

Vietnam on Tape

Episode 1: "Inheritors" (20:41)

[Sound effects of removing a disk from a case and putting in computer]

Evan: I'm queuing up a CD that came across my desk a few months ago. It's a pretty amazing thing. A Vietnam veteran brought it in to the Bullock Texas State History Museum. The disk is white and scrawled on it are his name, a date (February 1970) and a few other words: MEDEVAC, WOUNDED, PHUOC VINH, and RVN. And a name: Jim Kearney <KURR-nee>. Jim's a native Texan. He recorded the audio on that CD in 1970. Luckily for us, he had it digitized a few years ago. He originally made the recording using one of these

[Sound effects of playing with cassette player]

Evan: Cassette tapes were introduced in the mid 1960s. By the end of the decade, they'd become the first really popular way of taking your music with you. It was the era of hits like ... "Born to be Wild", "Suzy Q", and "Purple Haze" Soldiers in Vietnam used cassettes as a way to maintain a connection home. They exchanged audio letters, which would arrive through the mail. And yes, soldiers listened to a lot of music on cassette...But I'm not queuing up some music to play you. With ten days left in his tour of duty in Vietnam, Jim Kearney had a rare day off from his duties as a combat medic. His Army inventory list of personal items included a microphone, headphones — and a cassette recorder. On that rare day off, Jim was relaxing, listening to music on cassette. Then there was a call for volunteers for an urgent rescue mission. There'd been a lot of action that day. A medic was needed. Jim volunteered to go. He didn't even have time to change out of his blue jeans before he was on board a Medevac helicopter. He still had his cassette recorder with him. So he wrapped the microphone in gauze, stuck it in a helmet, and plugged it into the helicopter's intercom. It recorded the whole flight.

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.

[Music lead by electric guitar riff]

Evan: Now, before we continue with Jim's story, I need to let you know that this podcast contains descriptions of war and audio of military combat, some of them graphic. It may not be appropriate for all listeners.

Tape recording: Helicopter chatter

Evan: The helicopter mission we're hearing the sound of right now ... it became a critical moment of Jim's service in Vietnam. A critical moment in his whole life. It also takes us back to a time, a half century ago, that remains critical to how we think of ourselves as Americans. It was a time when the war in Vietnam divided American public opinion. And divided American families.

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Tape recording: Helicopter chatter

Evan: In 1965, after decades of a simmering conflict, President Lyndon B. Johnson made the decision to send U.S. combat forces into South Vietnam.

VO from US Government Film: Today peace and security are no longer empty Communist promises, but guarantees from latest entries in the war, the United States Marine Corps. These newcomers are destroying the myth that Communist Viet Cong cannot be defeated on the field of battle.

Evan: Many young men voluntarily enlisted, driven by a sense of duty and concern for national security. But behind closed doors, even the president had reservations. Two days before combat forces arrived in Vietnam, President Johnson's doubts were recorded in a telephone conversation with Senator Richard Russell.

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Dick, The great trouble I'm under--a man can fight if he can see daylight down the road somewhere. But there ain't no daylight in Vietnam. There's not a bit.

Senator Richard Russell: There's no end of the road...It's the worse mess I ever saw in my life. You couldn't have inherited a worse mess.

President Lyndon B. Johnson: Well if they say I inherited it I'll be lucky. They'll all say I created it.

Evan: As the conflict escalated, Evening News broadcasts brought images of Vietnam home to living rooms across Texas and the whole United States. By June of 1968, polls indicated that the majority of the country believed the United States was either "losing" or "standing still" in Vietnam. Walter Cronkite's 1968 CBS Special Report concluded with the respected journalist voicing his own doubt in the Vietnam War. After that broadcast, President Johnson reportedly said "If I've lost Cronkite, I've lost middle America."

[Music]

Evan: Vietnam was the last war for which the U.S. American military relied on conscription — the mandatory enrollment of men aged 18 to 26 years old for military service. So conscription, also known as the draft, loomed large for any young American man growing up in the late 1960s and early '70s. One day, you check your mailbox, and find a letter from the Selective Service System. It could change your life. Some men enlisted as a way to have a choice in their military future. The majority of those that served in Vietnam during the Vietnam War were volunteers. About 25% were draftees. The draft posed a moral dilemma for many whose religious or ethical convictions prohibited them from carrying a gun into war. They were called Conscientious Objectors.

Woman: Their status was sanctioned in conscription law, codified by Congress, affirmed by the courts, and then implemented by the Selective Service system.

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Evan: That's military historian Jean Mansavage. She's worked for the Department of Defense since 1995. The dissertation she researched in the 1990s looked at the role served by Conscientious Objectors in Vietnam.

Jean: So much of the information ... serve with weapons.

Evan: Hard statistics on Conscientious Objectors are notoriously hard to find, though.

Jean: The military, the Army never kept the data on how many non-combatants there were.

Evan: Mansavage's years of research suggest that 15,000 Conscientious Objectors served during Vietnam — about half on the front lines. If you got drafted and your moral concerns were deemed legitimate — but not a barrier to wearing a uniform — the U.S. Military classified you as a 1-A-O Conscientious Objector.

Jean: 1-A-Os were individuals who, for reasons of religious training and beliefs or deeply held ethical rationale, refused to train with weapons — they refused to kill.

Evan: Though they wanted to serve in the military and fulfill their obligations to society in a broad sense by serving in the military when called. Once drafted, you were then assigned to serve in a non-combat position. This was NOT a ticket out of harm's way. Far from it. Conscientious Objectors actually served by the thousands on the front lines of Vietnam as combat medics. Flying into harm's way, without a gun.

Man: We had a very peculiar situation

Evan: That's Jim Kearney, the veteran who brought us the audio from his cassette recorder. He was a 1-A-O conscientious objector.

Jim: What's unique about 1-A-Os is they are in the thick of things. They are not on the periphery. They are on the A-team. They are not sitting on the bench. And you knew, if you were granted this classification, that ... 1-A-Os became, paradoxically, combat medics — in combat, without weapons. And so you were likely to sign your own ticket into the thick of the battle.

Evan: This is exactly what happened to Jim Kearney.

Tape recording: MACHINE GUN SOUND "Kearney's been hit. JIM: Something hit me. MACHINE GUN SOUND We're taking hits."

Evan: That 50-year-old audio Jim brought in? It recorded the moment when Jim's helicopter was strafed by machine gun fire.

Decades after the event, Jim Kearney is now actively wrestling with what it really meant to serve as a 1-A-O conscientious objector combat medic in Vietnam.

Tape recording: Helicopter chatter

It's a journey that's led Jim to attempt to reconnect, a half-century later, with some of those he served with.

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And after a career as a respected historian and author, he has different questions than he did in 1969.

Now he wants to find the data, He wants to know how many there were like him. Where they went. What happened to them.

Jim's own story offers a remarkable glimpse into the history of noncombatant conscientious objectors who served in Vietnam. It's a history that — even in the Army's own records — has almost been forgotten.

We'll be telling this piece of The Story of Texas on this podcast series from the Bullock Museum in Austin, Texas. In a later episode, we'll hear the full story of Jim's final mission as a combat medic — recorded on that amazing cassette tape.

TAPE: handling sound optional

For my part, I'll admit that when I first listened to Jim's Vietnam audio, I didn't have much context. I thought the audio from the mission tape WAS the full story.

But since then, I've talked a lot with Jim Kearney. And I learned very quickly that those 19 minutes are just scratching the surface.

So I kept talking with Jim, a lot. I was just trying to really wrap my head around the meaning of his story as a Vietnam conscientious objector.

To do that, though, you need to go back BEFORE Vietnam.

Back to the ranch where Jim grew up, in Columbus, Texas.

TAPE: JIM Whistling to horses, Hey! Evan: Oh wow! Horse snort. Jim: Unh-humm. [Gate swings.] I have to give 'em some food

Evan: Columbus, Texas, population 3,640 in 2019, is the county seat of Colorado county. It's just off the Colorado River. It's classic Texas, the courthouse sits on the town square and the nearly 150 year old buildings are shrouded by massive live oaks. I recently drove through that town square to visit Jim on his ranch. Jim had prepared for my visit by pulling out a number of artifacts related to his experience in Vietnam. Letters, pictures, his medical bag, his shirt with a bullet hole. But before we went inside to look at those, we went for a walk outside.

Jim: They have their pecking order ...

Evan: In the horse barn, Jim pointed out his father's hat. And his saddle — now about a hundred years old. There was an old western saddle from the 1870s. And the chaps Jim wore here as kid, working cattle on horseback.

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Jim: We had thousands of acres to roam over, my brother and I. We could fish, hunt, we had tractors, horses. It was a boy's paradise. Back then, in those days, we had to work, too. But we had to make our own fun. And we did it in nature. We would wander all day long over 1000s of acres, or saddle up our ponies and just ride and explore. And we learned experientially, not through books. We learned what's poisonous, and how to avoid snakes. And we'd take delight in climbing a nice tree. You know

Evan: Mmm-hmm

Jim: Tree climbing was a big deal for us, especially these patriarchal live oaks that we are so blessed with here in Colorado County. You know, we claim to have the biggest one in world. We'd climb way up in these trees, and feel like we were birds."

Evan: There was one live oak in particular that Jim and his brother loved to climb. It was in the yard of the ranch house.

Jim: It was a wonderful climbing tree. We grew up climbing in that tree, with these enormous branches ... It covered our entire back yard, like a big huge umbrella.

Evan: For Jim, that Live Oak tree brings back some of the best memories of his childhood. That tree also serves as a reminder of one critical day during his tour of duty in Vietnam. So when I visited Jim on his ranch, I knew I wanted to get a close look at the pattern of bark on those grand live oaks. But I'm getting ahead of the story ...The ranch Jim grew up on is part of the original "Cunningham League." It's a large plot of land that's been handed down by inheritance, never sold, since 1833.

Jim: "Yeah, lots of memories about growing up here carrying cotton to Mexico."

Evan: Jim's father served as the link between the Cunninghams and the Kearneys as keepers of the land.

Jim: My father, he grew up in Columbus and graduated from Columbus High School, and he went and played professional baseball for eight years right out of high school.

Evan: At that time, the Cunningham family line was nearing its end. The last of the Cunninghams were three older women.

Jim: This family just didn't have many children. These three women got to know my father. And they took a liking to him.

Evan: Jim's father went to play baseball in San Antonio as a pitcher. An injury to his arm ended his career. He got a job with the public service in San Antonio. But there was an accident. His father was electrocuted, burning the tendons in his hands, and he fell 25 feet.

Jim: So what is he going to do? He's unmarried, and he'd grown up working cattle and knew agriculture. And he decided the only thing I can do is buy my own land and be self-employed the rest of my life.

Evan: The three Cunningham women remembered their former neighbor.

Jim: They said, “Charlie, we want you to come back to Columbus. And if you come back to Columbus and take care of us in our old age, we will give you this land. So that was an easy decision.

Evan: That decision made the Kearneys the legal — and spiritual — inheritors of the land, and the ranch where Jim enjoyed such an extraordinary childhood. By 1968, Jim was in college at the University of Texas at Austin 90 miles away. And things didn’t feel so peaceful. The War in Vietnam divided many American families. Including Jim’s.

Jim: I kind of had a doubting Thomas nature, I didn’t always believe what I was told I became a news junkie, listening to Walter Cronkite even evening.

Evan: Television news brought the war home in a way that had happened with no previous war. Reporters interviewed soldiers on the battlefield, personalizing their experiences of war.

Vietnam News Coverage: Interviewee: How much time do you have to go? Interviewee: I have approximately 268 days to go over here. Interviewer: So you’ve been here a very short time. Interviewee: I’ve been here three and a half months. Interviewee: I heard you had some pretty interesting experiences already. Interviewee: Yes I have. Interviewer: Like what? Interviewee: I’ve been shot down already twice.

Evan: Images were delivered directly into the living rooms of Americans. Some of the images were graphic, scenes of wounded casualties or civilians fleeing the effects of napalm— which caused human flesh to burst into flame. Students on the UT campus gathered together to watch the newsreels in the Union in silence. And the young Jim Kearney began to question the morality of the war.

Jim: I can from a background with hunting and weapons ... not like I came from a pacifist background... it was kind of a journey for me. By the time I was subject to the draft, I was thoroughly opposed to the war. I thought what we were doing over there was absolutely reprehensible, and I just wasn’t going to be a part of it.”

Evan: Jim’s parents did not share his reservations. A rift grew between them. He kept trying to explain to them his opposition to the war. Without success.

Jim: I mean whenever I tried, I was very frustrated. I’ll put it that way. I’d become quite alienated from my parents at that time. You know, I’m not self-righteous about that ... I know it was very difficult for them. It was this generational thing. My father and mother were shaped by the Great Depression, and World War II, and they just simply couldn’t understand what was goin on.

Evan: When drafted, college undergraduates were allowed to defer their military service. Jim was a good student, and he was accepted into a number of graduate programs. Master’s and doctoral students, however, did not have the same ability to defer service if drafted. This gave particular weight to an offer made to Jim by the University of British Columbia, in Canada.

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Jim: They had accepted me into their graduate program there, and offered me a TA-ship. So I had a place waiting for me and a means to support myself.

Evan: It was tempting. Yet Jim also had a strong sense of loyalty and duty. And a deep connection to the land where he had grown up.

Jim: I grew up with a real sense of place, growing up on this ranch That would have been tough to say goodbye to that. Not to mention my inheritance — I'm sure I would have been disinherited. But, you know I was willing to do it. But yet, at the same time, I guess I was willing to make compromises. The people who were really true to their beliefs, they wouldn't go into the military ... but I said, I'm not going to be that radical. If they won't make me carry a weapon and use it, I'll go in. I'll serve. And nobody can say I was a coward.

Evan: Jim turned down the offer from the Canadian University. Instead, he enrolled for graduate school at the University of Texas at Austin. One day in March of 1969, during his first semester, Jim went to check his mail. He'd received an official envelope. Inside was a notice that James C. Kearney had been reclassified and was ordered to report to the Army Induction Station. He'd been drafted.

Tape recording: Helicopter chatter

Evan: In our next episode of Vietnam on Tape, we'll hear what happened after Jim applied for conscientious objector status.

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.

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

Our podcast editor and producer is David Schulman.

For Vietnam on Tape, I'm Evan Windham.
