



All the Best Podcast
Episode 9: “Courage Under Fire: Chi Chi Jima”
Featuring Author James Bradley

James: Here's some reflections from President Bush after he was shot down in Chichijima and rescued by the Finback submarine.

"I'll never forget the beauty of the Pacific, the flying fish, the stark wonder of the sea, the waves breaking across the bow. It was absolutely dark in the middle of the Pacific. The night's so clear and stars so brilliant. It was wonderful and energizing, the time to talk to God. I had time to reflect, to go deep inside myself and search for answers. People talk about a kind of foxhole Christianity where you're in trouble and you think you're going to die, so you want to make everything right with God and everyone else right there in the last minute, but this was just the opposite of that. I had already faced death and God had spared me. I had this very deep and profound gratitude and a sense of wonder.

Sometimes when there's a disaster, people will pray. Why me? In an opposite way, I had the same question. Why had I been spared and what did God have in store for me? One of the things I realized out there all alone was how much family meant to me. Having faced death and been given another chance to live, I could see just how important those values and principles were that my parents taught me, and of course I thought about how much I loved Barbara, the girl I knew I would marry.

As you grow older and try to retrace the steps that made you the person that you are, the signposts to look for are those special times of insight. I remember my days and nights aboard the Finback as one of those times, maybe the most important of them all. In my own view, there's got to be some kind of destiny and I was being spared for something on earth."

George: In the workplace, I believe that character is a part of being president.

Barbara: And life really must have Joy.

Sam: This is All the Best, the official podcast of the George and Barbara Bush foundation. I'm your host, Sam LeBlond, one of their many grandchildren. Here, we celebrate the legacy of these two incredible Americans through friends, family, and the foundation. This is All the Best.

We're Mountaineers, volunteers
We're the tide that rolls, we're Seminoles
Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right.

George: I remember something my dad taught me. He said, "Write your mother, serve your country, and he said, tell the truth." And I tried to do that in public life. All through it.

Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right.

Barbara: You are a human being first and those human connections with children, with friends are the most important investment you will ever make.

George: We stand tonight before a new world of hope and possibilities for our children, a world we could not have contemplated a few years ago.

Sam: On behalf of our family and the George and Barbara Bush foundation, this is "All the Best."

Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right.

Sam: In this episode, I am joined by American author James Bradley. James is currently based in Vietnam and just released a brand new podcast, Untold Pacific that mines 40 years of his life in Asia and his four bestselling books. His podcast Chronicles historical travel logs about the American experience on the other side of the Pacific. James is a close friend of the family and first met my grandfather 17 years ago. James, it's great to have you on "All the Best."

James: Hey Sam, it's great to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

Sam: September of 2019 marked the 75th anniversary of my grandfather being shot down over the Pacific Island of Chichijima. Few people have studied this incident and other incidents on Chichijima like you have. Could you share with our listeners the big picture of what was happening on Chichijima? The U.S. joined the war and how that played into my grandfather's unlikely rescue.

James: On December 7th, 1941, Pearl Harbor day 17-year-old George Bush is walking across the campus of Andover. He's got his life made, he's accepted at

Yale. He hears Pearl Harbor and he says to himself, "I'm going to do something about this." He enlists on his 18th birthday. He is the baby of the Navy. He's the youngest naval pilot out in the Pacific.

The Pacific in late 1944 and 1945 was becoming the most expensive killing grounds of World War II. The reason it was so expensive was because of the water. They had to attack it with ships and airplanes. The number one most expensive instrument is not the tanks that Patton used in Germany, but they are the airplanes that George Bush at the age of 20 now is flying in the Pacific and he gets the mission to bomb the radio station at Chichijima. This is key. Chichijima is next to Iwo Jima.

They are 600 miles South of Tokyo. Take a string of pearls and hold them up on the map at Tokyo and straight down 600 miles, you get Chichijima and Iwo Jima. Iwo Jima was flat and had airfields, so the Marines attacked it in the famous battle of Iwo Jima.

Chichijima is all hilly, nowhere to land a plane and there were more Japanese troops on Chichijima guarding that radio station than there were on Iwo Jima. So we had to attack it by plane and 20-year-old George Herbert Walker Bush, Lieutenant JG comes in for the bombing run. A Japanese shell, tears into the plane. Well, this is a 1940s tin can, it's a flame. He's gonna die. There's no question.

What does George Bush do? He says, "I've got my duty and I have to do it". That's a quote in the book. I've got my duty and I've got to do it means I might die but here my duty is before me. With a flaming plane, I want to repeat that. Just think of your hands around flames and your hands on the wheel. He does his duty and he releases those bombs on that radio station and then he has to get rid of the plane. So he slides out to sea as he's trained.

Now he's got two buddies in the back, so he slides the plane sideways, now this is risking his own life in time. He doesn't bail, to take the pressure off the back door. He can't see them, the way the plane is configured, he can't communicate with them. The plane is a flame, but George Bush takes the time to slide the plane so his buddies can get out. He doesn't know if they did. That's another whole story. He then jettisons himself, hits his forehead on the plane. He's bleeding.

He lands in the water. No life rafts. Someone drops him a life raft but the other planes have to get out of there. They are little tin cans, they don't have much gas. And they go and George Bush at the age of 20, bleeding, is floating in the Pacific with 25,000 angry Japanese looking at him and he paddles for over three

hours and then he sees a submarine scope and he thinks I'm dead. It's gotta be a Japanese submarine. It's an American submarine. So in a story where truth is stranger than fiction, the guy who gets away in the story becomes the President of the United States.

Sam: It's an amazing story and that kind of transitions me to your book, "Flyboys." Obviously, before "Flyboys," you wrote the iconic book, "Flags of Our Fathers." Can you tell us a little bit about why did you decide Iwo Jima back in 2002 and then we can also talk about the visit you took them back there and what that meant to you to be there with him and kind of learn from him, his first trip there since being shot down.

James: Well, let's start with "Flags of Our Fathers." Clint Eastwood and Steven Spielberg made a movie out of the book. They also call their movie "Flags of Our Fathers." And in there is a scene where the Bradley family, my family, 8 kids and 2 parents, 10 people at the table are having lunch and a 12-year-old actor who's playing me as 12 years old gets up to answer the phone. Well, the 12-year-old James Bradley, me, in the movie knows exactly what to say. It's Walter Cronkite's producers calling from New York. They would like to speak to my father about Iwo Jima and this is how the phone call went.

"I am sorry sir. He's not home. He's up in Canada fishing in his ice shack. Oh, oh no. Well sir, no, he doesn't have a telephone in his ice shack. Oh well, we don't know when it's coming back. He never tells us. He just stays up in Canada and fishes." And then they would hang up. So I was trained how to handle Iwo Jima's phone calls as a youth but my dad never talked about it. So we didn't know.

After he died, we found papers. I wrote "Flags of our Fathers" about the heroes of Iwo Jima, and after that I'm getting phone calls from every veteran in the United States telling me they've got a great story. Then Iris Chang, the great author of "The Rape of Nanking" says to me, you've got to call this guy named Bill in Iowa. He's an ex-vet, but I think you should talk to him. So I called an ex-vet in Iowa named Bill, and Bill says, "I'm 76 an ex-lawyer and I witnessed a trial when I was 20 on Guam and it was about these Japanese soldiers on Chichijima and they were beheading the fliers and eating their livers."

What? He says, "I witnessed a trial and I had to sign two papers a day saying I'd never talk about it, but then they declassified it when I was 73 so I went to Washington, found the files, and I'm telling you the truth."

So I'm thinking, well, this guy's nuts or who can get to him first. So I said, Bill, "What are you doing tomorrow?" Well, he says, "Nothing. I'm just here with

my hunting dog." So the next day I'm in his house. He picks me up at the airport and we're sitting in his kitchen table, formica-top kitchen table, two gin and tonics and a bowl of popcorn and there's a stack of paper and he said, "In these papers, this is the secret war crimes trial in Guam for the guys in Chichijima. That means the guys who were going to capture George Bush, this is what they were tried for."

I thought, just a minute, I know this. The mothers of the dead airman don't know this. This guy in Iowa is saying, "Nobody knows this. Only me. I got the papers. It's been secret." And I'm thinking, no, just a minute. George Bush was head of the CIA, President, he ran for elections, the press would have dug this up. This can't be.

I look at the documents and I've got the secrets about the Island that George Bush was bombing that he never knew. So I write to the President, I get seven letters back. "We read *Flags of Our Fathers* James, we appreciate you. My son just got elected President. We're not giving interviews to the New York Times, Reader's digest, you know, we hope you understand." So I write back and I said, "No, no, no, no. This is not about you as President. This is you getting shot down. You know, you've got to honor these guys. Mr. President. Eight guys got their heads cut off. You were going to beat the ninth, they were going to cut your head off and I've got the testimony here."

Well, I couldn't make the case through a letter. So then I'm down in Texas and we're gonna speak to 6,000 vets on Pearl Harbor Day and I'm there early and George Herbert Walker Bush flies in, the former President flies in, in a Shell oil plane. They donated the plane. And there's a huge entourage obviously, and there's a line in the museum to meet him before he goes out and speaks to 6,000 people. I was a speaker also.

So I had been in the meetings business and in the planning business, you know, putting on professional meetings for IBM and Merck, Sharp and Dohme and big companies. And I studied speakers and I knew what speakers do just before they have to go on stage. Just before you go on stage, you have to go to the men's room. So I sussed out the men's room, figured it out, do my recon, and then I put myself last in line in the reception.

George Bush is coming down, you know, nice to meet you. Nice to see you again. There's about 50 people. Every time someone got behind me, I'd say, no, no, you go first. So I was the last one.

So George Bush comes to me, I'm looking up, I'm short, he's tall. And I said, "Hey, Mr. President, James Bradley, *Flags of Our Fathers*. And he goes, "Oh." I

said, "Hey Mr. President, you need to use the head." He goes, "Yeah." So the secret service are looking at me and he's kind of welcoming me into the bathroom. I show him where it is. So we're in there, we're two guys standing at the urinal and I've rehearsed what I'm gonna say. "Mr. President, you know, where you were shot down, I was there three months ago and I talked to people who saw you shot down and I know what they were going to do with you."

Well, he doesn't say a thing. Here's this guy talking in a urinal, you know, almost nonsense. We go over and wash our hands and then I had something else to say. "You know the Bay where you were shot down, another guy from Missouri was shot down near there two months before you and he had his head cut off." Bush just wipes his hands and walks out. Not in an impolite way. He's a very polite man, but it's just like he wasn't going to address this gibberish.

Sam: So that was your first encounter in a restroom?

James: Yeah, I pitched him in a restroom. I planned it out and rehearsed it. How else am I going to get alone with the President? He just wrote me seven letters saying that he can't talk to me. So he goes on stage, gives the speech, I shake his hand one more time and I think I'm an idiot. I tried to get the President in a washroom. I mean, oh my God. About seven days later, I'm having an exciting day of a writer. I'm watching paper come out of my printer and the phone rings and I hear these words, "Hello James, this is George Bush."

And people joke about you have to stand if the President's addressing you. There was no one watching me. I was all alone in my home. I stood immediately ramrod straight, and I thought, why am I standing? The President's on the phone. You have to stand up. And then the second thing I thought was, "If the President calls you, you have to do what he says. Presidents call to get something done." So I thought he's gonna say something and then I'll say yes. So he says, "James, take me back to Chichijima, work it out with the secret service." So I said, "Yes sir." And then he gave me a date and the next day I was in the Bush Library.

Sam: What a story. So we're up to the point where you're leading him to Chichijima for the first time since he was shot down. I understand the Japanese Navy flew you over to the Island very kindly and skillfully researched and replicated the same flight pattern that my grandfather took coming into the Island. What else do you recall from that day being with him, the emotions and his first trip back?

James: Well, George Herbert Walker Bush at the age of 77/78 flies into Iwo Jima. That's where they have landing strips and we sleep overnight there. I take

him up to Mount Suribachi. We shot some footage of where they raised the flag on Iwo Jima. He's the second President to be up there. Eisenhower was the first. They had trouble with an airplane and Eisenhower went up to Mount Suribachi where they raised the flag and George Herbert Walker Bush was the second President up there.

We slept on Iwo Jima, had a banquet with the Japanese army and Navy. I mean my dad is fighting the Japanese in Iwo Jima, Bush is bombing them and then two generations later we're having banquets together. Then we get in the helicopter to go to Chichijima and they do a loop around Mount Suribachi where they raised the flag in honor of my dad. Then we chopper over to Chichijima, which is right next door and we land.

Well, the whole Island turns out. That's 2,000 people, you know, and all of a sudden Bush is standing there looking handsome in a golf shirt with a Navy flyer pin over his heart. There's 2,000 people welcoming him at Chichijima. There's women, you know, three and a half feet, four feet tall, hugging in his legs. And this hero just came here and there's just that outpouring of love for this guy.

If you read the book "Flags of Our Fathers," Commodore Perry, this is 1850s, Commodore Perry goes to Japan to open it up. Well, he stops first to Chichijima. This is the Navy's first outpost in the Pacific, Chichijima. An Admiral named Perry buys landing rights at Chichijima from a guy with the last name Savory. He's an American from Massachusetts who was running Chichijima at the time. A relative of Savory came to greet President Bush. It was just history in the making and Bush gets up at lunch and gives a speech with no notes. It should have been recorded. One of the best speeches I ever heard. And it had to be translated and he's talking to his Japanese audience.

He basically has to say, "Hey, I was trying to kill you yesterday and now I'm back here and we're talking, let's never be in that position again." And then I spent a lot of private time with him taking them up. I had been to Chichijima and done the research and I showed him the places where the flyers were buried. I showed him the radio station he was bombing. For the first time, he went in that radio station. It's overgrown with foliage now, but the walls are five-foot thick. His bombs were going to bounce off it.

Sam: Back to that fateful day when my grandfather was shot down and he lost his two crewmen. For a long time, he never talked about that. Later in life, he opened up and really talked about how the loss of his two crewmen stayed with him until the end of his life. In your experience, is that common?

James: It's individual. There was nothing common about George Bush's emotion. I'll tell you when I hit it. We were alone. It was a soft day. It was in his office, in his library, and he had his feet up on a glass table. I was seated on his couch, he was in a comfortable chair and I was interviewing him and I have my Mac computer in my lap and we're talking about the day he shot down and all the details and I'm telling him the knowledge I had and we're planning to go to Chichijima together and we're going over the details and I'm asking him follow up questions and saving it on my computer.

And then finally at the end when I'm done, he says, "James, do you have any more information about Ted White and John Delaney?" And I looked at him, he was kind of emotional and it hit me. I had seen a lot of survivor's guilt on faces. I interviewed a lot of veterans. I said, "Mr. President, I'm sorry, I do not. My information ran out a long time ago on that as I assume yours has and I'm sorry I don't have more information on your friend."

And he sits there for a minute and then he was silent for the first time I knew him. Well, I looked down to do my computer and kind of break the emotion of the moment. And I've got a satchel and you know I'm the guest in his office and I'm packing up and he stands up and I don't watch him. And then I look up after a few moments and he's standing at the window. The Texas sun is hitting this handsome guy's face and he's got one hand in one pocket so his sport coat is wrinkled like he would always stand and he's looking out into the courtyard with the sun on his face. And he said, "I think about those guys all the time."

Sam: For the most part, it wasn't about I could have done this, I could've done that. It was more about his sorrow for their loss, but also for their families and to see that side of him was pretty amazing.

James: I'd like to say though, war is hell. This guy lost friends. One of his first bombing runs, his friends just didn't come back and you're out there in the Pacific on a carrier. For you just to land on a carrier, that was one of the most dangerous things to do in World War II. George Bush was serving with the guys that got killed the most. His bunkmate sleeps in the same place with him. Just doesn't show up. You just don't know. And you've got a pack his toothbrush and then write a letter to his parents and put it in a box and then someone picks the box up and that's the end of that guy. So that's the environment Bush was out in. He loses two buddies through no fault of his own. It's documented.

I mean "Flags of Our Fathers" after it came out, I got so many letters from older women now. They're daughters of Iwo Jima veterans, but they're in their 40s and 50s now. Now I know why my dad shot himself to death in the garage. I

wrote "Flyboys." Eight flyboys got their heads cut off. The government didn't tell the mothers. The mothers went to their graves wondering what happened to their boys. Two of these mothers were in psychiatric hospitals. I went down to Texas and opened the trunk of one of the mother's. Dusty trunk. Right on top was her wallet. Well, what do you have in your wallet? You have your identification. I open up her wallet. She had been dead for eight years. The first thing in her wallet is the picture of her boy who didn't come back.

Sam: I'd be remiss not to ask about his better half, my grandmother. If she was here, she'd be kicking me saying, "Enough about him. Let's talk about me." But can you talk a little bit about, not necessarily my grandmother, but about Americans during this time? Obviously the men going to fight. We're in one mindset, but what about the people who are behind, the people staying at home? People like my grandmother or your mother. What was the mindset for those people?

James: Well, I met Barbara Bush. I've eaten at her kitchen tables in Kennebunkport and Houston, and we've flown together in planes had been together a number of times, spoken on the same stages, been at banquets, and I'll tell you a story about Barbara Bush. I fly down to Texas. I'm going to meet the President for the first time tomorrow and at 5 pm today I get a call from someone saying Barbara Bush, can she come over and speak with you?

So Mrs. Bush comes over and looks me in the eye and checks me out in various ways. Very interesting. And then we're saying goodbye after my interrogation session, I guess I passed and I was going to meet the President the next day and she looked at me and she said, "Tomorrow you'll discover that George Bush is the nicest man in the world." But she could say it. You know, it wasn't braggadocio, it wasn't like you're going to meet this guy. He's not so great. It's like, James, I just want to tell you a fact. You know, tomorrow you're going to meet a guy and then you're gonna know him for years, and then you're going to think he's the most wonderful guy in the world. That's just the way he is.

Sam: As you know, this podcast is called, "All the Best." My grandfather, a prolific letter writer throughout his entire life used to sign off on many of his letters, "All the best. George Bush." Given your great relationship over the years, I'm sure you've received a letter or two in your day. Would you mind telling us about them?

James: Well, I received a number of beautifully handwritten letters from the President. It's true. He would always say, "All the best." And I've come to think that really he didn't realize it, but what he was describing was himself. My experience with the man, George Herbert Walker Bush, was that from the first

moment I met him until I saw him just a year before his death, so I knew him from 2002 to 2018 and this was all the best. This was a great man in my eyes.

Sam: That's amazing. Well, James, thank you so much for sharing all this. I want to end by talking about what you're doing currently in Vietnam. I know you are also working on a podcast because we'd love to hear about what you've got going on currently.

James: Well, it's called "Untold Pacific." I went to University in Japan in 1974. Now it's 2019 and I'm in Vietnam, but I've traveled almost every Island in the Pacific. I've walked in the boot steps of General MacArthur in New Guinea, been all over Australia. I've interviewed hundreds of Vietnam veterans. I wrote two books about China, Taiwan, Okinawa, Japan. So I've been out in Asia and I've got a podcast series called, "Untold Pacific" and every episode takes an American who crossed the Pacific to go into Asia and we learn a lot of fun facts. One of these will be about George Herbert Walker Bush.

Sam: Well James, thank you so much for preserving these important moments in our nation's history and for further generations to learn about the bravery and resolve of the greatest generation. Thank you so much, James.

James: Thanks for having me. And then, I'd recommend if anybody doesn't have time to read a book about George Bush, just to remember that he was all of the best.

Sam: I'm Sam LeBlond, reminding you to listen, share and subscribe to "All the Best" on Apple Podcasts, Spotify and everywhere great podcasts are found. Thank you for joining me as we celebrate All the Best.

Yeah, we're one big country nation, that's right.

Barbara: Both George and I believe that while the White House is important, the country's future is in your house. Every house, all over America.

George: Preparedness, strength, decency and honor, courage, sacrifice, the willingness to fight, even die for one's country. America, the land of the free and the brave. And God bless the United States of America, the greatest country on the face of the earth.