407 Zero to Hero

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(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*.
Williams: Welcome to *Pritzker Military Presents* featuring author Richard Ernsberger and Medal of Honor Recipient Allen J. Lynch, for a discussion of their book about Lynch's life. The book details Lynch's transformation from bullied kid to decorated warrior. I'm your host Jay Williams, and this program is coming to you from the Pritzker Military Museum and Library in downtown Chicago. It's sponsored by the Boeing Company, Rita and John Canning, Reed Smith, and Motorola Solutions. This program and hundreds more are available on demand at PritzkerMilitary.org. In this program, Medal of Honor Recipient Al Lynch sits down with coauthor Richard Ernsberger to discuss their new book about his life titled *Zero to Hero: From Bullied Kid to Warrior*. It is published by the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.
(Music)
Voiceover: This is the life story of Al Lynch in his own words, an American hero who is now one of only seventy-two living Medal of Honor Recipients. A happy boy growing up in Chicagoland Southside industrial neighborhoods, his happiness was almost eradicated by several years of intense bullying, though he found ways to overcome it. As an anguished young man his prospects of following in his father's footsteps as a blue-collar tradesmen were cut short by the Vietnam War. This is the story of a man whose life came into sharp focus when in a deadly firefight in Vietnam he rushed in to rescue three wounded soldiers in no-man's land. He was urged to leave the wounded and return to a safe position, but Al Lynch refused to retreat in order to stay with his men, despite having every reason to believe he would die that afternoon. Because of these actions, he is a hero. This is also the story of the many troubling consequences of surviving battles while others die, sometimes tragically due to friendly fire or the random violence of an endless war. His sense of honesty and independence has been honed over a lifetime of mistakes and victories, toward always doing the right thing no matter the cost. He learned that independence can be a selfish burden and that life is not only about helping others but allowing others to help him. So this is the story of a man who overcame the dragons of PTSD with the help of his family and friends and by being honest with himself. One doesn't have to be a war hero to be wounded by life. By the writing of *Zero to Hero*, Al shows us the stuff of which heroes are made.
Williams: Lynch's story is of vast importance because it not only imparts his life and battle-tested wisdom to the rest of us, but also because his story is exemplary and accessible. Allen James Lynch served with Company D, 1st Battalion of the 12th Cavalry Regiment and the 1st Cavalry Division Airmobile. He had been in country for six months when the action took place that would result in his receiving the Medal of Honor. This recognition of his conspicuous gallantry and selfless service to others on that day would be the catalyst for a life of service to others. Richard Ernsberger, Jr. is a noted writer who served as an editor and reporter at *Newsweek* for over twenty years. He also served at *American History* and *World War II* magazines. He is the author of many books including *Bragging Rights: A Year Inside the SSC Football Conference.* Here are Al Lynch and Richard Ernsberger at the Pritzker Military Museum and Library.
(Applause)

Ernsberger: So, I had the pleasure of working with Al Lynch on his book *Zero to Hero: From Bullied Kid to Warrior,* and the book recounts Al's fascinating journey from a Southside Chicago sort of working stiff, as you said, the victim of bullying, to a Vietnam War hero, a recipient of the Medal of Honor, PTSD survivor, army reserve officer, and then a long career serving veterans in various capacities, generally in the Chicago area. As Al notes in the book he wasn't a man, wasn't a guy who was conspicuously destined for success in life. There were problems, there were hardships, but he overcame them, and he went on to have success in many different ways, and his story is a good inspirational one about personal perseverance, I would say, having worked with him, and service to others. So, I want to start Al by just asking you to give us a little overview of your early years growing up in Chicago, where you grew up, who your parents were, what they were like.

Lynch: I grew up in Roseland. My first, I think--was about age six, seven years old. And it was back at a time when mom stayed home, and so my first couple years in grade school, kindergarten and first grade, I could walk to school, which was about six blocks away. Cross busy streets. Parents are fainting all over the country now because of that, but I could walk to school and come home, have lunch, and then walk back to school. Roseland was kind of the start, and then we moved from there, I think it was 1951 or so, to Homewood. Ely's trailer camp in Homewood, and we spent a couple of years there. And then my dad decided that we wanted to have a house, so we moved to Lake Eliza, Indiana. Rural Route 2, Lake Eliza, Indiana. Back in those days Lake Eliza was kind of the go-to place for Southside of Chicago people to go on vacation.

Ernsberger: What did your dad do, and your mom?

Lynch: My dad started off as a laborer, became a rigger, and then became a first class and then a journeyman welder. And then he became a machinist with union carbide. My mom was pretty much a stay-at-home mom. Her job was taking care of my sister and I, and back then it wasn't as easy being a homemaker as it is today in the sense, because just the laundry with the old washing machines took a whole day, and didn't have the fancy vacuum cleaner, the little robots to do all that. So, my mom stayed home. My mom was an amazing cook, a loving, caring woman. And when she did have to work she usually ended up as a secretary doing typing-type things.

Ernsberger: So when you were in Lake Eliza, Indiana, you were sort of a carefree country boy, and then that sort of became in middle school, I guess, ages eight, nine, ten, you started getting bullied pretty seriously, a process that went on for years. So I want to ask a three-part question.

Lynch: Okay.

Ernsberger: About being bullied. The first is, how did getting bullied change you as a young man, how did you overcome it, and then how did you use that experience, bad as it was, for your own sort of positive personal development over the years?

Lynch: Well, when we first moved to Lake Eliza, and the years before moving there, I always had friends and was always out playing and doing what boys do, and the first couple years at Lake Eliza, third and fourth grade, halfway through fourth grade it was total freedom. We could get on our bikes at eight years old and be gone all day. We would go down to the lake and go swimming. We could ride into Wheeler, which was across busy Route 30 and all the way into Valparaiso if we wanted to. It was just totally free. We could go out o the woods and shoot squirrel and shoot cans with our 22s or 410 shotguns. It was just a--

Ernsberger: Carefree existence.

Lynch: --carefree existence, and then the bullies came. And I don't know why, all I can remember is my mom saying, "What would you do, how would you feel if you hurt somebody after you fought them?" And what I found is that if you give fear a place

inside, it grows like a cancer. And I started thinking about that, and they kept pushing me around, and my dad kept--"Punch him in the nose, punch him in the"--but my dad was working two jobs. So he would literally come home from work, or if he did come home, and head out to his four-to-twelve job. So, I started losing friends. I started--my grades started to suffer. And there was a, just a loss of everything. And it kind of culminated one day. And I actually fought one of the bullies that day. And I came back—it was in junior high, came back, and one of the high school kids says, "Why are you always picking on this guy?" And he says, "Because I hate him." He says, "Why do you hate him?" And he says, "Because everybody else does." And I just felt like my life drained out of me. It was like I was ninety-eight years old.
Ernsberger: And you became a bit of a loner, right?
Lynch: I became very much a loner--
Ernsberger: The woods were your sanctuary. Did you spend a lot of time in the woods?
Lynch: Yeah, I was working towards that, and then after that it was like, I just liked being alone. I got comfortable in my own skin. I think that was the benefit for me. And then it kind of went into high school a little bit, and I say in the book that I thought I had--I changed locations, but I didn't change. No matter where you go, there you are, and I moped through high school. And the way--I think what bullying did for me was it made me a survivor. I got very--I knew where not to go. I knew where not to sit. I could almost tell when I shouldn't turn that one corner. It was almost like I had ESP, you know. But I got very aware of my surroundings, which I think helped me in Vietnam, because I'm situationally aware most of the time. In fact even now, I'm seventy-three, I'm always hearing things.
Ernsberger: And there were no interventions back in the 50s when it came to bullying. I mean, you were essentially on your own unless your parents sort of got involved directly.
Lynch: The teachers basically thought that this was boys will be boys, and you gotta work it out, the law of the playground, and they didn't let us get—they didn't let me get beat up too much, but it was just like, well, hey kid, you better learn how to fight 'cause that's the world.
Ernsberger: And your family next moved to Dolton, Illinois, which is on the outskirts of Chicago, and you went to high school there. There was a little bit less bullying, you made friends, but you still had issues, right? You were a bit of an indifferent student.
Lynch: I hated school. (Chuckles) I hated school.
Ernsberger: Had a bit of a bad attitude, if we can say that, yes.
Lynch: That's a good thing to say, yeah, because I really hate school.
Ernsberger: You graduated, though, nevertheless. Even despite your academic issues. In 1964 you worked two or three factory jobs in the area, and then you decided to enlist in the army. So what was the motivation for wanting to enlist in the army in '64?
Lynch: Well, I was kind of like that guy in *Officer and a Gentleman*, when Lou Gossett stands over and tells, "Why don't you just quit?" "I got nowhere else to go." I knew I was gonna get drafted. I was in a rut, you know, I had finally found a nice job. I was working for Libby, McNeil, and Libby on 119th and Ashland, south side of Chicago, but it was, you go to work, you'd hang with your buddies, you come home, and you rinse and repeat, and Saturday night is you go out with the guys, Sunday night you go out with your girlfriend, and it was just that's the way it was. And I thought, I'm gonna get drafted eventually. I want to control my life. So, see that's how smart I am. So, I enlisted in the army because I wanted to control my life. Yeah, that makes sense.
(Laughter)
Ernsberger: Turning logic on its head. Alright, you joined the army, you went to basic training at Fort Knox, Kentucky. You found that the army suited you in some ways, right.

It boosted your self-esteem to a degree. What was it about the army that you liked? Gave you some direction?
Lynch: You learn real quickly that if the drill sergeant ain't happy, ain't no one gonna be happy, and he makes you more afraid to fail than anything else in the world. Other than maybe my dad. But it was, you know, we're in a WWII barracks, so there's no privacy, which was really weird. I'm a white guy from a white neighborhood, and all of a sudden I've got an African American drill sergeant. We've got white guys, black guys, northern guys, southern guys, guys that barely made it through freshman year of high school to guys with some college education, and we're all in a barracks, and we're told to work together. And I started to really like it. I could do things. I found out I wasn't as stupid as I thought. I learned how I could run and sing songs, the army cadence and all of that. So it started to give me confidence and build my spirit. And then they made me a squad leader. I think it was like, the day we hit basic I was made a squad leader for four days.
Ernsberger: So, you graduated from basic training, then you went through advanced basic training, and then you got offered a position in infantry officer candidate school in Fort Benning, Georgia, and you went and you started officer candidate school, and then things didn't go quite so well there.
Lynch: No, I--
Ernsberger: What happened at OCS?
Lynch: Well, OCS is basic training--I went to advanced infantry training. I was gonna be a clerk, but I went to infantry. And it's kind of basic training and advanced infantry training on steroids. We attack officers, we had to eat a square meal, which, we sit in the first five inches of your chair, and your back is straight, and up and down and over and all that. It just--and then they lost my pay records, so I couldn't get the uniforms, I couldn't get the tailoring I needed, couldn't buy the Cochran jump boots, couldn't do any of the stuff I needed to do to make it.
Ernsberger: Started to stress you out.
Lynch: And it stressed me out a lot. Again, I did not know how to laugh at myself, so when things happened to me, I couldn't laugh. I took it all—they're out to get me. I was right back to being a little kid from Union Center Grade School.
Ernsberger: Mhm. There was one incident in particular that you write about in the book that spelled the end of OCS for you, and that involved what you call pogey bait, which is a military term, I guess, for candy. And you were trying to smuggle it into the barracks. Tell us what happened.
Lynch: Well, we had an honor code. I will not lie, cheat, or--it was longer than that, but it was basically, I will not lie, cheat, or steal or tolerate anyone who does. And you couldn't break the honor code. To get an honor code violation would be bad. But at the same time that we were told not to have pogey bait or not to have pizza or not to do anything like that, we were told to do it. And you know, again, not being the sharpest pencil in the pack, I didn't get that this was all part of the game that is played. You smuggle pogey bait in because you get over on the tac officers, and it's a big kind of wink wink, nudge nudge. You shouldn't do that, but yes, you should. So, it was my turn to get the pogey bait, and I had layered my bag with the pogey bait in the bottom of the bag.
Ernsberger: Duffle bag or--
Lynch: It was just two shopping bags. Brown shopping bags, and I had all the good stuff up on top. And I got stopped, and to make a long story very, very short, I said—he said, "What do you have in the bag?" I named all the items, and then I said, "Sir, I have pogey bait in the bag," and he turned red and--
Ernsberger: Erupted
Lynch: Oh, yeah, jumped up and down, screamed and yelled, and all of that. And, "I want a company formation." So we got a company formation, and he said, "Candidate

Lynch thought you guys deserved a treat, so he went and got pogey bait, and he's going to pass out pogey bait to each and every one of you." Not too bad, I thought. "While he is passing out the pogey bait, he is going to sing a song. Here's some candy I bought." So I had to go, (singing) "Here's some candy I bought for you," and the company had to sing, "We thank you." (Chuckles) 150 times I sang that song. Funniest thing that ever happened to me in the world, and I was madder than hell.
Ernsberger: Wasn't so funny for you at the time. You were humiliated and angry, weren't you?
Lynch: I wanted to take my little tack officer out and beat him half to death. I was so upset. I was so--and I was humiliated. And I look back at it now, and I just want to grab myself and give me a slap in the back of the head, and what's the matter with you? But we took a little walk. We were gonna strip our blouses and have a conversation, and we started walking out, and he said, "Were' gonna drop you next week. It's the fourth week, it's fourth week cut week. You can be drinking beer this afternoon. All you gotta do is DOR, drop on request." And I did, and I was. I went--it was kind of funny, because I processed out. I saw Colonel Ned, who was a WWII Medal of Honor recipient. He tried to talk me into staying and recycle me, and I said, "Nah, I'm done. I'm not officer material." He says, "You're right, and bye bye." So, I went back to the barracks, packed all my stuff, and I was gone.
Ernsberger: Do you ever regret that decision? Do you think that was--
Lynch: Nope, nope, nope.
Ernsberger: No?
Lynch: Nope. I ended up retiring as a first sergeant. I was an NCO. I liked being an NCO. Have a lot of respect for some of my officers, but I liked being an NCO once I grew up.
Ernsberger: So, after OCS you were subsequently sent to Germany where you were assigned to a weapons company at a base near Frankfurt. April 1966 you reenlisted for three years and were sent to a headquarters company in Berlin, where you became a clerk ammo bearer for a mortar platoon, which I don't think was your cup of tea exactly--
Lynch: Oh, no.
Ernsberger: But you got two article fifteens, correct, non-judicial disciplinary punishments, and then in February 1967 made the big decision to apply for a transfer to Vietnam.
Lynch: Yeah.
Ernsberger: So, what was the motivation for that decision? And you had a little--what did the first sergeant say when you made your request to go to Vietnam?
Lynch: The military terminology of what I was was dud. It's an unexploded round, and it's very dangerous, because duds, you don't know when they're gonna go off. And you know, I was making progress, I was growing up a little bit. The two article fifteens were well deserved. But it was just—I was getting to a point where I just--Vietnam was going on it was the event of my generation, and I wanted to be a part of it. But also I carried with me that stink of cowardice, that I was bullied, I was picked on, what would I do? And I needed to test myself. I needed to find out what I was made of. And I was at Fort Benning in '65 when the 1st cavalry went over, and so when I put in my papers I volunteered for that, and my first sergeant looked at me, and he said, "You know, it's for real, and if you continue with the attitude you have you're not gonna last a week," or a day, I think it was a day. And boy, he was right. You learn real quick in combat that it is definitely for real.
Ernsberger: Yes. So, you're off to Vietnam. You land at Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, in late May 1967. You're twenty-one years old and destined for a year of duty as a replacement infantry soldier with the 1st Cavalry Division.

Lynch: Finally.
Ernsberger: Why 1st cavalry?
Lynch: It was cutting edge. The 1st cavalry, a lot of guys were being levied from Germany to go to Vietnam. We had one guy I think that actually ended up in the cav. but the exploits. The Ia Drang Valley, everybody knew about that in the cav, was airmobile which was brand new.
Ernsberger: New concept.
Lynch: Yeah, and it was just--it was just like, that's what I want to do. If I'm gonna go over there, I want to be with the best, and in my mind the 1st cav was the best. Sorry, everybody else.
Ernsberger: Airmobile with all the helicopters.
Lynch: Exactly. Right, exactly.
Ernsberger: What do you remember about your first days in Vietnam? Anything in particular?
Lynch: Hot. It was hot.
Ernsberger: Yes. And what did you do for the most part? What did your unit do?
Lynch: We did a lot of air assaults. When I first got to them it was--we had about a click, I think, about a half-mile to the South China Sea. And everybody was talking about going swimming. And I thought, "Geez, that's pretty cool. I'm gonna go swimming." No, no. Didn't earn that right yet. So I had to stand guard duty with one of the old timers. Old-timer at the age of twenty-one or twenty. But the next day we went on a search and destroy mission, and we found some VC and VC suspects, and then we went on an air assault the next day, and it was just one right after the other of--
Ernsberger: Search and destroy.
Lynch: Yeah, search and destroy. Get on a helicopter. The first time I rode a helicopter and it tipped, and you're flying in an open door, and your feet are sitting on the slick, and you fly over, and it's like ninety degrees down, and you're looking, you're going, "I'm gonna die. I haven't even been shot at at, and I'm going to die." And by the end of the week it was old hat. Just--
Ernsberger: And you were based at Camp Radcliff in the central highlands, and that was a big helicopter base, right? 400 helicopters there. And I think you say in the book how you still--the sound of helicopters flying by still resonates with you.
Lynch: I got it--
Ernsberger: Yeah. You had a good friend in the platoon, a guy named Gerald Brines who was killed I think very close to you. What happened there?
Lynch: Now, when you don't have a lot of friends and you make a friend, that's very special. And we had one guy in our platoon who--he was a dud. He was a know-it-all, was lazy. And Jerry and I just had lunch. And we started moving forward down the trail. What we didn't know was there were Special Forces units coming toward us. And so when our point man got out and he saw movement, everybody got into a fighting position, and Gerry got behind a tree and a big bush, and I got behind the log. And our machine gunner got back a little bit, but he had a good field of fire. And all of a sudden we hear ceasefire, ceasefire, ceasefire. In the military, you always yell that three times. And it's reported. So the word came down, ceasefire, ceasefire, ceasefire. And I stood up, Jerry stood up, and he got shot. And the machine gun jammed with one round. One round went through Jerry in the chest, and Jerry told us that he had been kicked by a horse and stuck by lightening when he was a kid, an it's three strikes and you're out. And what stuck in my mind was he just kept saying, "Oh, you know, that's it. Three strikes and you're out. I'm gonna go, that's it." We got him medevaced out, and then I went up to the guy that shot him, and I put my 16 under his chin, and I said, "I'm gonna kill you in the next firefight if he dies." So, for a week they told me Jerry lived. Jerry actually died on

the helicopter. But during that week I had time to cool down. The guy that shot him was handled. He was kind of silenced, and we had wanted nothing to do with him. He shot one of our own. But redemption is that he turned out to be a good soldier, and he was a squad leader when I left Vietnam. And I look at a lot of stuff today, and it's like, there were some friendly fire issues, and it's like, you know, you make an honest mistake even though you're a bonehead when you do it, there's still something there that might be saved.
Ernsberger: Mhm.
Lynch: But, yeah, it's one of--
Ernsberger: Traumatic experience. Your moment of truth--combat moment of truth, I guess we could call it, with 2nd platoon, D company, 1st battalion 12th cavalry came on December 15, 1967. We'll give a little background on this. At a collection of hamlets named My An in Binh Dinh Province near the coast, the area was part of the Bong Son plain about 300 miles north of Saigon, and Bong Son was the tactical responsibly of the 1st brigade of the 1st cavalry division. There had been a series of clashes in previous days. I think your 1st cav was, like you were out to find the 22nd regiment and chase the down and engage them, correct?
Lynch: You know we had the thing of--and I'm gonna stop you for a minute, Richard, because see, what a lot of people won't understand is that the Vietnam chapter was gonna be one chapter. It was gonna be me in Vietnam and done, and you made those three chapters, I think, the best in the book. I think that your help and your guidance and your insistence on detail (chuckles) and my poor wife--but I'd come downstairs, and, "I don't want to write about this. I just want it short, sweet, and to the point," and you kind of pushed me through that and for that, I think we've got some really good reading in those chapters. And that's largely due to you.
Ernsberger: Well, thank you. But let's--about the battle. I think it was almost like a two-week engagement. It was called the Battle of Tam Quan. And there had been a series of clashes in previous days between US and South Vietnamese infantry and mechanized units and the North Vietnamese 22nd regiment. And then on December 15th, the last and most intense of firefight occurred, and the NVA had an estimated 1,200 men, the US and South Vietnam had about 650, half as many, and by the end of that harrowing day you had earned the Medal of Honor for saving the lives of two or three soldiers. And we've talked--you don't remember a lot about that day. I mean, it's combat; few people do. I mean, you don't remember an hour later, much less fifty years later, which it's been. But what do you--what does stand out in your mind about that day and what you did?
Lynch: The hardest part of writing it was for me, and the guys in the trench with me, we were just trying to stay alive, so we saw--
Ernsberger: Your platoon was walking--
Lynch: Yeah, we were walking the point. My platoon was walking point, and as soon as the fire started, Lieutenant Southerland, who was our platoon leader for, like, six hours, ran towards the fire--I being his RTL, I was right behind him. I was his shadow. So, he went up, he reported that we were getting fire, and I gave some--passed the word of what he was saying. And as we're trying to assess what's going on, and as I remember it Sergeant Wilhelms comes running back, gets shot about half way out, I went out, and I got him and the medic, and I brought him back in, and he said Sergeant Gesares was shot in both shins. And so I went out, brought my radio, and told the LT that I was gonna do that and then bring him back. My mind was to go out and get him, pick him up, bring him back. And because both of his shins were gone and he was pretty messed up, I was trying to think of how to put him on my back and take the 16s and all the rest of it, when Esparza comes running across and gets shot, and I went out and got him and pulled him

in, and then as we're laying there he got shot again, so he got shot in the--I thin he got shot in the leg, and then he got shot with a dirty bullet in the arm; he ended up losing it.
Ernsberger: So, you were essentially in a ditch in no-man's land between the two sides, and nowhere to go.
Lynch: Nowhere to go, and we just laid there, and we killed a lot of Viet Cong because they didn't know where we were, so they'd start talking.
Ernsberger: They were close behind the hedgerow.
Lynch: There was a big, thick hedgerow, so we'd just stick our 16 through and spray, and they'd stop talking, and a few minutes later they'd start talking, and we'd hit them again. One time an APC pulled up, and that's--unbeknownst to us, it got hit by an RPG and it left, and that was it. Then they called in continuous artillery and air strikes, and it just was--
Ernsberger: You were there for hours, were you not?
Lynch: Yeah, they said three hours, but it was just after chow when we got out there, and it was dark when we got out. So, it was a long time.
Ernsberger: And I think the company commander Donald Orsini, a man named Donald Orsini, made two attempts to rescue the three of you, and the first one they--too much fire, they came under and had to retreat. Then they came back with the APC. That got hit by a rocket-propelled grenade. He himself got seriously injured. And then your platoon commander Mr. Southerland--
Lynch: Roy Southerland came up.
Ernsberger: Roy Edward Southerland, who was twenty-two, and I mean that was tragic right, because he--tell us about the night before. You didn't have a platoon leader.
Lynch: No, we didn't have a platoon leader, and he insisted he wanted to be--
Ernsberger: He was at headquarters.
Lynch: At headquarters back at LZ English where we went for stand down, which is where you get refitted and new fatigues, and stuff like that, get a shower and stuff. And he insisted, he wanted to come out, he wanted to have this platoon, he wanted to get his time in. And Orsini said no, and he insisted, and Orsini said, "Okay, if you can clear it through brigade," and brigade said no, and he insisted, and brigade said yes, so he literally joined our platoon for the air assault that morning.
Ernsberger: It was the first time you met him.
Lynch: First time I met him.
Ernsberger: You were radiotelegraph operator.
Lynch: Yeah, yeah. It takes a while to get when you're an RTL to get to know your commander and to know their idiosyncrasies and what they do, so it was a fast, steep learning curve because we literally air assaulted in, he's a platoon leader, we do a little sweep of a village, little small firefight kind of stuff, nothing big, and then we walked into this nightmare, and he came out the first time to get us, and I think Orsini said that he was nothing if not insistent. He says, "No, they're my men. I'm coming," and words to that effect. And when they came under such intense fire they called him and said, "Come on, Brig, we've got to get out of here." And he didn't move. He got shot in the head trying to recue me. And one other guy got shot. I think he survived trying to rescue us.
Ernsberger: So, the air power that was brought in helped save you guys. North Vietnamese fled or left, and then you were able to--what happened then?
Lynch: Well, it got real, real quiet. I mean, we had probably fifty minutes of just continuous artillery and air strikes. One of the air--the jets came down the trench line, dropped napalm right over our head, which is why at the--I wish I would have studied math 'cause I would have known that height, speed, and distance it's not gonna fall straight down, but when he released it, it was like--well, I won't say what we thought or said, but it wasn't for mixed company. Then it got real quiet, so I went out and I went to

the two hooches that were in our area, and searched them, and walked around, tried to find them. Then I carried the guys over to a tree, and my idea was that I would carry them here, and I would search a little bit, and I would carry them to another place and search a little bit until I found our unit. Well, I went probably 200 meters and there they were, and we went out and got our guys, and we were all medevaced. Two, three days later I went back to the unit and they said, "We'll put you in for the medal of honor and all of that. And then they lost--
Ernsberger: Did that surprise you?
Lynch: Yeah. Yeah, I didn't think I did that much. I still don't. I think most of the guys—look at the people that tried to recue us. Look what Don Orsini did, look what Southerland did. You know, that's--we have a thing in the military that you do not leave your wounded, and they were not gonna leave us as long as there was any opportunity to get us.
Ernsberger: So, yeah, just to recap during the two-week Tam Quan Campaign I think 58 Americans lost their lives, I think there were about 250 that were wounded, and nearly half the fatalities, twenty-six died during the fighting of that day, December 15th around the village of My An or the collection of hamlets. And then the 1st 12th cavalry had twenty-on men killed in action and suffered twenty-two wounded. It's worth noting, because I think this was a month before the Tet Offensive started, that the commanding general of the 1st cavalry division, Major General John Jarvis Tolson III later explained the importance of the Tam Quan campaign saying it had a much greater significance than we realized at the time, and that area preempted the enemy's Tet Offensive even though the full impact wasn't then realized. As a result that part of Binh Dinh was the least effective of any part of South Vietnam during Tet. And yes, it was--this battle was as all battles are I guess, it was very hard to sort of pull it together. There was a lot going on, a lot of troop movements, and we really had to--got lucky in the sense that the leader of the 3rd platoon, a man named Tom Jost had been writing a history for years of the Tam Quan campaign, had a lot of information on it, which was very helpful in pulling it all together, and then there was also a guy named, a soldier named Rigo Ordaz who was a soldier with the 150 mechanized, and then Donald Orsini himself, your company commander, wrote a rather lively account of the battle. It was--and so we pulled all that together with after action reports and daily staff journals and, yeah, it was a challenge, but it was good. And after being put up for the Medal of Honor you got taken back to the rear where you were with the gear, correct? And you spent about six months back there.
Lynch: I was a rear echelon male or female.
Ernsberger: Right. (Laughs)
Lynch: See what I did there?
Ernsberger: You left Vietnam on May 1, 1968, spent a few months at Fort Hood, left active service in April of 1969, went back to Chicago area, started working at Libby again, the canned food manufacturer. Met a woman, cute woman named Susan who you started dating, and then you decided to get married, and you were gonna get--the marriage date was April 25, 1970, and then something happened the day before your wedding. What was that?
Lynch: Well, I was on my way home.
Ernsberger: You were in Dolton.
Lynch: I was in Dolton. I was on my way home from Libby's. Before I went to Vietnam--there's an S-curve in Dolton, and I took it, and I got arrested, 'cause I took it really, really fast.
Ernsberger: You liked to drive at high speed.
Lynch: I still do. Yeah, I love to drive fast. But I took the s-curve, I was-but I was on orders for Vietnam, so my dad got the ticket. So I got back, and I'm on my way home,

and I thinking, this is gonna change my life, and that S-curve worked pretty good the first time. So it's daylight, there's light traffic, I took it pretty light. I only did it like fifty-five, and then I slowed right down. I thought I got away with it. I got followed home by a police officer. And I turned, he turned, and I'm like, ah crap, here we go. The day before I'm getting married I'm getting a lousy ticket. So I pull into the driveway, and I always find it's very smart to be nice to police officers. So I got out, "Yes officer, can I help you?" And I'm thinking, here we go. And he says, "Is your name Alan Lynch?" I said yes. "Is your social security number this?" I said yes. And I'm like, what's going on here? "Call this number," and he turned around and got back in his squad car. I started saying what--what, what am I, what is it? He said, "It's a good thing. Just call the number," and drove away, so I called the number, and I got some colonel, and did the same thing, and was told I was gonna receive the Medal of Honor, the day before we got married.
Ernsberger: And you didn't want to talk about it too much, did you?
Lynch: No.
Ernsberger: I mean, marriage was more important to you at that time.
Lynch: I got the Distinguished Service Cross like two months after I got out of the army, and I as done with the army now. And I just wanted to get married, go on a honeymoon and have a good time and be left alone. And this happened. And it was, don't talk about it. And of course I told my mom and dad, and pretty soon they--so, you know how that goes. I told one, and someone told one, and pretty soon everybody's talking about it on our wedding day, which kind of irritated me.
Ernsberger: What do you remember about the day you received the medal from President Nixon, I believe?
Lynch: It was--(laughs) it was awesome. I mean, I've never flown first class in my life. We flew first class to Washington. I got a suite. Treated like royalty, got to the room; there's twelve other recipients. He came around and talked with each one of us and put the medal around our neck and asked each one the where-you-from kind of questions, and had a private reception in, I think, the east or west room of the White House and met Trish Nixon and you know, Mel Laird and all of these—it was just, it was amazing. It was very difficult to keep reminding myself I'm just some boneheaded kid from the south side of Chicago, the suburb of Dalton.
Ernsberger: And then wasn't it back to real life when you got back to your house?
Lynch: (Laughs) Yeah. We had fish, and I forgot to take out the garbage, and we opened the door, and the house wreaked. It was--my wife doesn't remember, but I remember it, because, oh lordy, did it smell. And I looked around for my two aids, and they were gone. So, I took out the garbage, and she sprayed Lysol.
Ernsberger: You in the subsequent years through the 70s I guess, you suffered symptoms of PTSD. I don't know if you knew that was what it was, but you had symptoms, various symptoms, right, but you never got fully diagnosed until, what, like 1992. It was a long time. What were the symptoms that you had and--
Lynch: It started with a startled reaction. It was hot. I used to walk from the bus to our townhouse, and it was damp, it was nasty, it was raining, it was thunder and lightening, and I was fine. I got home, got changed, took a shower, came down, getting ready to eat, and all of a sudden there was a crack of lightening and a bang of thunder, and I was on the floor. And Susie said that you just got a strange look on you face and it was like you were totally gone, and then you were down. And then ever since I have a startled reaction that comes and goes. I don't like loud, sudden noises. Sometimes it affects me, sometimes it doesn't, which is weird. Then I started having intrusive thoughts and angry anger outbursts. Just a lot of different stuff. Suicidal ideation, and all of that stuff. But back in '73 if you went in and sought treatment, they gave you a diagnosis of anxiety reaction and stuff like that. And I didn't want none of it, so I kept it all in like a lot of

Vietnam vets did. And you just kind of sucked it up, and of course the WWII veterans had gone through it, but they self medicated, the ones that were having problems, which is why we had the alcohol programs and that.
Ernsberger: You finally got counseling, and you had some guilt for not being wounded as well, right--
Lynch: Yeah. You go to the Medal of Honor conventions, and you see people like Einar Ingman, who was severely wounded in the Korean War. His face was all messed up and scarred. And guys that lost legs and arms, and here I am, my closest wound was being hit in the face with a coconut. And I was offered a Purple Heart for it and refused it. I mean, how do you explain that away? So yeah, a lot of guilt. A lot of survivor's guilt, especially when I knew that Southerland and all these guys died trying to get to us. And then writing the book, again and opening up that whole chapter just brought a lot of it back.
Ernsberger: And didn't it help that you also did something involving your old buddy Gerald Brines, who had been killed.
Lynch: Yeah. I'd been in therapy for a little over a year, and I never had a good holiday. It was kind of like Pagliacci, laughing on the outside. But I hated the holidays. Just hated it. It was--that was the time that bad things happened. And she suggested that I find Jerry's grave. And Jerry lived up in Shullsburg, Wisconsin. So, I went up to Shullsburg, and--
Ernsberger: On December 15th.
Lynch: On December 15th, the day of the action. It was kind of something old, something new kind of thing. So I went up there, I found--went through the graves, and finally I found a Catholic priest who said, "VFW commander's at the bar." So, I went down and I--the bar was open, I went in, and I said, "I'm looking for the grave of Jerry Brines. I heard there's a VFW guy in here." And he says, "I'm him, and I buried that boy."
Ernsberger: But you found the grave, and it was a very cathartic experience for you.
Lynch: It--I haven't had a bad holiday season since. I found the grave, I bought a camera, little CD camera, and did a recording, told them about Jerry and why we were friends, and what it meant to find his grave and all that, and I went home, and we just shared the day, you know--
Ernsberger: With your family, yes.
Lynch: Yeah, with my family, and my wife makes beef stroganoff, which is my all-time favorite that she makes, and she made that, we had a nice dinner, and Christmas was amazing. And I haven't had a bad holiday season since. It's been great.
Ernsberger: And I think also you mentioned this concept of others, not self, that's been helpful to you. What is that about? Explain that.
Lynch: As I'm going through therapy my dad contracts lung cancer, which you get for smoking seventy years or fifty years or whatever. And he was dying, and I would go to the hospital to see him. Go there on the weekends, and when he was home on hospice I would go visit, and I found that when I was doing it was kind of like I didn't know it until it was over, but I was non-symptomatic because I was concentrating on going to see my mom and dad, going to see helping out my mom, and doing all of that. And then about a year and a half later my mom had a massive stroke, and it's a long story, but she called me the day she had the stroke, and told me that she didn't want to survive a stroke. She had had a friend that had one and didn't do well. But I disobeyed my mom, and we decided to keep her alive. And they operated on her, and she ended up in a nursing home, and I would go out to the nursing home every Saturday. When she was closer I would go out there a couple times a week, and then she got moved a little farther, so I'd go out there early Saturday morning, spend the full day with her, and then rinse and repeat. And then she passed away, but as I was thinking about my mom I wasn't

thinking about me, and what I found is that--and the reason that's on my challenge coin is because part of the way that you can fight PTSD is to make it not about you. What I was doing my whole life of PTSD was making it about me. It was how I felt, what I felt, what I felt, what I needed, what I wanted. Oh, and I owned it. It was my PTSD. I try not to own it anymore. What I saw is, I call it a dragon in the book. I'm kind of into the *Lord of the Rings*.
Ernsberger: Slaying the dragon, yes.
Lynch: And it's slaying the dragon. And it's like I view PTSD. I don't want it to have a nice name. I don't want it PTS; it's PTSD. It's a nasty, vicious enemy that you have to defeat every day, and I try to, and most of the time I succeed now that I have tools.
Ernsberger: You emphasize in the book that receiving the Medal of Honor brings with it great responsibly to live up to the values that it symbolizes--sacrifice, service, courage--and you've made that idea of service really a compass point in your life. I think through your more than thirty years of being an advocate for veterans, military veterans and Vietnam veterans in particular, just very quickly, briefly sort of run through your career as a--
Lynch: Well, I started off as a veterans' benefits counselor. But the big thing was when I worked for the attorney generals office, and they allowed me to do cases, do appeals. And I had a lawyer teach me how to write, and she was brutal. She had a vicious red pen, ended up being a states attorney I think in one of the counties out west. But she taught me how to write legally, and for twenty years I won probably ninety-five percent of my cases, and I didn't cherry pick. I'm really proud of that, 'cause I didn't cherry pick my cases.
Ernsberger: So you were representing veterans who were appealing their--
Lynch: Yeah, they had to be denied first by the regional office, and then I could take it once a notice of disagreement was filed. And I took some real tough cases. But I just loved it. It was the best time ever. I used to tell my vets, it's not about you, it's about me not losing, and I hate losing.
Ernsberger: So, it meant a lot to you to work for veterans for thirty-some years.
Lynch: Yeah. It saved my life.
Ernsberger: Yeah. In 2012 you started your own foundation. Allen J. Lynch Veterans Assistance Foundation. It's not called a foundation anymore, but tell us briefly, very briefly about that.
Lynch: In 2014 we became a program of Operation Support Our Troops America, so it's now kind of a three-pronged thing. We send packages overseas, care packages overseas to those serving. We have the veterans assistance program, my program the Allen J. Lynch program. We help veterans over the hump. Everybody has too much month at the end of the money at some point, so we try to help veterans that are in need, but it's not a handout. It has to bring sustainability, 'cause there's a lot of veterans out there that just, like a lot of other people, just give me something now. No, no. You've got to have financial counseling. You've got to be a part of this. The other thing that we do is really called Leap of Faith where we take gold star families, and we give them a week of therapy, and then we take them up and strap them to a Golden Knight and throw them out of an airplane. Well, they get to volunteer to do it. They could also swim with dolphins. But there's something about that kind of thing, of jumping out of an airplane, why I don't know, that is cathartic for them, and a lot of them had their lives change. So, we're in the business of changing lives.
Ernsberger: How much money have you raised over the years?
Lynch: Oh, geez. Probably over a million dollars, but it's been going since 2012, and we have some phenomenal people that help us out. Jennifer Pritzker helps us out every

year with our sporting clay event by gifting us, granting us, 25,000 dollars. And we have unions that help us, and people like Mr. John Schwan helps us out.
Ernsberger: I was impressed, working with you, by your diligence when you were writing the book. You wrote a lot, and you wrote fairly quickly. But you said in the end of the book that it was--writing the book was one of the hardest things you'd ever done. Was it emotional for you, to--
Lynch: Very, very much.
Ernsberger: --go back through your life and your war experience?
Lynch: And I didn't think the bullying part would be that emotional, but it was like part of me was still that little kid, and I could feel what he was going through. The other part of me wanted to grab him by his collar and do a General Patton on him. You know. But it just brought back that dark, dark time, and then writing about Vietnam and dealing with Jerry's death again. That was a long day or so. The day I earned the medal was really, really hard, hard to write. It still is. It's--I think about it. I tried to read the book again a couple weeks ago, and it was very difficult to get through. It just brought all of that stuff back.
Ernsberger: Well, you've led an exemplary life, and it was a pleasure to work with you on the book. And I guess that wraps up our session, and we can open up for questions.
Lynch: You were a very good mentor and friend and drill sergeant to me. I appreciate it.
(Applause)
1: Can you talk about the men you saved? Do you still have a relationship with them, and how are they doing?
Lynch: Sergeant--I think he was a private them, Private Esparza lost his arm, ended up a physical therapist, he lives on the west coast. I've never seen him. The other two guys, I don't know what happened to them, don't know where they are. Don't know anything. They've never come to any of the cav reunions. Nothing. But I've talked to Esparza a couple times on the phone, and then we're on LinkedIn together.
Ernsberger: But it seems like they want to put the whole war experience behind them. And we've made some attempts to sort of contact them.
Lynch: Yeah, it just—don't know where they are.
2: I was reading part of your book. It's a very easy read, and I was wondering if you mentioned how you kind of went from, ideologically, of wanting to fight the communists to, you saw the true tragedy of Vietnam, and how did this evolve for you?
Lynch: Well, because I've got the Medal of Honor I do a lot of speaking at schools, and I get asked a lot of questions. I've sat on a couple Vietnam, back in the 80s and 90s, symposiums and such. So, I've read a lot. And I guess I could best say that Vietnam is the war we fought for all the right reasons all the wrong ways. When I found out just how much of a liar Lyndon Johnson was, that really upset me. It was almost like he threw--we used to say we got wasted, because what did we get out of Vietnam? We fought because some president didn't want to lose a country that was lost already. And then I read the history of how the United States allowed the French back in with their brutality, and then how we followed on the French, and the politics behind it, and Eisenhower basically telling Kennedy, "Don't go to Vietnam. Don't do this." And Kennedy basically doing it. It's just, the more history I read about it, the more angry I get about it.
3: Did your veterans assistance portion of your career, did you work with many WWII veterans, and if you did, did you see any differences between them and the Vietnam veterans you worked with?
Lynch: WWII veterans were a lot more stoic, which I think is why I was early on with the PTSD. Because that was my dad's generation. They didn't like to talk about things except amongst themselves.
Ernsberger: And your dad was in the army, right?

Lynch: My dad was in the army. He was in the army air corps, trained dogs. And which gave me a love of dogs. I had my son's dog and trained him a little bit. He still obeys my commands. But, yeah, I found WWII veterans--I worked a lot of their cases over the years--are just the same as any other veteran. We do the exact same things. We put our life on the line for our country, and then when the country is done with us they tend to forget about us. And a lot of their claims were mishandled by the VA, still are. And now as Korean War and Vietnam veterans are coming of an age we're finding a lot of--when I left, stopped doing casework, found the same thing that has been going on for many, many years. I don't know if I answered your question, did I?
4: Thank you for sharing your story with us today. As you have different speaking engagements and you interact with people who are our children, perhaps, how do you feel we're doing teaching about the Vietnam War to our kids?
Lynch: We're doing a horrible job of teaching American history to our kids. And I think that you have--history is. It's neither good nor bad, it's history. And we had a tendency back in the 50s to, when I was going to school, you know, George Washington chopped down a cherry tree and Honest Abe and all of that. Well, people are people. History is history, and we need to tell--we need to tell the story of Vietnam factually without leaning it right or left or making it political. We need to teach the history of our country the same way. So we're doing a terrible job of teaching our children history. We have a lot to be proud of in this country, but our history tells us we have come a long way, but we also have a lot more work to do. And the lessons of Vietnam need to be taught. And they need to be taught in our schools. The lessons of the War on Terrorism need to be taught, and they need to be taught in our schools, and not politically, not with an agenda.
5: What do you hope people will get out of reading your memoir?
Lynch: I wrote it for two reasons. One is, I was bullied, and there's a lot of kids out there that are bullied. And I want them to know that that's just one chapter in your life. There's a chapter, and many chapters afterward, so don't-- some of those bullies are gonna get their own comeuppance in their own way. And I tell what happened to some of the bullies in the book. The second part is, that post-traumatic stress disorder. We lose twenty-two veterans to suicide a day. Now, some are not due to PTSD. My brother-in-law killed himself because he had pancreatic cancer and just didn't want to suffer through it. But nonetheless we have a lot of men, a lot of women, that are suffering the effects of post-traumatic stress, and if my book can help somebody get past it and to fight it and treat it like it's an enemy and win, then I'll be very happy.
(Applause)
Williams: Thank you to Al Lynch and Richard Ernsberger for a fascinating discussion, and thank you to the Boeing Company, Rita and John Canning, Reed Smith, and Motorola Solutions for sponsoring this program. To learn more about the Pritzker Military Museum and Library, 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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