Pierrelli and the rest of the Yards, but we did, through a hail of fire. But Danny kept their heads relatively down. They didn't get good beads. And the second thing is, why? Why would I do this? Why would the commander do that? Especially veterans would understand, you never ask anybody to do anything that you haven't done or wouldn't do. That just goes without saying. And this is something that I felt I needed to do. He was alive but didn't quite make it back to Kate before he perished. But we did recover the body. We come back in, we hunker down, and now the incoming starts. And we are getting hit with B40 rockets. We are getting hit with mortars. We're getting hit with all matter of small arms, and it wasn't long after that they started the ground assault. Now I'm starting to get tactical air. I'm talking to Major Latin. He was a forward air controller up in the sky. Wonderful, tremendous guy. Saved my butt. And he is stacking up aircraft. And the air force is coming in, and they're running bomb runs and strafe runs. And in between they're not doing that, then the gun ships--the Huey gunships—they're coming in with rockets and fire power. 'Cause there--at that time in Vietnam there really
wasn't anything going on except at Fire Base Kate. Air force gets hold of Latin--now I can talk to the FAC, forward air control. I can talk to him, but I can't talk to the jets, so that's what he does. I can talk directly to the helicopters. I'm talking to the FAC, and I said, "I need more firepower." I said, "They're massing. They're hitting us with human wave attacks." He said they need a BDA, bomb damage assessment. To justify the many sorties that they're bringing in here, they have to have a body count. And I'm standing there looking--crouched, looking off to the sea and to the bottom to see what I can see, and I said, "There's dense jungle down there. They're dragging off their dead and wounded. I can't do that." "I know that," he says, "but give me something." I said, "Okay, two hundred." (Laughs) "There you go. How's that?" "That's good. Works for me." So we started getting--we started lining up. Now let's talk about the call sign for a minute, 'cause this is a great little story. My call sign was Chicken Wolf as I told you. Chicken--Wolf. Yeah, Chicken Wolf. I'm sorry. And I'm in there calling in some more air, and one of the FACs leaving. Another FAC comes in, and I've been waiting for more tactical air, and he goes, "Chicken Hawk." Yeah, "Chicken Hawk, Chicken Hawk, Mike E2," I'm thinking who the hell is this chicken hawk? Why would you have a name so similar to Chicken Wolf? "Chicken hawk, Chicken Hawk, Mike E2." And I'm thinking, "Maybe he's calling me." So I say, I said--and it's a shot and the shell is coming in and men are screaming, and I said, "Mike E2 this is Chicken Wolf. Are you calling me?" And he goes, "Oh, sorry Chicken Wolf. I thought your call sign was Chicken Hawk." So I say to him, "Call me Chicken Wolf, Chicken hawk, or Chicken S**t," I says, "just get me some ** tac air in here now." And he--and after that it became Chicken Hawk, and then right to Hawk. And to this day there are people out there that don't know me by anything but Hawk. So I got tactical air coming in. Now I've got a problem because they're dug in all around us. We are completely encircled, except for the gentle slope. Well, we're encircled, but they're not firing directly, directly onto the firebase. This was a poor choice to put anything. So he says, "I need a better--I need you to pinpoint it better 'cause I'm looking--I'm using landmarks. I'm using estimated yardage. So I said, "I got an idea. I have some tracer round." So I load a magazine with tracers, put it in there, wrapped around in with my M16s. And I said, "Okay, I'm at the south end, southeast." I said, "Watch this stream of tracers," and I laid right in on this NVA gun position. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. Now there the guy was dug in. those tracers went true, marked the position, he came in with the marking rocket--boom, white smoke, white phosphorous, the jets came in and bombed them into the Stone Age. I said, "We're onto something here," so I did about two or three more times, and they got onto me. So it was immediately--the first time I'd crank a tracer down range, they knew who I was. And they continued to--continued on that. But it was such a good way to pinpoint targets, I continued too. We are calling now in for reinforcements. Let's skip ahead. This is day three or four or five. I'm sorry, day four or five. I need reinforcements. We had a to of casualties. The dead--we--we get them out. Helicopters are still coming in. But they now moved in this--the first time it's been used in country--anti-aircraft weapons. 37 millimeter, whatever. They brought them in. and they started shooting the helicopters out of the sky. Joker 85 went down in front of my eyes in a ball of flame as he was trying to make a run for me. I said, "That's it. No more helicopters except medevacs and to come in at night and kick out some ammunition." Well, we certainly had the air force, and they earned their pay, and we certainly had Spooky and Shadow, and they earned their pay. Now we're getting hit by artillery. And the difference between a mortar and a rocket and an artillery round is day and night. And it shook the very ground. And even though we had been digging and reinforcing, we could not withstand that. So I talked to FAC. I said, "FAC, Mike E2, where is that coming from?" I said, "We're getting hit with some heavy stuff." He says, "Roger that." So he flew, and he flew over due west. And he came back,
and he said--he said, "Hawk," he said, "that's coming from across the fence." and I'm like, damn, what am I gonna do? 'Cause, you know, neutral country, right. So he goes, "Yeah, I can't send jets in there unless the ground commander declares a tactical emergency." I said, "I declare a tactical emergency." "Roger!" And they went in and bombed the crap out of this Camp Le Rolland in Cambodia. And they went in there, and they really, really hit them, and hit them hard. My name was on a--attached to an international incident because I called a bomb strike in, not once, but twice, into a neutral country. And that was okay with me. So I was asking for help. What do you do when you get to Vietnam? We were supposed to go out in the jungle and find them, engage them, lock horns with them, bring in the assets, and neutralize them. Take them out. That's what you do. That's what you do in battle. That's what you do in combat. That's what I was trained to do. Well, hey guys, I got a couple regiments in here. I got a hundred and fifty guys there--more like about a hundred and thirty--I got some guys here. We're locked up, we're running low on ammo, and we're running low on water. And if you've ever been without water, truly without water--God. Give me some help. Now, here at Pleiku, which was another big town in the central highlands, major area, there was the 4th Infantry Division. Ten thousand men. Ten thousand American infantrymen, the finest you could ever have. Here at Bambi Tuit, 23th ARVN Ten thousand infantrymen. Okay, I'm locked up with five or six thousand NVA. I don't know the exact numbers then, but I do know there was a lot of them. Help. It goes up the chain of command. It goes over to Americans, and Richard Nixon had really started pushing in Vietnamization.

Vietnamization was when we turned the war over to the--we're returning the war over to the Vietnamese. Wasn't working real good. Does this sound familiar with what's maybe happening right now? So the 4ht division says--and they would have. And they're our brothers, our American brothers. They would have if they could have. He says, "No, we can't." "What about the 23rd ARVN. You guys gotta go get them." and they looked out there, and they saw that there was 27 Americans and 130 Montagnards who they considered subhuman. "Nah, don't think we're gonna do that." "You have to." "Nah, no we don't have to." Neither side would blink. So the mobile strike force, the Mike Force said, "We'll put some people in there." They were gonna put a battalion, a reinforced battalion in there. Again, we didn't know the strength of the enemy. We knew there was a lot, but we didn't know how many. I could see the helicopters come in on November 1st. I could see them coming in. I could see them landing. This is--remember these are the best of the best. And about 150, maybe 200, got on the ground. Or a couple reinforced--a couple--about a reinforced company, so maybe about 150, maybe 200 soldiers got on the ground. I could see them landing. I couldn't see them exactly, but I was--hallelujah. We're gonna get reinforced. Walked right into a meat grinder. They immediately came under heavy contact. They diverted the forces, they went over there engaged. The Mike Force fought valiantly but pulled back, pulled back, pulled back, and had to break contact, run, dig in, and hunker down. They couldn't fight them. We at least had bunkers. They were in the open. No reinforcements. Things were not looking good for the home team. So I said--about that time the Montagnard commanders came up. And they were-- like I said, they were a great group. "Sir," through an interpreter, "We--we think we need to leave. We think that we can't defend this anymore. We don't have enough ammunition. We don't have enough anything. We have wounded, and now we have the dead." And the dead were stacking up like cordwood in body bags. It was not any of the American dead, but they were the Montagnard dead, which are brothers too. And I said--I had to make a decision. We're almost--we're very low on ammo. I could probably sustain one pretty good firefight. One--defeat one more assault. Water, critically low. So we're almost out of ammo, damn near out of water, and most certainly out of luck. I said, "Roger that." So I called the Americans together that we could, and we're
manning some. And I said, "I'm gonna request permission to abandon Fire Base Kate. We are now defending an impact area. We haven't been able to use our artillery tubes since day two." They had zeroed them in and knocked them out. I said, "Let's prepare. I'm gonna send a message in and request permission to abandon Fire Base Kate." So I coded it up, I sent it in. Wasn't real long. We're still in the process of getting everything ready, and my reply came back. Permission denied. I said, "Okay. Let me do this again. This is what I am going to do. I am abandoning Fire Base Kate. I am not gonna"--we had three choices, three choices as I saw them: surrender, which was never gonna happen. Die in place, and for what? We weren't fighting and delaying action for somebody like the Alamo. Or attempt to break up, and I'd rather die on my feet than die in a hole. So we--they finally did come back and said, "Okay, we grant you permission." Oh, thank you. "And we're gonna give you a Spooky ship to cover it." So we made all the preparations. All the preparations we could. We spiked the tubes, just to be sure, with thermit grenades. Had all the preparations done, then we gathered. We waited for the sun to set and darkness to come, and we were on the base of the north slope ready to go. It's not often the fates allow a man to know exactly where and when he will die. But I could see exactly where and when I would die, and it would be in that gap. I knew that. We all knew that we were not gonna see the sunrise--that was a given--but some of us were gonna get out. So they said, "We're gonna send Spooky out, and they're gonna get in front of you, and they're gonna spray the area in front of you as you proceed out."

Now this is a good plan. I like this a lot. So as we proceed, they're gonna be shooting a hundred yards or fifty yards in front of and us clearing this out of us. This I like. So we hunkered down. We're waiting on the hillside. Spooky, first one sent out from Phan Rang, engine problems--turn around and go back. Next one sent out, engine problems--turn around and go back. Third one, now it's getting late. What I didn't know, and I found out later, is that the NVA had been given no uncertain terms--you will take that firebase tonight. You will knock it out. We're tired of screwing around with these guys. You will take it tonight. Spooky, Shadow, we don't care. Overrun it. They had masked at the south slope. I went back to check, and I could hear them coming. I could hear the muffled sandals, and it was a very steep slope, but they had dug--they had dug up into the field of fire. They had dug into it. I will pick up from there with the reading. "By 19:40 hours, I decided if a Spooky gunship was coming, it ought to be within radio range. Big Tex Rogers had volunteered to carry my radio and serve as my RTO--radiotelephone operator. As our artillerymen crowded around the darkness I took the headset and called Spooky. No answer. I waited an eternity--maybe two minutes--and called again. No answer. I tried a third time. No answer. Frustrated and angry, I turned to Tex. 'This damn radio isn't working,' I hissed into the gloom. Tex swallowed a big smile. In his calm, amused Southern drawl, he whispered, 'Sir, you need to release the push-to-talk switch.' Those tactical radios operate on a single frequency. When I squeezed the handset talk button, it disabled the receiver and turned on the transmitter. I looked down at my hand, and I held the push-to-talk switch in a death grip. My transmitter was on, my receiver off. I relaxed my hand, releasing the switch. All of a sudden the radio goes, 'This is Spooky 41, we're coming in,' says Lieutenant Mike Smith who was there with me. Everybody got excited. The cavalry was riding to our rescue. Embarrassed, I managed to mumble thanks to Tex. Again I understand I was just as frightened as everyone else. Panic is more contagious than the common cold. If we were to have any chance at all of getting off of this firebase I had to remain calm and focused. Silently, cloaked by the night, I now made peace with the almighty. I resigned myself to the realization that I would not see another sunrise. I could not envision a scenario where this would end well. Not only did I not know"--I'm sorry. "Not only did I know that I would die, but I knew where it would be as I entered the gap in the jungle leading to Ambush Hill. So I prayed not for my own life
but for the lives of those that had been entrusted to me. Then unbidden and unexpected I was filled with a sense of calmness and well-being. It felt like a good night to die. Alabama Dykes was Spooky's mission commander. It would be a little while before he would be in position to fire for us. I didn't want to leave anyone behind, so I told the men I was going to run back to the south end of the firebase to make sure that we weren't leaving anybody. Turning to leave I heard gunfire, small arms fire, coming from that direction. 'The captain said that he was going to run back to the other end,' recalls Nelson Koon. 'He said if he's not back in five minutes to leave without him.' We all said, 'If he don't come back we ain't going anywhere because we don't know the lay of the land like he did.' So everybody was shaking hands and whispering, 'Well, if I don't make it out and you do, get a hold of my parents and let them know what happened here.' It only took a second for me to reach the other end. The shooting had stopped. All our foxholes and fighting positions were empty. As I squatted on my haunches in the darkness listening I heard the faint but clear, the unmistakable sound of barbed wire being clipped and muffled clatter of sandals moving up the hillside. They weren't more than fifty meters down the hill and coming. The hair on the back of my neck stood up. I started back for the north end, and then I heard the soft, evil cough of a nearby mortar firing, and I went prone just as the rounds exploded a few meters away. Then another blast, and a little farther north. Then a few seconds later another. The enemy was walking fire south and north along the length of the firebase toward where everybody was massed for evacuation. When the barrage ended I ran to the north end to find that one man had been killed, and that they were now--we could hear the popping sounds of illumination rounds above us. The NVA was popping lum rounds so they could see us. Then another, then another. We all laid. Kate was naked to any observer on the eastern ridge. Everybody flattened on the hard ground. My heart was a kettledrum threatening to explode from my chest. I was certain that hundreds of enemy infantry would spill over the south crest and come at us firing. There was no time to lose. When the last flare burned out I jumped to my feet and announced that we were leaving. But before we took more than a few steps our point man, in the act of clearing our wire, our own wire that we had, accidentally set off a trip flare. Again everyone hit the ground. As the shifting and unearthly orange light from the flare floated down to us we waited for the mortars. None came. That flare seemed to burn forever, but then it sputtered out. Everyone got back on their feet. For a moment it was utterly still. Then I heard the welcomed sound of the sky raider." we did have one sky raider above us, an A1E WWII vintage sky raider, and they are phenomenal. They were just a workhorse of Vietnam. He had one strafing run left, and he had asked me--he had asked me if he should strafe the gap before we left, and I thought, "I might need you. I might need you later. I want to keep you in my back pocket until Spooky gets here." So I held him in abeyance. "I then heard the sound of the sky raider diving low toward the hilltop hoping to make the neighborhood bullies think that he was on a strafing run. But as we barreled over the low and fast, he didn't fire. As he barreled over the low and fast, he didn't fire. I knew that he was almost out of ammo. I expected Mike Force element to be waiting at the foot of Ambush Hill. This is what I was told. I had been told that they would lead us to their main body a few miles away to make it easier to enter the point of the perimeter that I was supposed to link up with this element at the base of Ambush Hill. I had everybody in single file when we came off Kate. I gave the order, and we moved out. At about forty or fifty meters the line stopped. I worked my way to the front and found that the point man, twenty meters from the gap leading Ambush Hill--he was frozen. He was frozen with fear. He was unable to move. Spooky was still too far out to fire and clear our path, and the enemy was on our heels. I must act immediately. I moved up to the front, and I took the point. I understood that I was about to die, but it had to be done. And there was no one else. My carbine
was slung beneath my right arm and held waist high on full automatic. My finger was resting on the trigger. I gripped the radio. I got the handset. I put it in my left hand, said, 'Follow me,' and I stepped into the night." And if you want to know how it ends you have to buy the book.

(Laughs)
Clarke: A little bit about what you're doing with this book going forward. You've got a pretty active schedule.
Albracht: My bride and I are packing up, and we're going on a book tour down to Texas, and then--staying away from the north with this snow--and then go over to southern California and Arizona and Albuquerque, New Mexico and so on. It's gonna be quite rigorous, but a lot of fun too.
Clarke: Best of luck. Thank you.
Albracht: Yeah, thank you very much. Thank you. Thank you all.

(Applause)
Clarke: Thank you to William Albracht for joining us today and to Penguin Random House for making this program possible. The book is *Abandoned in Hell: The Fight for Fire Base Kate*. To learn more about our sponsor, please visit PenguinRandomHouse.com. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, become a member, and explore all the Museum and Library has to offer, visit us in person or online at PritzkerMilitary.org. Thank you, and please join us next time on *Pritzker Military Presents*.

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(Theme music)
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(Theme music)
Voiceover: The preceding program was produced by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.