

Vietnam on Tape

Episode 4: "Hot Hoist"(20:12)

[Tape recording: Helicopter chatter]

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

I'm Evan Windham.

Jim: "Let me tell you, this is fundamentally a Texas story."

Evan: It is. When you talk about the Conscientious Objectors who served in Vietnam, San Antonio Texas is ground zero.

Most of the Army's combat medics were trained there at Fort Sam Houston, in San Antonio.

Combat medics like Jim Kearney.

Jim: All these COs go through, are funneled through Fort Sam Houston.

After Jim shipped out to Vietnam, he kept in touch with his new friend Bill Clamurro, another Conscientious Objector. They met in training at Fort Sam. They became lifelong friends, despite their different backgrounds.

Jim grew up riding horses on his Texas ranch. Bill was a wisecracking northerner like in the movies.

Jim: The thing that struck me about Bill is that — first of all, he had an amazing resemblance to Groucho Marx. And I was a bit of a Groucho Marx fan.

Bill: I just looked like it with the cigar and the mustache. They weren't very good cigars.

That's Bill Clamurro.

Bill's Groucho Marx impersonation was so good that some people quit using his real name. They just called him "Groucho."

Bill: One time when I had left battalion HQ and gone out to the field, they wanted to call me back for a special assignment. And no one knew my real name. They said, 'Where's Groucho?' Unfortunately, they found me."

At first, Bill and Jim were posted as unarmed combat medics to different locations. Bill was assigned to a tank unit. Jim to an artillery unit.

Bill: We went to Vietnam in different units, and we only came back together by pure accident, when we were both assigned to the 15th Medical Battalion for the last couple of months.

Evan: That was at a camp about 45 miles from Saigon, at Phuoc Vinh.

Bill: It was basically a base camp unit — a MASH unit. It didn't go out to the field that much, unless some of the medics were on the Medevacs.

Jim: When he was on duty in the aid station I would go over there and hang out with him we would play chess and drink beer. And when he had some time off they they did show movies outdoors. We had some kind of little projector, and we sat on old helicopter blades and watched movies together, and just hung out.

Evan: By then Jim and Bill were seasoned medics. They knew they'd only have a few more months in Vietnam.

Bill: We were all on a kind of a count down. You were only there for 12 months, more or less — you weren't there for the duration. Jim, he had a zest for adventure. He really should NOT have volunteered to be a Medevac medic, because he was too close to the time he was supposed to leave. But he did it anyway, because there was something heroic about Jim.

Evan: For 50 years Bill and Jim have stayed in touch. When Bill recently came out to Jim's ranch for a visit, they invited me over .

Hanging out at the ranch with them, I think these guys would've been friends no matter what.

But their friendship was really sealed one day in January 1971....after what turned out to be Jim's last mission as a combat medic.

It was aboard a Medevac helicopter.

It was a mission that, rather incredibly, was captured on Jim's cassette tape recorder. That recording has survived. And, fifty years later, Jim dropped off a copy here at the Bullock Museum in Austin — starting a cascade of events that became the focus of this Texas Story Podcast, Vietnam on Tape.

In prior episodes we've heard snippets of this truly amazing recording.

During the next few minutes of this episode, though, we're going to hear it at length. We're going to hear the action. We're going to hear Jim narrate what happened on that fateful mission in Vietnam — as we listen to the 50-year-old audio he recorded.

And I do need to warn you in advance — this is intense stuff, with strong language, vivid descriptions of war, and scenes of violence heard as they unfolded. It may not be appropriate for some listeners.

So if you or others around you are uncertain, now is the time to pause your podcast player.

(04:03)

Jim: Our motto was, 'So that others may live.' The unit was very interesting, the 15th Med, because it was all volunteer — in other words, they didn't accept green medics or green pilots and so we had the best of the best.

And as much as I really despised the war, I got, somehow, so involved in this whole business of being part of this team, I actually extended my tour of duty voluntarily by two months.”

“I had four days left in country and 8 days left in the Army. And I am not on duty We had 4 helicopters and 4 crews and the first step would take the first mission that came down the pipe, second up would be in support of them if they needed backup and third up usually back hauled patients to the surgical hospital in Saigon and then fourth up you were off. So I was not on duty when this mission came down. I was thinking about hat I would soon be going back to 'the world' as we called it, back home.

I was sitting outside my new cassette tape recorder, I was not in uniform and as luck had it, crews 1,2, 3 already out on missions. They had a call in to try to put together a mission, they asked for volunteers so I said "ok" you know, "I'll do it." And I had my little cassette recorder with me so I just stuck my microphone, my cassette recorder into a helmet and out some gauze around it, plugged it into intercom and turned it on and off we went.

[Helicopter sound]

“And off we went ... and we heard it would probably be a tough mission ...

[Intercom: “Medevac 1-9. Do you want to use napalm?”]

“It began with a helicopter being shot down, and a special crew called the Blues who went in to try to rescue pilot and co-pilot. They were ambushed, and took injuries including a sucking chest wound — very critical.”

[Intercom: “The guy’s got a real bad bleed ... do you have blood aboard?”]

“THis action only 4 kilometers from base camp ... we flew out ...I’m in jeans ... had difficulty finding the place so finally they put up smoke.”

[Intercom: “what color smoke do you have? Goofy color.”]

“Goofy Grape is what they called it on the tape ...”

[Intercom: “Anybody see any smoke? Come back to 8 o’clock position, Dave, I think I saw some goofy grape.... Got it.”]

“This mission was in triple-canopy jungle. The pilot had to maneuver down through trees 200 feet high. And had to do it blind — he had to be talked down ...”

[Intercom: “Little bit left ... bring it on down about another 25 feet.”]

“He’s listening to crew members ...”

[Intercom: “Bring it on down.... If we see any muzzle flashes, we’re going to fire, right? No, don’t fire unless they’re coming at us — they might be friendlies. OK.”]

“This procedure is called a ‘hot hoist,’ and it is the most dangerous mission you can perform do as a medieval helicopter, because you are so vulnerable.”

[Intercom: “Understand you are the man on the ground? Affirmative ... in case we have to return some fire.”]

“As we came down, we could see American’s lying about behind trees ... Coming down, we’d heard fire — and you can hear that distinctly on the tape, machine gun fire.”

[“We’re taking fire, man! No, we’re not taking fire — they are re-conning by fire. Alright.... Be real calm gentlemen ... you’re doing fine on the left ... another 10 feet, and you’ll be over the hole ...real fine.”]

“At first we hovered about 50 feet above the ground, and saw the wounded person below.

[Intercom: “OK, Kearney, have you got him in sight over there?”]

I threw a litter down ... and then I leaned out the hoist and started running cable down ... I was kneeling in the helicopter with one hand up on this hoist ... we flew with doors open on these helicopters, a big bay door, and I’m bracing myself ... kneeling at the edge, guiding this cable down. And that’s when I saw the guy shooting up diagonally from the ground, straight at us with a machine gun.”

[Machine gun sounds]

I could see the rounds coming at me, something about the light was just right.

“Most Dustoff helicopters were not armed, but we were. And my gunner started like an old Wild West shootout with the North Vietnamese gunner on the ground at point-blank range. They started a real firefight — you can hear all the machine gun chatter. And in the space of a few seconds, we took umpteen rounds in the helicopter.”

[Machine gun sounds. Intercom: “Kearney’s been hit! Something hit me — I don’t know what the fuck it was. Oh, God damn.” Machine gun sounds. “We’re takin’ hits. Kearney got hit. I’m hit in the foot, and in the right upper leg.” Machine gun sounds]

I was hit in three places, and my gunner was also hit. But he had on his armor plating, which saved his life.

[Intercom: “Did you get any hits, Kramer? [unintelligible] OK. God damn it!”]

There was a lot of confusion, because one of the rounds hit a bean can which had been clipped to his M-60 machine gun to help feed the ammo, with the result that the bean can exploded and sent beans all over everybody. And at first we didn’t understand what that was. I thought it was somebody’s brains.

[Intercom: “I don’t think I got a direct hit, I think it’s a ricochet — oh there, it came through the floor and hit me.”]

So there was a lot of confusion. And then the pilot is not able to see, and he's having to control the helicopter and trying too figure out what's going on. But he obviously hears the rounds tearing into the helicopter. You hit the compression chamber of the turbine on a Huey, and it'll bring it down.

He tells us to be calm, and starts trying to get the helicopter out of the hole before we take a round that'll bring the helicopter down.

[Intercom: "Climb, Dave, climb — I'm gonna take a look at these guys... I ain't bleeding too bad, but I'm hit in the arm, the leg, and the foot... How bad are you hurt, partner? I don't know. I might live, I might not. If I don't, tell my parents I love 'em... I always wondered what it's like to get shot; now I know. It hurts like hell]

We got up out of there, we were only 4-5 kilometers from our base camp. Luckily, we were able to fly the helicopter all the way back to the base camp before all the oil ran out of the transmission. It's a good thing that didn't happen, because if the transmission had seized up, we'd have gone down like a rock.

[Helicopter sound]

The helicopter they told me later was completely junked. All the oil had run out of the transmission, and all the bearings were red-hot, about to melt.

[Helicopter sound]

But luckily it continued to fly with all those bullet holes in it.

[Intercom: "And you're down" "Bird on my pad, bird on my pad, this is medievac hotel.]

And it landed at the aid station and I hopped out. And my friend gave me a cold beer.

(13:28)

That friend was Bill Clamurro.

Bill: I was in the office as the admissions and dispositions clerk, we heard what was going on, we were all listening to the radio reports we heard that Jim's helicopter had been damaged. So we were waiting for it to arrive. Beyond the office was the place where the doctors worked immediately on the first bay. And then beyond that was a door. I went out into the open where it was a helicopter pad. So we were ready and I went through the treatment area out the back door to wait for the helicopter to land. Amazingly, when he got out, he was able to hop on the foot that wasn't injured. He hopped over, like a rabbit, on one foot. I had my clipboard, and I brought him a can of beer. It might probably just a generic beer like a Miller or Budweiser.

There was a great sense of relief and happiness he was alive. Later, he said he was in such a supercharged state of adrenaline that he didn't feel that much pain. The pain would come later, of course.

Evan: Off the Medevac helicopter, in the aid station, it was possible to assess the extent of Jim's injuries.

Jim: The one round went through the floor of the helicopter. It entered my foot at the top of my foot — I actually have that bullet. And another round went up my thigh and laid it open about an inch deep all the way but never got into any bone or anything. So just laid open that muscle all the way, there's a scar from here to here. A third round went through the flesh of my arm. I have my shirt, and you can see the bullet hole in the shirt."

Evan: When I went to visit him on his ranch, Jim showed me that shirt with the bullet hole.

Evan: Unlike most of the men he treated during his time in Vietnam, Jim was equipped to view his own wounds with a clinical eye. He could see in moments what they likely meant for his future.

Jim: I'm a seasoned medic at this point. And I look at my wounds, and I realize I'm not hurt ... badly. You know, if I'd been one foot over kneeling in the helicopter, those rounds woulda hit me in the stomach and gut. And I wouldn't be here right now. So I was almost ecstatic.

[Music]

(15:43)

Evan: There was a flurry of activity. Jim was strapped into a litter. He was loaded onto another helicopter for evacuation to a farther south.

Jim: This sense of euphoria is still over me. But then, all of a sudden, I become very paranoid. I'm confined to this stretcher and they put me on this helicopter with some other people and they're sitting there and I'm feeling really very vulnerable. Somebody said, 'Uh-oh,, we're under mortar attack.' And I'm freaked out, really. You know, I made it this far and here I am, strapped in this stupid litter on this helicopter. But finally they take off and we get out of there

It's only about a 20-minute flight to Long Bin in Saigon — this huge military installation the main base of the army in south Vietnam. They take me to the 25th surgical hospital. And then at that point they give me morphine.”

[Music]

I'd never had morphine before or for that matter any kind of narcotic. And I can still remember the pain just dissipating,t just like that. And then all of a sudden I could see the huge live oak tree in the backyard of the house I grew up.”

[Music]

I could see the bark and the texture of this ancient live oak tree, patriarchal live oak tree, that is enormous and hundreds of years old.

[Music]

That that vision was so vivid that I can still recall it today. And then I just dropped off in sleep you know.”

Evan: Besides his bullet-torn shirt, Jim saved the actual bullet a surgeon removed from his foot. He also held onto another souvenir: a monochrome photograph showing him in his hospital bed in Saigon. Standing by the bedside is General George Washington Putnam, who commanded the 1st Air Cavalry division.

Jim: The general came around the next day to give me my distinguished flying cross and purple heart. I was still under the influence of morphine. They kinda propped me up like a deer or something — and you can kinda see it in the photo. I’m kinda cross-eyed. They pinned the medal on me and took a picture with a Polaroid camera, and off they went.

[Music]

Evan: In our next episode of Vietnam on Tape, Jim returns home and we trace his decades-long journey of reflection and reconnection.

Jim: It's a very intense experience, you know, in the camaraderie of working in these extreme situations. You look back on that actually with a kind of weird nostalgia.

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. This podcast episode is no exception and we'd like to thank Jim Kearney and Bill Clamurro 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]
