

Vietnam on Tape

Episode 2: "Little Groups of Neighbors" (20:46)

[Sound effects of driving around ranch]

When I went out to visit Jim Kearney at his ranch in Columbus, Texas, we started by walking and driving around the place. We crossed an old road, where the wheels of wagons cut deep ruts into the earth. That was around the time of the Mexican-American War, in the 1840s.

[Sound effects of driving around ranch]

Evan: We also passed a bunch of truly majestic old Live Oak trees. Jim and his brother used to climb way high up into those Live Oaks when they were kids. Jim told me it felt like they were birds.

Then Jim and I went back up to the house. Jim had set out a few things he'd saved from his time with the Army in Vietnam. There were letters, and some pictures. He showed me the [leather] bag that contained the equipment he used as a combat medic.

There was an old shirt of his, with a bullet hole in it.

Jim handed me a typed letter signed a Methodist preacher. He had known Jim as a young man in Columbus. It was dated May 17, 1969.

The paper itself was extremely thin and I was nervous to touch it. But the words drew me in.

The letter was addressed to the Chairman of Texas Local Board #44, Mr. Sam K. Seymour The Third ... in 1969, I realized, Seymour would have been the chair of the local draft board.

Here's what it said:

Evan [reading]: "After several hours of extended conversation with Jim Kearney, I am convinced that his belief in God and his convictions as to how to serve best the cause of humanity and of his country are credible. Jim chooses not to fire a gun or drop a bomb; but he is willing to serve what he believes to be the best interests of

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his country and of humanity by relieving the suffering of wounded men as a non-combatant (1-A-O) in medical service.”

The preacher's letter was a form of support for Jim to be allowed to enter the Army as a non-combatant conscientious objector.

The local draft board held Jim’s fate in its hands.

(2:00)

[Tape recording: Helicopter chatter]

[Music]

I’m Evan Windham.

From the Bullock Museum, this is Vietnam on Tape — a Texas Story Podcast.

Before we get any further, I need to let you know that this podcast does contain vivid descriptions of war, audio of military combat, and strong language — so it may not be appropriate for some listeners.

By the time Jim Kearney was drafted in 1969, he’d become firmly opposed to the war. On moral grounds.

[Jim:]“I thought that what we were doing over there — it was absolutely reprehensible, and I just wasn’t going to participate in it.”]

Evan: Jim had an offer from a Canadian university that would have allowed him to leave the U.S. for graduate school.

But Jim also had a deep connection to the land where he grew up, in Columbus, Texas. And a sense of duty.

He requested Form 154 for Conscientious Objectors from his local draft board.

[Music]

Conscientious objection was recognized by the Continental Congress early in the American Revolution. But until a Supreme Court ruling in 1965, conscientious objection was only recognized based on religious motives.

The 1965 Supreme Court ruling opened the door for draftees like Jim to make a case on moral and ethical grounds.

Jim didn't really think he had much chance of success. But filled out the form. And he gathered supporting documents — like the letter from the preacher.

To his surprise, Jim's request was approved.

Jim felt the Army had heard him. That they'd offered him a fair deal.

So he said no to Canada. Yes to the Army.

Jim: In my mind, I had said, "We've struck a bargain. And I'm going to live up to my share of it."

Woman: That bargain actually began during the World War II era.

Evan: Jean Mansavage. She's a military historian working for the Department of Defense. We heard from her in our first episode — her dissertation focused on Conscientious Objectors.

Jean: In 1943, Secretary of War Stimson actually restricted non-combatants to the medical corps to encourage them to choose joining the military. These men would still be members of the military; they would still receive pay and GI benefits. So it was a bargain.

These individuals could adhere to their conscience, not carry weapons — not kill — and still be allowed to serve in the military and fulfill their responsibility as a citizen.

Evan: Almost all of them trained in Texas.

Jean: 98 percent of all non-combatant conscientious objectors trained at the Medical Training Center at Fort Sam Houston.

Evan: Fort Sam, for short — the big military base in San Antonio.

Jean: The commander at Fort Sam, Colonel Charles Pixley, he estimated that between 6 and 8 percent of all individual draftees who came through the Medical Training Center were non-combatant conscientious objectors.

Many of them came from a long line of military officers, with parents or grandparents who had gone to the military service academies. And they believed wholeheartedly that the military had a right to exist, and that it served a very fundamental purpose in the country.

Their personal beliefs simply did not permit them to carry weapons, and kill in war.

Evan: So ... Jean Mansavage has never met Jim Kearney in person.

But the more she and I talked on the phone, the more Jean just about perfectly described Jim's situation that summer of 1969.

Evan: When Jim got his draft notice, it came from the Selective Service, a federal agency. But his fate was really in the hands of a few of his neighbors.

Especially Mr. Sam K. Seymour.

Jim: There was a kind of boss of Colorado County, Mr. Sam K. Seymour. He was head of the draft board. He was head of the Democratic Party. He owned the savings and loan. He owned the lumberyard. He was the announcer at the football game.

[Recording of phone call between Evan and Jean] Evan: You know, talking about the board - the local board ... Could you shed a little bit of light on what that process was like for Conscientious Objector Status?

Jean: Sure. All young men 18 to 26 had to register when they turned 18 and within a couple of months the Selective Service would send a classification questionnaire to determine what their draft status was going to be. Because there were all sorts of other deferments that individuals could get if people were still of high-school age or they were in college or if they had dependents or they worked in agriculture. There were a whole host of other deferment other than conscientious objection. So there was one part of that form that asked about conscientious objection. They had to fill that part out and then they would get a form from the Selective Service

System, another one, that asked for them to explain their pacifist belief systems. Then the local board would review all this information and either grant or deny whatever classification it was and if the local board just by the paperwork didn't want to grant the status, a young man could ask for a personal hearing before his local board. He'd be able to explain himself in person, take a witness, take more documentation, to prove that he lived his pacifist belief system. And then the local board could either grant or deny the status. And if they denied the status, it could go into a whole series of Appeal processes.

The local draft boards are the really the linchpin in all this. Lewis Hersey, who is the director of the Selective Service System from 1940 until 1970, referred to the local boards as "little groups of neighbors." So this was really an attempt to allow local control over what young men were sent to war because they felt that those local boards best knew their local populations and who were genuine about their beliefs or truly had dependents or were actually in school. They had kind of their finger on the pulse.

But the problem is these guys were primarily World War one or two vets they were highly patriotic men who served in the military. And they may or may not have believed in someone's rights of conscience.

Jim: When I was a junior in high school I worked for Mr. Sam in his lumber yard. He was a commander of the Veterans of Foreign War in Columbus he had been in the Rainbow Division in World War I. So that's all I can think about you know he just granted it I mean the board did what he told them to do.

(08:45)

Evan: Jim Kearney had been offered a bargain. He accepted it. He was inducted into the United States Army. He was abducted into the Army as a 1-A-O Conscientious Objector.

Jim reported for basic training at Fort Sam in San Antonio. There he was assigned to train with a group of other Conscientious Objectors — called “C.O.s” for short.

All would be trained as combat medics.

None would be trained to carry weapons.

Man: A lot of people, nowadays, don't even understand. I try to explain it to people, and they say, "You're crazy! You mean you were in Vietnam without a gun?"

Evan: That's Bill Clamurro.

Bill and Jim met in basic training at Fort Sam that summer. They've been friends ever since.

They've done a lot of things in their lives, but only recently have they begun trying to come to terms with the history they share, and that few remember today: The story of close to 15 thousand conscientious objectors who served in Vietnam.

[Sound effects of driving around in a car]

Bill recently flew to Texas to visit Jim.

They invited me to join them on a trip to San Antonio, where they'd gone through basic training together, at Fort Sam Houston. Security was tight. But as we drove around base, Jim recognized a spot where he used to hide a car. He and Bill used it on their days off to get back out to the ranch.

A big part of our trip to San Antonio was to meet up with another veteran. Fred Ervin. He was in the same training class as Jim and Bill in 1969.

Jim had tracked Fred down thanks to a scrap of paper he'd rediscovered in his Vietnam memorabilia: His Fort Sam class roster from 1969.

We planned to meet Fred at the East End Church of God in Christ. Today, Fred's the pastor there. His church stands right across from Fort Sam Houston.

It was the first time the three of them had seen each other since basic training at Fort Sam — half a century before.

Jim: "Hello Fred? It's Jim. We're outside your church."

Evan: Within seconds, Fred appeared in the door.

[Sound of people walking outside, a door opens]

Man: Hey! Man oh man oh man! Ha! This is something else.

Bill: Do you remember me Fred?

Fred: Yes I do! It's gotta be 50 years. Wow — this is something else! I don't believe it.

Evan: Fred invited us into the Fellowship Hall.

Fred: You guys have a seat.

Jim: Thanks!

[Chair noise]

Evan: He brought out a kind of old yearbook, and started paging through it.

Fred: It says class list right there. See right there?

Jim: Company D, Third Battalion. That was it.

Fred: That's it!

[Paper turning]

Fred: The truth about this, I don't visit this very much, because for me it was a bad thought. But the best thought was that I came back alive. As a matter of fact, WE came back alive.

[Paper turning]

Jim: Have you thought of any of our old classmates? You were commander, and I was vice-commander. We bunked together. We had to make up rosters for guard duty ... we were supposed to keep the guys in line. We had a couple of troublemakers.

Fred: We did!

Jim: These guys weren't all meek, just cause they were C.O.s

Fred: Oh no. Oh no they weren't!"

[Paper turning]

Jim: Could I ask you, how did you come to be a conscientious objector?

Fred: It's through my church — my dad, a pastor. I'd rather be a life preserver than a life destroyer.

Listening to them talk in Fred's church, it really brought home for me what a deep and life-changing choice it was for all of these men to enter the military as conscientious objectors.

In 1969, Fred, Jim and Bill all had strong moral objections to the war in Vietnam. For Fred, those objections grew out of his religious background.

For each of them, their moral code included a strong sense of responsibility and duty. And for that, they put their lives on the line.

Fred: I really trusted my life to my country. I had nothing to protect me — I'm giving my life to my country.

Jim: Yeah.

Bill: It's a special kind of patriotism.

Fred: That it is.

Bill: Some people think you're only patriotic if you carry a gun and fight other people. But there's another kind of patriotism — it's sacrifice.

Fred: That's the part. Our heart was in it. Our soul was in it. Our mind was in it. We put ourself IN IT, to do a job for our country. We didn't hold anything back, cause what you have is your life. And if you trust that, what else can you give? And that's what we did.

As we sat in the church looking at Fred's scrapbook, Jim thought back to the day at Fort Sam when they were all convened for graduation. They'd had 16 weeks of training. Now it was time to get their orders to deploy.

Jim: They had a parade formation. And we marched out company by company. And they read our orders, or they handed us our orders. And all of us who were

C.O.s, to a man, went to Vietnam. And a lot of the others from the other companies went to Germany or they went stateside. But all of us went to Vietnam.

(14:22)

Evan: Where there was combat, the military needed its medics.

Fred was deployed to an Infantry unit in Vietnam.

Bill went to a tank unit — a bit of a lucky break, since tanks were pretty much useless in the mud of Vietnam.

At first Jim was attached to an artillery unit. Then he was transferred to the 35th infantry division during the invasion of Cambodia.

Finally, he was posted to a Medevac unit with the 1st Air Cavalry. They were headquartered at Phuoc Vinh — far forward in the combat zone.

For medics with just 16 weeks of training, it was trial by fire.

Jim: A lot of people, we would sew people up. We were prescribing shots, what today only a doctor can do, thyroidectomy or starting IVs. I mean we learn by doing. I think I simply watch and sew myself somebody else got a needle thread and do it yourself.

Evan: Fred, Jim, and Bill were officially designated as 1-A-O conscientious objectors. They did not carry weapons. So for them, armed self-defense was NOT an option.

And there was an apparent contradiction — a built-in tension — between the mission of soldiers in Vietnam, and the mission of C.O. combat medics.

Bill described it to me as two different kinds of patriotism.

Bill: As one medical doctor, one of the officers, put it, “We always confront the enemy that is death. We’re always trying to defeat death.”

“The soldier’s mission is to create death, is to kill if necessary. The medic’s mission is to prevent death.

The 1-A-O is there without weapons, and knowing that he might not be able to defend himself. All of the soldiers are making sacrifices of course, cause they're all in danger. But the 1-A-O medic, the non-combatant medic, adds to that by already relinquishing, renouncing self-defense.

Evan: The bargain the military made with its conscientious objectors dictated that no commanding officer could order you to take up arms.

Not that it never happened ...

Despite the occasional test of wills, Jim says his conscientious objector status was largely respected during his tour of duty in Vietnam. And as these three men proved themselves in the field, they found they became valued members of the units they served.

As Jim recalls, though, it didn't work out that way for every combat medic.

Jim: If you made it through that early trial by fire ... that's when you really had the respect of your people, and they would take care of you.

Fred: That's so true. I had a situation where, as one company said, 'We not going anywhere without the medic. You can't go, we not going.' I was treated very, very, very well.

Evan: Jim, Fred and Bill talked in the church for almost an hour and a half.

I had a bunch of questions I was going to ask ... but they really got rolling. So I just sat and listened as they traded story after story.

Some were grim. Some absurd — even made them laugh.

At a certain point, though, Jim and Bill and Fred began to feel the weight of their shared history in Vietnam. The weight of revisiting vivid, traumatic events. And trying to make some sense of it all, 50 years later.

It was time to put away Fred's scrapbook.

Fred: A lot of that information that was ingrained, is washed out!

Jim: Yeah.

Fred: You know, you kind of bypass it. I mean right now I can't watch movies — they just made me feel real terrible. I mean I look through this here, and this gave me a BAD feeling.

Jim I mean, you know, and Bill knows, you meet people who were never able to put Vietnam behind them.

Fred: Yes.

Jim: And it really became destructive in their life. And I think that's true — that's the unspoken cost of a lot of wars, that people don't know how it can wreck 'em. But for me, I made the decision that I wasn't going to let it dominate my life. I was going to put it behind me.

Fred Yes sir.

Jim: But you suddenly reach a point where I feel like I DO have to come to terms with that experience. At some point, you've got to look at the skeletons in the closet.

Fred Oh yeah.

(18:40)

[Music]

Evan: In our next episode of Vietnam on Tape, we'll hear from a retired Colonel who flew Medevac missions in Vietnam, and relied on medics like Jim Kearney.

Man: The medics on the battlefield were at what we call outside the wire they've happened the fields with the soldiers only they did not carry a weapon and they would just carry their medical supplies they were very courageous members of the combat team.

Evan: This Texas Story Podcast is produced by the Bullock Museum in downtown Austin. We tell stories through people, places, and original artifacts, so everything we do is because of people like you who help keep Texas history and culture alive.

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This podcast episode is no exception and we'd like to thank Jim Kearney, Jean Mansavage, Bill Clamurro, and Fred Ervin for being a part of it.

This episode was edited and mixed by David Schulman.

Visit us online at the story of Texas dot com, where you can also share your Texas story in the Texas Story Project. It could be the next season of our podcast. And if you're ever in Austin, be sure to stop by and visit the Bullock Museum.

For Vietnam on Tape, I'm Evan Windham.

[Music]
