

Vietnam on Tape

Episode 5: "Reckoning and Reunion" (17:42)

[Helicopter chatter]

Evan: In November of 1970 medic Jim Kearney extended his tour of duty in Vietnam.

Jim: As much as I really despised the war I got somehow so involved in this whole business of being part of this team that actually extended my tour of duty voluntarily.

Evan: Jim had four days left in country when he volunteered for a medevac mission. The helicopter came under fire Jim was wounded amazingly this mission Jim Kerr nice last mission as a combat medic was captured on his cassette tape recorder. The recording survived. The mission ended Jim's time in Vietnam. But it marked a new face in Jim's Vietnam experience.

[Music]

Evan: I'm Evan Windham.

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

A lot happened very fast on the day medic Jim Kearney was wounded.

From basecamp at Phuoc Vinh, Jim was flown to the big medical center in Saigon.

It was the start of months of recovery at military hospitals.

Jim: February to June I'm in various hospitals. They shipped me to Camp Yama, Japan which was a big military hospital there. And then they put you all these huge cargo planes and they suspend the litters from the ceiling down, so you're hanging in the bay. These things are creaking and groaning and they take off and the wheels come up into the bay, I mean, these things are enormous. And they land someplace in California then they were gonna fly us on to Fort Sam and this thing takes off down the runway and all of a sudden comes screeching to halt and we're all swinging in these litters. And I said "holy cow," you know, "I've made it this far and this thing's gonna crash." So they couldn't take off so they put us in a hospital

there in California and they had an earthquake that night and the whole building starts shaking I say "holy cow maybe this building is gonna fall on me."

Evan: After all that, Jim returned to Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas.

Jim: Finally I get out of there and get back to Texas. But they were over crowded at Fort Sam so they put us in a building called Beach Pavilion, and it was so such a misnomer, I mean there were no beaches around and it damn sure wasn't a pavilion. It was a building that was built in the 1870s when Custer was there at Fort Sam. They didn't have a room or a place to put me so they put me and a lot of other people, we were out in the hall.

Evan: In Vietnam, as his friend and fellow conscientious objector Bill Clamurro remembers, Jim Kearney was a model medic

Bill: There was just something heroic about Jim.

Evan: But after long stays in military hospitals, though, it was back at Fort Sam where Jim reached his breaking point.

Jim: I just sat there for a couple of months until they finally scheduled me for a surgery to do my foot and sew up my leg. And by this time I was pretty sick of this man's army, I can tell you that. And I just wanted out.

Evan: By the time Jim was discharged Bill had returned home.

Jim: We celebrated our both of us being out of the Army by taking a over a month-long trip to Mexico together.

Evan: Jim set about building a new way of life. He reconnected with the ranch where he grew up. Jim and his wife raised a family on that land. Jim became a high school German teacher.

Jim and Bill's friendship also endured.

Jim: We have met at least once every year for the last however many years it's been, over 40 years I guess. And you know he said godfather to one of my children.

Evan: Both Jim and Bill received their doctorates both went on to teach at university level. And Jim started writing and publishing books on Texas History.

Until quite recently, though, the history Jim had NOT delved into was the one that he lived: His experience as conscientious objector combat medic in Vietnam.

It was an experience shared by around 15,000 1-A-O conscientious objectors. These CO's served in noncombatant roles refusing to carry a weapon based on religious training and beliefs or deeply held ethical rationale.

Now in his 70s, Jim and Bill are writing about their time in Vietnam, collaborating on a book together. And they started reconnecting with veterans they served with like Fred Ervin, a fellow CO they met in basic training. Jim, Bill and Fred spent an afternoon together sharing stories and souvenirs.

(06:07)

Jim had spoken to me about attempts at reconnecting over the years. He had attended a reunion for the 15th Medical Battalion many years ago and had brief stints of being involved with veterans organizations. But he told me about a sense of awkwardness that came with that.

Jim: It's an alternative narrative from A to Z for us. That's part of the dilemma of being a conscientious objector. I don't deny it but I don't advertise it either.

Evan: But Jim did attend the 2019 reunion for the 15th Medical Battalion in San Antonio, Texas. And at the reunion, he reconnected with retired Colonel Greg Simpson, the aircraft commander on the mission he has on tape.

I talked with Greg Simpson after the reunion. At that point, I'd spent weeks with Bill and Jim. I knew about Jim's time in various hospitals and I knew how Jim's life had unfolded. I asked Greg to describe the mission from his perspective. What happened after Jim was wounded?

Greg: So we shut the helicopter down and left it. It was completely out of service because of many hits. And we literally ran and, I mean as fast as we could, run from the hospital pad to a different helicopter. And my whole crew - minus Kearney we had another medic by this time, we did a scramble departure and went right back out to where the soldier in the field needed to be evacuated because we didn't get him. We did not get him. And we went right back out the enemy had departed the area or they had been terminated, we received no enemy fire at all on the second part of the mission, and we successfully evacuated the patient. Picked him up and brought him back to the same place where we brought Kearney.

Evan: The wounded soldier lived. Jim was awarded his Distinguished Flying Cross for that mission. The other members of the crew were as well. But in the flurry of the day's action, that was the last time Greg and Jim saw each other for a half a century.

Greg: I wish I could look you straight in the eye and tell you this so you could see my eyes and know that I'm telling you the truth. I thought about him for 50 years. I thought about him so many times. Because I never knew what happened to him.

When I got back from this mission that we were on I went to go see--I wanted to see how he was. All I know is he's had been hit three times in the chaos of that battle and the folks at the hospital, at the emergency room we'll call it, at our base camp said "No Kearney, he's been gone for about an hour. We treated him and squared him away but we had to evacuate him for the south." When they'd have to evacuate you in a hurry a lot of times, not always but a lot of times, it means somebody's really hurt badly so you know I did everything I needed to do to try to find out where he was so I could check up on him but I couldn't find--nobody knew. Once he was sent wherever he went I lost contact with him so I never heard from him.

A few years after, I don't know when, we had our first reunion. We started having reunions and he wasn't at any. He wasn't at the one that I went to. Then I went to another one and he wasn't at that one. So I just lost track. And I called a couple of two or three of my friends that I kept up with all these years and nobody knew what ever happened to Kearney. Everybody knew Kearney but nobody knew what happened to him. Did he have his arm amputated? Did he have a leg amputated?

Evan: Fifty years later, Greg's questions were answered.

Greg: So anyway the long short of it we have the reunion and it's at a hotel in San Antonio, Texas not far from the Riverwalk and here this tall, lanky, real thin guy ten meters away from me walks over to me. And somebody says "Hey look there's Jim Kearney! He's here!" and I looked up I could not believe my eyes. I just couldn't believe it. I didn't recognize him, neither would he have recognized me after 50 years, but I couldn't believe it and we shook hands. I guess we embraced and it was very emotional because I told him I said "Jim, I haven't heard from you all these years I've--nobody knew what happened to you. I didn't go with you, I just didn't know." You take some of that kind of stuff when you're when you're a commanding officer of the aircraft, you take some of that stuff kind of personal. But the good news is he was whole. One hundred percent. And we went we had lunch and we talked and come to find out he has done so very well in life and you know very productive. PhD, book author. I've done very well in my life as a matter of fact, everything honky-dory here with me, and so we had just a wonderful, wonderful experience for about a day and a half. So I caught up with him and it was just so thrilling to know that he made it because he was the only crew member that I had that that was battle-damaged. I'm sure some of them were scarred emotionally, mentally, because of fear and because of being in situations where they could have been killed. Just by the grace of God we were not. We had some very frightening moments and went into some very precarious situations, very life-threatening, very uncertain circumstances. But we were blessed, we were just fortunate. We took fire many times but we didn't get anybody hurt except Kearney and he here he was. He had all his fingers and all of his toes and both eyes were working and his hearing, it was good...well not perfect! But it was just the most wonderful experience, and we spoke of our mission as if it happened the day before. It was a kind of an amazing conversation he and I had at the Riverwalk. Probably won't ever forget it.

(12:45)

Evan: As time has gone on Jim has worked to share his experience. To communicate what it was like Jim told me about one instance in particular when he was asked to speak to local high school students on Veterans Day.

Jim: I told an anecdote about when I was a teenager and I was hunting with my great-uncle who had been in the trenches in World War I. An airplane flew over, he's in his eighties, and he throws his rifle down and starts trying frantically trying to dig a foxhole. And we were walking down an old dry creek bed which it looks just like a trench you know, and he was transported back by the sound of that airplane flying low over the top of us. And trying to drink frantically dig a foxhole

for protection from being strafed...and so I said "look here's why we honor veterans, it's because it really is true that for those who are in war you never really get over you know the war is within the war never ends. It sits with you the rest of your life."

Evan: I've thought a lot about that anecdote and about Jim's words. A few minutes of cassette tapes started this podcast. I was focused on the mission and I had expected to dissect the tape minute by minute. But that tape ended up being only part of the story.

Jim sent me another audio file. This one much longer and recorded in 2019. The audio is of him and Bill working on their book. They're in Bill's home in what sounds like an open room and birds are chirping outside.

Over the course of the recording, Bill and Jim banter and tease out storylines. They talk about the various formats they could incorporate. And I can picture them, at a table, together, figuring out how to tell their story.

Jim has shared parts of his and Bill's writings with me. The words are beautiful. They're funny, they're sad. In some cases matter of fact. When I read them, and listen to that recording, I think about something else Jim said.

Jim: What I did encounter, which I think every veteran from every war has experienced — whether it's the Civil War or World War II, or they are Germans or Americans. Whatever. You simply are restarted when you try to explain to somebody what it was like. And you can't. And the only people that can really understand are people who also went through it. At times you want to communicate and you're frustrated — because you're not Shakespeare. You can't come up with the wonderful words to express it. So you sink back into your own frustration and seek out people who you know have similar experience so you don't have to explain it to them. It's not like when you get together you sit around and talk about it, but you know that you're with somebody who understands.

[Sound of Jim and Bill muttering, birds are chirping]

Evan: Thank you for joining us for Vietnam on Tape. Thank you to Jim Kearney for sharing his story for this podcast. Thank you to Bill Clamurro, Fred T Ervin, and Greg

Simpson for sharing their experiences with me. Thank you also to Jean Mansavage for speaking with me and for her research. Additional thanks to the archivists and historians at the US Army Medical Department Museum.

This episode was edited and mixed by David Shulman.

This Texas Story Podcast is produced by the Bullock Museum in downtown Austin.

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For Vietnam on Tape, I'm Evan Windham.

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