LONGstorySHORT
with LESLIE WILCOX

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When U.S. Army General Robert Brown spoke of the 2018 recipient of the Mana O Ke Koa, Spirit of Warrior Award, he said: Awardees demonstrate unparalleled patronage for and civilian leadership toward our Army. Allen Hoe embodies those qualities. While each nominee for the award is deserving, we feel Allen's dedication to the Army is truly outstanding.

Fifty years prior to General Brown's statement, the Army sent a special invitation—a draft notice, to the same Allen Hoe, who admits he was a typical local boy of the late 60s, focused only on surfing, hotrods, and girls. But a ten-month combat tour in a small country in Southeast Asia turned this local boy into a soldier's soldier. Vietnam veteran Allen Hoe, next, on Long Story Short.

> One-on-one engaging conversations with some of Hawaiʻi's most intriguing people: Long Story Short with Leslie Wilcox.

Aloha mai kākou. I'm Leslie Wilcox. Allen Hoe's father was from Kalihi on Oʻahu, and his mother was raised in Moloaʻa on Kauaʻi. He points out his ancestors were all subjects of monarchies—on his father's side, Chinese and Japanese; his mother, Hawaiian, English, Scottish, German, and Spanish. His father was a World War II veteran, and there's evidence of warriors serving their country throughout Hoe's family tree from the Queen's royal guard in India, to a war lieutenant for King Kamehameha.

Now, you were raised a regular local kid?

Typical local boy; right. You know, in the 60s, focused on surfing, rock 'n roll, and girls. The 60s, I think, for me, our history in the 60s was probably the most traumatic decade that our country has experienced in the last century.

And were you part of that resist, oppose? You know, resist authority was the call of the day for young people.

Yeah. Me? No; I was more interested in hotrods and surfing.

So, that kind of passed you by.

Yeah, yeah; that kinda passed us by.

Were you in ROTC as a student?

So, did the war in Vietnam touch your life as it started out in the 60s?

You know, not really. I think in my junior, senior year, it was just really kinda like an extra subject for history lessons, history courses. And it wasn't until the summer after we graduated that it kinda came home very personally, because the older brother of one my dearest friends was one of the first casualties in Vietnam. He was killed in Cu Chi.

Oh …

And then, later on that year, I had a cousin who was killed in Vietnam as well. And then, it's like, wow, this is for real, what's happening here.

What happened next?

And then, I was still pretty much living life like a local boy.

Hotrods.

Hotrods—

Girls and surfing.

Yeah, yeah, surfing. And then, I got a special call. I love to tell this story, because the young soldiers today, I said: You know what, we are so proud of the decisions you made to serve your country, but you know, my legacy is a little bit different. I was very special; Uncle Sam came looking for me.

He said: Mr. Hoe, we need you.

Had you been dreading a draft call?

No; no. You know, in my generation, that was part of growing up. At some point, you know, you would either volunteer to become part of the then, what was very fascinating all-Hawai'i company, which on 4th of July every year, you know, a hundred or so young high school grads would become part of the all-Hawai'i company. So, for me, you know, service was just gonna be part of my growing up.

So, that service didn't, in your mind, include combat.

No. But it included, you know, doing some time in the military.

Right. And so, even when you got that call, you didn't say: Oh, my god, I could get sent to Vietnam, I could get put in really difficult circumstances.

Yeah; reality … I was nineteen, and that was not, I think, part of my reality. You know, I was young, still making perhaps unwise decisions regarding activities in life, et cetera. So, for me, yeah, I didn't feel threatened by it, neither did I feel any kind of overwhelming sense of obligation, other than to serve your country.

I understand after being drafted, you could have stayed here, I think. But you volunteered to go to Vietnam?

Yes. Having grown up and hearing the stories from my aunts and uncles, and cousins, regarding our, quote, warrior culture, after training to become a combat medic—

Why did you train to be a combat medic?

Well, Uncle Sam said that's—

You were designated.

Designated.

Okay.

Yeah; for training. And you know, they give you a battery of tests, et cetera, and you know, who knows, but you know, fortunately, and I feel I was very blessed to have been selected to become a combat medic. And after I trained long and hard to do that, when we graduated, all of the new combat medic qualified soldiers would go to the bulletin board to see where their next duty station was. And the bulk of my class went straight to Vietnam. I was assigned to San Francisco. And you know, I didn't question it. And then, when I got to San Francisco, I was assigned to Travis Air Force Base. The unit I was assigned to had a lot of soldiers who had come back from Vietnam, and they maybe had three to six months left on their assignment before they got out of the Army. And stories that they shared with me in terms of what it was like presented a challenge to me, and I said: You know, given my background and my family history, I don't ever want to … look back and say, I wonder how I would have done in combat.

But it was a different kind of combat. I mean, it was like no other war we've had.

Yeah, but you know, for a nineteen-year-old, there's only one kind of combat.

Wasn't there some Geneva Convention ruling that it's a war crime to shoot a combat medic who's clearly identified in combat. But in Vietnam …

There were no rules.

Forget it.

Forget it; right. And life expectancies for combat medics were worse than first lieutenants.

So, you wore weapons.

I carried, I carried both sidearm and a rifle. And you wore nothing that indicated that you were a medic, other than your bag was bigger than the rest.

And then, you went out right after people got hurt in combat.

My mission, I was with a long-range reconnaissance team. And so, when someone got wounded, they were generally standing right next to you, so you knew what was going on. Yeah.

So, you could have been hit too.

Yeah.

Did you fire your weapon?

Yes. You know, for me, part of that experience, being twenty by the time I got there, and being young and adventurous, part of my responsibility being on that team was, I had to learn all the duties or all the functions of everyone else. And as the medic, I trained the members of my team to the best of my ability in terms of, you know, first responder life-saving methods. So, while with the team, not only did I fire my weapons, but you know, I helped set ambushes, I learned how to call artillery, and learned how to set demolitions and blow charges. And yeah, you gotta understand, for a twenty-year-old, this is like fun stuff.

You don't feel that it'll actually hurt you? Do you feel untouchable?

You feel immortal.

Immortal.

Yeah.

Yeah.

The most foolish kinds of things that one accepts in combat is that if it happens, it happens. You know. And then, for me, it was, you know, as long as I can get through three of these life-threatening experiences, then I'll be okay. I very clearly distinctly remember the three times that I was supposed to have received something fatal, and survived. And after the third time, it was like, oh, big relief. I said: Nothing's gonna happen.

I've got a force field around me.

I've got a force field around me. And then, you just kinda learn how to operate just naturally and freely. And yeah, you were still concerned, you were still frightened on occasion, but you knew that at the end of the day, nothing's gonna happen. And you know … nothing happened.

But you can't do that by skill alone; right?

It's luck.

It is a matter of chance.

No, no, no. Yeah; you survive combat purely on luck.

And meanwhile, you were seeing some scenes you can't un-see.

Yeah.

Mutilated limbs and gory stuff.

Yeah.

Very sad, just grievous injuries. How did you deal with that?

For me, it was just reactionary. I trained; everyone trained.

You compartmentalized?

You compartmentalize. When stuff happened, instinct kicks in. And you know, I think one of the saving graces of our current force is that our young shooters, as I call them, the young infantry soldiers or the young combat soldiers that have to go to war for us, they are required to train twenty-four/seven. And it becomes instinctive, it becomes

reactionary. So, when they're on a patrol, they experience enemy action, they immediately shift into their combat mode.

Did you hear the talk that we understand was common at the time, where people were saying: What are we here for, why are here, this war doesn't make sense.

Yeah. We would hear about that or read about that in letters or the newspapers that would occasionally come to us. But you know, the reality is, at the end of the day in combat, you're not thinking about fighting for your country, you're not thinking about fighting to preserve, you know, family values or the constitution, et cetera. You are simply thinking about saving the life of your buddy on your right and on your left. And you know, the reality is, at the end of the day, if you've done your job right and everybody survives, our country will be blessed by that.

Did you get really close to the guys you served with?

Oh; you know, to this day. Fifty years ago, I met incredible bunch of young men, and probably spent twenty-four/seven with these men, maybe not more than four or five months with them, but to this day, when I hear their voice, I immediately know who I'm talking to. It's that special bond that even kind of um, surpasses a familial bond. You know, I have a relationship and memories of guys that I served with perhaps that run deeper than with my own two siblings.

Wow. And you know, when you're with somebody who's terribly hurt, and possibly or inevitably dying, it's a really intimate time you share. How was that?

Yeah. For me, and the guys most closest to me, if one of our buddies was hit, we were—this is fascinating--we were doing our best to stabilize his condition, but it becomes not quiet and soft, but it becomes a loud, raucous kind of conversation to get their attention, to get them to focus, to get them to hang on and not to give up. You know, so it's yelling and screaming. This is like—you know, I remember the first time that happened, my platoon sergeant, who obviously had been there longer than me, as I was treating one of my wounded buddies, he was shaking him to get him to respond, to wake up, and to fight on before we put him on the helicopter. And I learned something that day, in terms of first, you know, you're gonna … do your job to stop the bleeding, prevent the shock, but at the end of the day, you've got to get that young soldier's attention, to get him to focus on things he needs to do.

Because that helps him—

Him, yeah.

--help himself.

Help himself.

You know, you have seen some things that most people never see, never have to know what it's like.

Yeah.

How has that affected you?

You know … at times, it causes me to kinda go into a slump, but I've always been able to deal with that in terms of, that's war. And I kinda kick into this mode where long time ago, I read this passage where, you know, in war there's only two rules; the first rule is that people die, and then the second rule is that you cannot change rule one. So, you know, we were at war, people are gonna die, you know, and thank God if you survive, that you survive.

That 1968, when you were there, that was a particularly …

Yeah.

--fatal—

Yeah.

--grisly year.

Yeah.

I mean, lots of fatalities.

Yeah. I guess the high water mark was 1968; in May, 1968. And yeah, May 1968 was a particularly bad month for me.

What happened?

I lost eighteen of my guys. And but for the grace of God, I would not be here, because ten of 'em are still missing in action. The grace of God was that my unit was transitioning from Point A to Point B, and I was not with them that day. I was back in the rear, getting ready to rejoin them. Before I could rejoin them at the new location, they were overrun.

And some of them were never found, but were you treating your own men?

Yeah.

In the field.

Yeah.

May; was that Mother's Day?

May, Mother's Day.

Mother's Day.

Mother's Day, 1968. Yeah. I mean … if you can imagine, I mean, you're a mother, you know how important Mother's Day is. That day by itself, you know, to get the message or the knock on your door that your son was killed on Mother's Day. I mean …

And so now, when Mother's Day comes around at your home, you think of another meaning for it.

Yeah. I am reflective on the mothers of my men who didn't make it. And you know, over the past fifty years … that bond I had with their sons, I've developed with them. So, for me, it's very special. For me, it's always been an obligation to assure their mothers whose sons never came home that their sons are superb young men.

You made an effort to go do that?

Absolutely. The majority of the men who I lost on Mother's Day 1968, their mothers and their fathers had absolutely no clue what happened to them. And to live without any knowledge of what happened, I just couldn't. And that's even worse, you know, to have your son taken from you in combat, and that's all you know. He's not here. Why? We can't share that with you, we can't tell you the circumstances, or what happened on that day.

Do you think you had PTSD after the war?

I had issues. I don't necessarily think it is or was PTSD. Everybody who experiences combat has issues. I remember when I first came back from Vietnam, the first month that I was home, it was just party time; right? You know, I was riding motorcycles back then, and every night we'd go out and … go and enjoy life, tip a few Primos. And I remember like after a month, one day, my dad came home. We were passing, I think in the driveway; I was getting ready to go out, and he was coming home from work. And said: Al. He said: You have a moment? I go: Yeah, absolutely. He told me, he

said: You know, son, I won't even begin to understand what you experienced in Vietnam, and what you're doing now, you know, I'm not supportive of your behavior and what your conduct is now. So, you know, how much longer are you going to do this, 'cause don't you think you need to start thinking about your future? I hope you're not planning to do this the rest of your life. And I said: No, Dad, I'm just having fun. But you know, that kinda came home to roost really strong for me, my father saying: Okay, all right, it's time to kinda like get on with your life. And, you know, I did.

He did it in such a nice way, too.

Yeah; he was just an incredible guy.

Allen Hoe's parents had always insisted he would attend college, so when he returned home, he took advantage of two new State institutions for learning. He enrolled in the new Leeward Community College, later graduating from UH Mānoa, and he was among the first class of law students admitted to the William S. Richardson School of Law.

Okay; the style of the day was long hair.

Yeah.

So, did you go back from the war with your short haircut, to—

Long hair.

--long hair.

Yeah.

And did you see anti-war protests?

Oh, yeah; yeah. You know …

How did you feel about them?

You know, this may sound strange, but to me, that was just part of our great democracy. You know, I tell people: Yeah, I have no problems with the protests, the marchers, and the anti-war people, even when I was in Vietnam. I said: Hey, that's what we're here for, to give them the right to exercise, you know, their freedom. And it truly did not bother me. One of the things, though, that did bother me was, a couple of the young Leeward students were egged on by this group to pull down the American flag. And four of us Vietnam veterans stood 'em off, and we said: You touch that flag,

and you're gonna go down. And … they left the flag alone. I said: You can protest the war all you want, but you're not gonna come and touch this flag.

And that was a spontaneous act by the four of you?

Yeah.

Did you ever get pegged the wrong way when you walked around campus with the long hair? I mean, did people assume anything about you that wasn't true?

The wife of a soldier who was in one of my classes, her husband was a career soldier, had not been in combat. And she made this kind of strange comment to me. She said: Why are you so angry? And I said: What do you mean? She said: There's this hate that comes from your eyes. And I said: Your husband's a soldier, has he been in combat? No. I said: Well, you send him to combat, and this is the look that he will come home with. And she just couldn't understand that.

That it's not anger.

It's not anger. People these days, or even for many years, they call it the Thousand-Yard Stare.

Allen Hoe's adjustment to civilian life was bolstered when he met his future wife, Adele.

We met actually, I think maybe the second month after I got out of the Army. And you know, when I first saw her, I said: Oh, my god, that is the girl of my dreams.

At first look?

That first day we spent together. She was actually a coworker of the sister of one of my dear friends. So, we just kinda like wound up on not a blind date, but time together. And she was, or is just a special person. Yeah; yeah. Swept me off my feet, so to speak.

Adele and Allen Hoe married and shared in the joy of raising two sons: Nainoa and Nakoa. Both young men chose to be warriors and serve their country. The elder son, Army First Lieutenant Nainoa Hoe, was killed by a sniper's bullet while he led a foot patrol in Northern Iraq in 2005. He was just twenty-seven years old, and had been married for less than a year.

My wife and I, Adele, we still hear from the soldiers who served with Nainoa. And that is very comforting to us. He absolutely loved being a soldier. And the fortunate part, if there is anything fortunate about that horrible tragedy, was that his last day on this earth was documented by a writer who wrote an incredible story of how my son spent

his last day with his men in combat. Now, for me, as a father who had experienced combat, that was just an absolutely incredible story. For me, it was very gratifying to hear how he performed in combat, and how his men just dearly loved him.

Yeah; I was so impressed by your son Nakoa.

Ah …

Seeing him at an event where Nainoa was being spoken of and honored, and all the attention was on the fallen son. And Nakoa is a very honorable and brave, Army leader in his own right. Right?

Correct.

But it was not about him; he was just happy to see Nainoa being celebrated. I thought, he's grown up in that shadow of his—

Big brother.

--his big brother being venerated as a hero.

Yeah.

And not feeling like: What about me?

Yeah. You know, in retrospect, my Hawaiian culture, that's what led me to name him Nakoa; brave, courageous, strong, army, a soldier.

It does take courage to kinda—

Yeah; to stand in the shadow.

To stand in the shadow; right.

Yeah. And he has become just an incredible young man.

So much grace.

So much grace.

Did you teach him that grace?

His mother taught him that grace.

How our family and how this community responded when our son was killed, for me, it was very eye-opening. You know, having survived combat, having witnessed death, it was totally different when that knock came on our door.

2005.

2005. And then, it's like our whole world just came screeching to a halt. And then, you know, over the years, I've become very close to the Vietnam veterans' efforts, the memorials, et cetera. Jan Scruggs is a very dear friend. And you know, Memorial Day 2005, I was invited to come and be a speaker at the Memorial Day ceremony at The Wall. It was not the first time I had been there, but that was my first experience when I got there and I looked at the fifty-eight thousand plus names in the wall, including like a whole panel of my guys. And I just kinda like … stopped, caught my breath, and I said: Oh, my god. Looking at all these names, you would think that the world would have come to a complete stop. Because I know my family—

For some, it did.

Yeah.

Many, it did.

For some, it did. And for, you know, my—my experience and my family's experience, the world did come to a stop. You know, but there it is, fifty-eight thousand plus names, and we're still at war.

Shortly before our conversation with Allen Hoe in the summer of 2018, he and nine other local Vietnam veterans were honored at what the Army referred to as a long overdue ceremony. While only ten veterans were selected, the Pentagon report said they represented a large number of soldiers who served in the Southeast Asia conflict, but were never given a proper military ceremony to present awards and medals. Allen Hoe received a Bronze Star and Purple Heart at the ceremony, and told news reporters it was well worth the wait to have the brigade you went to war with recognized years and years after that war was over.

We thank Vietnam Combat Medic Allen Hoe for his time with us, and the work he continues doing in the civilian and military communities. And we thank you, for joining us. For more of Allen Hoe's conversation, including how a flag originally purchased as a souvenir in Vietnam has earned a military record of its own, and why it's in Hoe's DNA to be passionate about horses and the sport of polo, please go to PBSHawaii.org and our Long Story Short archives. I'm Leslie Wilcox for Long Story Short and PBS Hawai'i. Aloha nui.

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People say: You do so much for the Army. And I said: You know what, when I have a quiet moment, sitting in my backyard at Maunawili, looking up at Mount Olomana, which was one of Nainoa's favorite places, I just kinda look up there and I says: All right, son, you didn't think Dad had enough to do? So, my mission has been to try and make the lives, and the comfort, and the memory of soldiers who put on the uniform every day for us a little bit better.