Kansas 1972 Podcast
EPISODE 10 – Voices of Vietnam Veterans

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Tracy Quillin:
This series was made possible by the Friends of Humanities Kansas.

Kara Heitz:
Welcome to *Kansas 1972*. A lot happened during that pivotal year, including the founding of Humanities Kansas. In celebration of our 50th anniversary, we'll be telling stories from that era of Kansas history. So tune in, chill out, and get the lowdown on 1972.

EPISODE INTRODUCTION

CBS NEWS, AUG. 11, 1972:
The fighting is over for American ground soldiers in Vietnam. The end came quietly today when the last combat unit, Delta Company, third Battalion, 21st Infantry, was deactivated. But until the final hours, Delta Company was on the job, patrolling the underbrush near Danang. And while the outfit took some casualties, its men were warned in advance. No taking chances, no heroics.

Kara Heitz:
It was on August 11th, 1972, when the last American ground combat troops left Vietnam. While this certainly did not signal an end to the conflict, this would be one of the first steps towards the US ending its involvement in the Vietnam War.

CBS NEWS, AUG. 11, 1972:
There are now fewer than 44,000 American servicemen left in Vietnam, most of them in support and supply roles. But another 50,000 Americans are on warships off the coast, and 45,000 more are stationed at bases in Thailand.

Kara Heitz:
Peace negotiations between North and South Vietnam and the US had been going on since 1968, but enough progress had been made in the fall of 1972 that on Oct. 26, US National Security Advisor (and soon-to-be Secretary of State) Henry Kissinger made his famous remark:

CBS NEWS, OCT. 26, 1972:
[Henry Kissinger] We believe that peace is at hand. We believe that an agreement is within sight. We cannot fail and we will not fail over what still remains to be accomplished.

Kara Heitz:
The Paris Peace Accords were officially signed on January 27, 1973. (Even though the US engaged in a bombing campaign in the interim, whose effects on the peace process historians still debate today.) And while the provisions of the accord were frequently broken by both the North and South Vietnamese, all the way until April 30th, 1975, when the Northern Vietnamese conquered the South, for many Americans, 1972 was the last year of significant US involvement in the Vietnam War.

Today we're focusing on the story of Kansas veterans who served in the Vietnam war. We'll hear from six individuals who were interviewed as part of the Humanities Kansas project "Kansas Stories of the Vietnam War." In 2018 - 2019, the stories of over 70 veterans were collected through 12 partner organizations statewide. All the interviews are now archived at both the Kansas State Historical Society and the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project. We

In today's episode, you'll hear how these veterans became part of the US military forces during the Vietnam war

Hollis Stabler:
I thought it was a good thing to do, you know? I thought it was the right thing to do.

Patty Locher:
Joining the military. Sounds like a great idea. A way to serve my country.

David Tangeman:
I was drafted without knowing I was drafted at age 18.

Kara Heitz:
Some of their experiences, both heartening and harrowing.

Ronald Aunquoe:
Best part. Being out to sea. That was really my favorite.

Jim Nelson:
We encountered the enemy almost every day.

John Musgrave:
The bullets that hit me were traveling over 2,300 feet per second.

Kara Heitz:
What kinds of reactions they received as Vietnam vets after returning home.

Hollis Stabler:
I received gratitude from my service, you know, from the Indian, from my Indian family side of the family.

Hollis Stabler:
There's a lot of people that couldn't separate the warrior from the war.

Ronald Aunquoe:
The Indian community honored me, which is different from the general population.

Kara Heitz:
And what their service still means to them today.

Ronald Aunquoe:
I'm proud I serve my country and that pride gives you some confidence.

John Musgrave:
The most important responsibility a citizen has is to stand up before their government and say no.

Kara Heitz:
Just a quick note – you'll be hearing from me a lot less in this episode than in the previous stories in this podcast series. We really wanted you to hear the veterans' stories in their own voices, with minimal interrupts. So, get ready to listen.

John Musgrave:
My father had been a teenage pilot in World War Two and the Army Air Force. He met my mother working in a defense plant where they were building bombers. So, both of my parents had served their country in the Second World War. My generation was fortunate in that if we were looking for heroes, all we had to do was look across the dinner table and we saw people who'd helped save the world.

Kara Heitz:
That's John Musgrave, a veteran of the conflict in Vietnam. He's also a writer and public speaker who engages in frequent public appearances about his experiences in Vietnam. John was recently featured in the Ken Burns' documentary "The Vietnam War" about his service. He was also interviewed as part of this Humanities Kansas project.

John Musgrave:
Military service to me was going to be a shortcut to manhood. It was like I was tired of not counting of being treated as if I had nothing positive to offer to my country or my community. My opinions weren't sought or listened to, and I knew that I had something to give. But at 17, your avenues are very limited and the military for me was a way to give to my country and it was something mature. It was something that at that time was respectable and it was a ticket out of my neighborhood.

When I enlisted, I wanted to be a hero. When I volunteered for the infantry and volunteered to go to Vietnam, I knew I was going to be a hero. After my first firefight with the North Vietnamese Army, all I wanted to be was a survivor.

I was just an American teenager. We loved the Beach Boys and the Beatles, who loved the Kansas City Athletics. But I had grown up with a sense of citizenship and a realization that I had lived 17 years of freedom. 17 years of protection. 17 years of the privilege of living in a free, democratic society. And being asked to serve that society in a time of war did not seem like an outrageous request to me. It just all made sense.

Kara Heitz:
A common thread among many individuals who enlisted is a parent or other close family members who also served, typically in World War II or Korea. This was true for Kansas Vet, Hollis Stabler.

Hollis Stabler:
I thought it was a good thing to do, you know? I thought it was the right thing to do. I wanted to do this because my father did it and he was highly esteemed in an Indian country for doing it. And I wanted that same, same esteem.

Kara Heitz:
Hollis is Omaha and his motivations for enlisting are interconnected with this heritage as well as the opportunity serving provided.

Hollis Stabler:
You know, my father took me hunting and he would tell me certain things and we'd talk about our Indian culture and how we went to war a long time ago and how it's different now. But. So, I was looking forward to it. And, you know, if we were middle class, you know, which we were I'm both working the school system and you know how much the school system pays. You know where I wanted to go to college and a GI Bill enabled me to do that. And I wanted to see the world.

Kara Heitz:
The connection between Native American cultural traditions and the desire the serve is also a part of Ronald Aunquoe's story. Ronald is Kiowa (KI-oh-wa).

Ronald Aunquoe:
In my culture, you know, to maintain your warrior status, you need to serve, you know, and we decided that a long time ago, that in order to maintain our warrior status, we were going to have to fight, you know? And Kiowas are veterans. We have a very strong veteran tradition in our tribe, and that that's what I want to do.

Kara Heitz:
So, Ronald enlisted right after high school.

Ronald Aunquoe:
Well, of course, the Vietnam conflict was going on and… It was 1970. I graduated in 70 and in May and June I enlisted. That was I didn't want to wait around to get drafted. My father was in the Navy, and I figured I joined the Navy also following test, but I was pretty anxious to go. As soon as I got out of high school, I talked to my father about it and went ahead and went downtown and signed up.

Kara Heitz:
Patty Locher began her Air Force career because the military offered women more varied career paths than what was typically available to women at the time.

Patty Locher:
I was raised Catholic. I went to Catholic schools all my life, except for first grade, which was a country school. And I went to a Catholic women's college. And during the

Vietnam conflict. The services were trying to get more women to the officer candidates. And so all four services sent recruiters to my college. And this time I was majoring in German, in Spanish. No teaching. I did not want to teach. I didn't really know what I was going to do with my degree. And of course, being from a humble farm background in the Midwest, I had no idea. I had no high connections or anything. How did you get hooked up with the U.N. or German company or anybody?

So, joining the military sounds like a great idea. A way to serve my country. And also, equal pay for equal rank, whether you're a man or a woman, which was a very unique concept in those days.

So, I decided to go for never having a clue at that time that I would make a career of it. But I'm glad I did. Therefore, I met my husband. He kept encouraging me to stay in and the. Next thing I knew I had 22 and a half years and I'm proud of my service and I've seen a lot of the world and seen a lot of good and bad.

Kara Heitz:
Of course, not everyone who served in Vietnam enlisted or was commissioned. Around 25% of the military forces who served in combat zones were drafted. Between 1964 and 1973, around 2.2 million men were drafted in the U.S. out of a pool of about 27 million. Jim Nelson was one of those draftees, and at the time he was working far away from his Kansas birthplace.

Jim Nelson:
I entered the service at Boulder, Colorado, where the draft board selected me to be inducted. I was in New York City at the time working for Raymond Loewy, the famous industrial designer. He designed the did a lot of the streamlining for Pennsylvania Railroad. He designed the Coca-Cola bottle, designed Skylab. He designed the presidential aircraft colors for JFK. Did the Shell Oil sign. Was world famous for his industrial design and I was one of his three mural painters. And I did Western murals for the department stores, basically May company out of Chicago, May DNF and Famous Bar and I was drafted... I was making very good income and I was drafted, had a studio on Fifth Avenue right across from the Metropolitan Museum. And I then got my greetings from the President of the United States, Johnson.

Kara Heitz:
Although as we'll see, Jim's experiences as an artist would come to play an important role in his military service.

Another Kansan who was drafted was David Tangeman. And David was drafted not once, but twice.

David Tangeman:
I was drafted without knowing. I was drafted at age 18 when I went in to sign up for the draft with the local draft clerk in Nemaha County. Cassie G. Smalley, who drafted my uncles in World War II, my uncle in Korea, and me in Vietnam. She asked what I was going to do and I said, well, I was going to go to college. I wanted to be a teacher. And she said, “Well, you know there’s a lot of boys go to college just to get out of the draft. You wouldn’t be one of those, would you?”

I finished college and was in my first year of high school teaching in Lyndon, Kansas, and it was Tet of ’68 when Lyndon Johnson did away with occupational deferments. And as a teacher, being one of those occupational deferments that was no longer recognized as so important, I was drafted at age 23, again, from Nemaha County.

Kara Heitz:
He recounts the day he left for Army Basic Training.

David Tangeman:
You met the bus at the county seat, which was Seneca, Kansas, county seat of Nemaha County. My dad drove me there. My mom didn’t go along, and it’s one of those things that sticks in your mind. And probably 10, 15, 20 years later, I asked my mom why she hadn’t gone along. And she had an answer. She said, “I watched my mother send my brothers to war, World War II, and I just couldn’t do it.” But it took me all of those years to be able to ask that.

Kara Heitz:
After basic training, many of the veterans interviewed were shipped off to the Southeast Asian theater of war. And John Musgrave was literally shipped off.

John Musgrave:
I went over on a troop ship, which was an exciting experience in and of itself. Most guys went over on airliners, but 33 days at sea on an old World War II liberty ship, worst living conditions I ever had until I was in the jungle. But it was thrilling to me because Marines were soldiers of the sea, and we'd always gone to war from ships, and I was going to war the way the Marines had always gone to war. So, for a young kid with a sense of history, it was great.

Uh, when I arrived in Vietnam, my first experience was to be assaulted by the physical and the sensual experience that was Vietnam. And that was in intense heat and smells - I, things I'd smelled that I'd never smelled before. And other smells I'd never smelled as great.

Kara Heitz:
David Tangeman experienced a similar sensory overload.

David Tangeman:
[Laughs] The first impression was you got sweat pores over every portion of your body when the plane opened! And I know that they put us all on a bus, and the bus driver I’m sure quite deliberately took us through the village and you’re looking out at a world that is totally alien and foreign to anything you ever grew up with. And, you know the old cliché, “It ain’t Kansas, Toto.”

Kara Heitz:
The heat and moisture created lots of unpleasant experiences for soldiers not used to the climate.

Jim Nelson:
During the monsoon, everything was wet, rained and rained, and the mud was everywhere. The socks just rotted off of you and your clothes were just disintegrating because of the mold and the and that the weather, you know, just soaking wet all the time.

Kara Heitz:
But rotting socks weren’t the worst environmental hazard Jim Nelson faced in Vietnam.

Jim Nelson:
And then the creepiest thing was the leeches. And they lived underground. And they… They were very they were like big oh, they were like Big Nightcrawlers. And they'd make a creaking sound when you were trying to sleep on the ground. Like if you had your poncho down and you were had your head down and there'd be this creeping noise while those were leeches trying to get to you.

Kara Heitz:
Yikes! But beyond the heat, leeches, and general cultural shock, there were other more emotional hardships.

Ronald Aunquoe:
Well, it’s probably hard for people to understand nowadays, but just being away from family and home, everything is so immediate now. Yeah. You know, I could be overseas right now, and I could, I could talk to my family and in place and in real time. So, there were long periods of time where you kind of wondering how everyone's doing. And of course, you miss home. And there's no instant great there was no instant gratification, you know, so slow mail. Yeah. And mail was a mail call was pretty important, as you know, because, you know, that was probably the worst part.

David Tangeman:
Holidays are the loneliest and the worst times because you're aware of where you are not and who is not with you.

Kara Heitz:
Of course, loved ones did send soldiers gifts, but sometimes they didn’t quite hit the mark, as David Tangeman illustrates.

David Tangeman:
Some guys got Christmas presents. And some of the presents were thought of but not well thought of and certainly not appropriate to Vietnam. And one of them was a series of, you know those little wooden puzzles you put together. And so, me and somebody on a berm, whatever, were trying to put this puzzle together and wouldn’t, couldn’t get it done, couldn’t get it done. So, we went over to the soldier who had gotten it and he pulled out of the dirt on his berm the directions, and he had thrown part of the pieces. And part of it always seemed like a symbol of Vietnam. It’s like, yeah, you got the puzzle but part of the pieces are missing.

Kara Heitz:
But sometimes they were perfect.

David Tangeman:
My oldest sis Jane is an excellent gift-giver. And again, I’m in the rear, and she knows that. So, she sends me one of those little Christmas trees, little fake Christmas trees, oh probably two feet tall maybe. And then she took pictures of everybody in the family and cut out the head and she made a little egg-shaped frame and a string to hang on the tree. With a note: “Since you can’t be with us this Christmas, brother, we will be with you.” And in my life, it is the best and most considerate, thoughtful, loving present I think I have ever received, and probably will ever receive, just because of how it touched my heart then and still does.

Kara Heitz:
While serving in Vietnam was an arduous, and, of course, traumatic experience for many, many individuals, a number of veterans also had very positive aspects of their service, especially those that were not directly fighting on the front lines.
Ronald Aunquoe worked as a signalman for the Navy during the war, a job he thoroughly enjoyed.

Ronald Aunquoe:
Man. Best part. Being out to sea. That was really my favorite. But, yeah, I. I dug it. You know, I had a job that I was outside on the very top of the ship with a complete 360 view of everything around in. The crow's nest.

And it was awesome. And the wind in your face and at night, you know, I was so amazed. You think you can see stars? You get two or 300 miles away from any coastline and you're going to really see some stars. And I was that was always just excellent, you know. And then, of course, it gets kind of scary out there at night when there's, there's no moon and you can't see your hand in front of your face. Every, every scary sea creature movie you ever saw comes to mind.

Kara Heitz:
At Officer Training School during the Vietnam War, Patty Locher found her way into air force intelligence, a choice that led to a long and successful military career.

Patty Locher:
Intelligence was one of the few career fields offered when I was at OTS. And that sounded like an interesting career field and a good chance for me. So that's the one I selected and I was approved.

It was at OTS that I learned what career fields were available. We had supply, personnel, administration, intelligence, and those are the only ones I can think of right now. But that kind of stuff.

Maintenance wasn't open for women until years later. Of course, flying women weren't in flying positions until. I was too old to fly. Um, we weren't allowed in combat until. Much more recently than that, probably after I retired. And so, it was just… one of those things that worked out for me. Intelligence was a good field for me and I was happy to be in that position.

Kara Heitz:
Of course, for those in positions that directly encountered enemy fire and combat, their time in Vietnam was often harrowing, Here’s Jim Nelson.

Jim Nelson:
We encountered the enemy almost every day. Whether it be a landmine goes off or a mine in a tree that goes off or an outright fight, a firefight. But our purpose was to locate and destroy enemy base camps.

Sometimes you didn't have sleep for days and days, days and nights, because you were attuned to trying to stay alert, to stay alive. I mean, at nighttime, we went on ambush patrols, who we went on, which was called listening posts, which you took a radio with two other soldiers. And you were way out there in the jungle, way ahead of everybody. And you listen. You were lying down behind the log all night long, and you were listening for the enemy's footsteps. And there was… That was scary.

Kara Heitz:
However, his experiences looking for opposition camps would inadvertently lead to probably the most important and rewarding part of his service in Vietnam.

Jim Nelson:
Since I'd been a commercial artist, you might say, and New York, I was asked to do maps on the back of envelopes that were sent to headquarters. And because of those envelope maps that I made while I was in the jungle, after we overran these enemy base camps, whether they were occupied or not, I was approached by an officer one day saying, Are you the person drawing these maps? And I said, Well, I didn't know anybody knew about these little drawings I'm doing. And the officer, he was a major. And he said, yes, they've been helping us at headquarters quite a bit. And he said, Did you know there's an opening at third Brigade headquarters for Draftsman?

I was selected to be the new brigade draftsman, and I did all the maps for the Tet Offensive. And probably the most important drawing I've ever done in my life was the day that I had to do an overlay and show where 15,000 Infantry were going to be landed by helicopter in a jungle clearing. If I'd had misdrawn those marks, I could have got people killed. So I, to this day, although I've sold a lot of paintings and I've had a lot of success. I still think that that was the most important drawing I've ever done and will probably ever do. You know.

Kara Heitz:
Of course, for many fighting in Vietnam, it was indeed, hell. John Musgrave’s story of being gravely wounded, almost dying, and the bravery of his comrades, is an emotional and difficult one to hear. But a necessary one to listen to.

John Musgrave:
Um, I was, when I was wounded the first and second time, I was 19. The first time was shrapnel from a hand grenade. It wasn't a serious wound, I stayed in the field with my unit. The last time I was wounded, I was, I was shot, first round was a ricochet that hit me in the chin and fractured my jaw, knocked me unconscious. And when I regained consciousness, which I think was just a matter of moments, I was lying on my face and we were in an ambush.

I was one of the first people to be shot. The man who shot me was a veteran and he knew that my buddies would come for me. And uh, that's when I became as bait. And when my first buddy ran up to me and bent over and stuck his arms under my, his hands under my arms, cupped my shoulders, and pulled me up, the machine gunner who was only a matter of feet away from me, fired another burst into my chest. And, uh, and they killed him.

The bullets that hit me were traveling over 2,300 feet per second. So the bullets actually hit me before I heard the sound of the gun going off and he was only eight, ten feet away at the most. It was intimate. And the next guy that came for me was shot. Marines never leave their wounded. Never. We would die before we would leave our wounded. My mind couldn't even keep up with my body. The impact of the bullets was so powerful that I thought it split me between my shoulders and I thought my shoulders slammed together in front of my face. Uh, it's impossible but that's what I thought happened. And it was the worst pain that I'd ever felt in my life. And I was trying to make sense of it. And I heard this horrible inhuman screaming. And I was trying to figure out who was screaming like that. And then I realized it was me. And then my body, my mind, and my body caught up with one another. And I, the thought in my mind was, I've been shot in the chest. I'm going to die. Shut up. Because it was making it harder on my buddies. And then began a fight to rescue me and the other wounded. There were 19 wounded and one killed.

For over 49 years, I thought I caused the deaths of two Marines, but I just found out it was only one. Although when you've been carrying that kind of guilt for over 49 years, it's, knowing something intellectually is, it's different than being able to convince yourself 'cause that guilt as much a part of me as my scars and my disability.

My buddies grabbed me and the other one hit while being pursued by the North Vietnamese. They would drag us for a little ways and then drop us and lay down on top of me and fire back at the enemy. They knew I was dying. I had a fist-sized hole through my chest and out of my back and I told them to leave me. I gave them permission to leave me. I begged them to leave me. I didn't want anybody else to die because of me. And I knew that it was a done deal, but they wouldn't do it. And then at one point I became afraid they would.

And one of the guys that was carrying me, was dragging me, I had one guy on each arm dragging me. Both my sons are named after them by the way. I pulled him down 'cause with my left lung gone, all I could do was whisper with a gasp. And I said, don't let them get me alive. And in the midst of all this, his nose is just about touching mine and he's looking me in the eye and he says, don't worry, they won't get you alive. And I knew he would kill me rather than let the North Vietnamese do what they did to us when they caught us wounded. And I owed him as much for that as I did for him carrying me out, for their sense of relief that washed over me. Then I could get back to praying for my family and my, and my buddies.

You don't see that in the war movies, but that's the way it was for me.

Kara Heitz:
John Musgrave did survive being shot through the chest. He was given a medical discharge … and a purple heart. However, 58,220 U.S. military personnel, including 628 Kansans, were not so lucky; the perished in the conflict.

For many American servicepeople who did make it back from Vietnam alive, dealing with the physical and emotional scars of the war was (and continues to be) a daily struggle. And while the US involvement in the war was quite understandably controversial, oftentimes people’s political objections translated into the negative treatment of veterans. Here’s Hollis Stabler.

Hollis Stabler:
But, you know, the whole thing about being in, you know, in the services, your job is to kill people. And their job, on the other hand, is to kill you. And so, I came back and and, you know, there's a lot of people that couldn't separate the warrior from the war…

Kara Heitz:
Even in Kansas, people behaved horribly to returning Vietnam veterans, as Jim Nelson describes.

Jim Nelson:
I decided I wasn't going to stay in New York anymore. All my friends had gone away, and they didn't like Vietnam veterans there at all. That was a hotbed of the Jane Fonda movement and all that. You know, you didn't mention you were in Vietnam, back in New York. Matter of fact, you didn't want to mention it here in Kansas to the Osborn VFW. Wouldn't even let a Vietnam veteran join.

People were not sympathetic here. They'd been brainwashed by the media which was anti American soldier in and served in Vietnam. And that didn't change until the Persian Gulf, Persian Gulf War, where the soldiers were treated to a parade when they came back. You know, then I think the American public started to... Relate to the Vietnam veteran in relation to the Gulf War veteran and why was it the Vietnam veteran was demonized by the media and the movies on the air? You know, just we were we were portrayed as drug addicts…

Kara Heitz:
While our social attitudes towards veterans have shifted in the U.S. since the years right after the Vietnam War, some communities within the U.S. had a different perspective even during the conflict.

Ronald Aunquoe:
Yeah, you know, the community, of course. I went back to San Diego, of course. And, uh, you know, there was so much bad blood because of the Vietnam War, you know, and servicemen were getting treated with a lot of disrespect everywhere, you know? Uh, but when I came home, of course, the Indian community honored me, which is different from the general population…

Kara Heitz:
Ronald Aunquoe is not the only ingenious veteran who experienced this. So did Hollis Stabler.

Hollis Stabler:
Well, I received gratitude from my service, you know, from the Indian, from my Indian family side of the family. Just about a month after I got back, my grandmother and grandfather had John Turner, was an Omaha elder at the time, composed a song for me, which is tradition. And so, we had a dance over at the West YMCA, and a lot of people came and I invited Charlie Harjo, who I grew up with, played Billy basketball together and other sports. And he was in the Army and he had seen a lot of combat. Yeah, I think he was in the first Cav. May have seen a lot of combat too. So I invited him over there to share that experience with me. And he did.

Kara Heitz:
Hollis Stabler's experience with his Omaha community is just one example of similar traditions in a number of Native American cultures, including the Navaho and Comanche peoples, that use community practices to help returning soldiers process the difficulties of war and reintegrate into society. The Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian has excellent information on its website about these traditions and how they help minimize things like PTSD in returning veterans. We'll put a link to it on the episode website.

Kara Heitz:
So how did their experiences in Vietnam and their status as veterans affect others' lives? Here are some final reflections from the veterans on what their service has meant to them. Patty Locher has publicized and celebrated the stories of other women who served in the military.

Patty Locher:
And I was fortunate to get hired at the *Sabetha Herald*, the local weekly newspaper, in 2002. Just less than three years after we moved here. And I had been. Asked to be the speaker of Memorial Day for 22, which just happened to be the 60-year anniversary of when women were once again allowed to join the military during World War Two. And so my speech was about them and about women serving. Then as I was preparing for my speech, I was amazed at how many women who lived in Sabetha at the time or were from Sabetha that had been in the military. And also a whole lot of women from here or who were now here had been in wartime production, which we kind of call as a group Rosie the Riveters, even though they were all in that particular job. And so I asked my bosses at the Herald about writing a series of articles about some of the women veterans who now lived here or who were from here, who still have contacts that I could get the information they this and go for it. So I started writing one every week for about ten or 15 weeks. And then as other women found out about I don't more, I think I've written over 30 on women.

But After I had done some of the women. Somebody whose dad was a veteran said, well, the men would like their stories told, too.

Kara Heitz:
Locher ended up writing around 100 additional articles about local men who served. Jim Nelson's artistic practice is intertwined with his military past. This began in the mid-1990s when he was commissioned to paint his first image of Vietnam veterans.

Jim Nelson:
So I worked on this painting six months. It's now located at the Department of Veterans Affairs in Albany, New York, in their gallery, if purchased by the State of New York, and that it's a mural 12 feet by six feet has 64 figures in it. And it's pretty well ,got published recently by the VFW in their new book, *Brutal Battles of Vietnam*. They actually featured my painting. And that was one of the first paintings I did. And it became so well known, the painting that the, the Military Museum in Branson, Missouri, wanted to show it and have a reproduction of it. The original paintings up in New York, Albany, New York. But I did some reproductions for the Branson Museum, and from there other military museums wanted my work. So, I have a painting, like in the Infantry Museum at Fort Benning, Georgia, a new museum there. And we had to take that to Fort Riley, and they put the painting in a colonics and shipped it down there themselves, you know. And so I actually made a little niche and military painting. I'm not I'm not, you know, famous or anything like that. But I have made a mark with my work, which I feel in my own lifetime is an accomplishment.

I get commissions all over. These soldier veterans are calling me up or writing me, and they want a painting, and I do it. Because I was there. I want to honor them for their service. I want to do it in a realist, in a realistic style.

Kara Heitz:
Ronald Aunquoe is proud of his service and what it instilled in him…

Ronald Aunquoe:
It gives you a sense of purpose. You know, I'm proud I serve my country and that pride gives you some confidence. You know, I'm not I've never been ashamed to tell people I'm a veteran. And, of course, by honoring my tribe, by serving my country, it gives me great pride in doing that. So and it gives you some confidence, you know, you have more confidence, you know, when you have experiences... Those experiences do something to you. They mature you and make you confident in everyday life, you know? You bet. Yeah. It does build character. Absolutely. It certainly does build character. And of course, when you're in the service, you see a lot of great examples of people with great character. Yeah. And we learn from those people, you know, and teach us how to carry on in life.

Kara Heitz:
But he also sees some familiar and troubling trends in contemporary times.

Ronald Aunquoe:
Oh, you know. I haven't seen divisions in this country like we had when I was in the service until now. I hate I hate to say it, there was so much racism and division in the sixties and all during the Vietnam War, including in the service, you know. And I was glad to get past that. But now I see those divisions coming back. And it hurts my heart. I guess… I wish we could all be on the same page. Yeah. You know, we need to come together. You know?

Kara Heitz:
The Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, DC, was installed in 1982, perhaps symbolizing a cultural shift in how Vietnam veterans were perceived in this country. David Tangeman talks about his visits to that memorial, and what it meant.

David Tangeman:
The first time I went, I went with my cousin’s kid. I told him if I had a kid, I’d want him to be you. He’s just a lovely man. He was 19 years old and at that time I was in my 40s. The statistical age of the draftee, of the soldier in Vietnam, was 19 years old. I know men. I know several men on that wall. And there’s a difference between weeping and crying and being wracked with grief. And startling my cousin’s kid, Eric, all of a sudden I am wracked with grief and an awareness that I had never in my wildest imagination thought. Ever. That I wished I had died in Vietnam and that my name would be on that wall, so that my name would be with buddies and friends forever and ever. And a tribute to this man-kid Eric, he never said a word. He never asked. He never demanded an explanation. It was like, sure, yeah, my dad’s cousin wracked with sobs and yeah, that’s whatever.

Then I’ve been back several times. The history of the Wall itself, the Wall starts in the middle, the war starts in the middle, in the fat part and goes to a narrow. It turns around and picks the war up at the other end of the narrow. And it joins because Maya Lin, who designed it, wanted the beginning and the end of the war to be a circle. It goes to a narrow point because war is a dagger in the heart of a nation. I happened to catch a docent giving a tour, ‘cause I didn’t know that. It’s an amazing concept. And that’s what war is, name after name after name after name after name after name. All lives eliminated, done, except in hearts, memories, and families.

Kara Heitz:
Finally, John Musgrave became an outspoken anti-war activist, joining the organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Just as he originally saw it as his duty to serve when he enlisted, his experiences in Vietnam shifted this sense of duty.

John Musgrave:
But the day came when I realized that as a citizen, I didn't have the right to lock myself in my house and hide from my responsibilities and as a Marine and a Vietnam veteran that I didn't have the right to turn my back on my buddies just because I made it through, that I still had a duty, that was MY war. I still had a duty to perform and that was to try to get my buddies home. I knew I was going to disappoint some people that loved me very much, that were going to find it difficult to understand. I knew that there would be people that I had admired that might consider me a traitor. I knew there were Marines that I loved, that might think I was stabbing them in the back. I knew that my president was going to treat me like I was a criminal. I didn't want to go through any of that. But the way I felt when I enlisted was that this was something a whole lot bigger than me and it was my duty. That's why I enlisted. Well, now I was facing that war again, realizing that this is a whole lot bigger than me and this now is my duty. And so I became outspoken.

Kara Heitz:
And he has remained outspoken for five decades.

John Musgrave:
To be a patriot is to love your country. To be a patriot is to understand that your country is bigger than you, that you are a part of something much larger. To be a patriot in a democracy is to realize that a true democracy is a participatory democracy. They, you find those two words together because if you don't participate, it's not a democracy. I discovered that the most difficult responsibility I'd ever had to exercise as a citizen wasn't when I put on a uniform to go and fight for it. It was when I stood up and said, no. That in a democracy oftentimes the most important responsibility a citizen has is to stand up before their government and say no when they feel like their government is doing something that is not in the best interest of the nation. And that realization was when I fully became a citizen of my country.

EPISODE OUTRO

Kara Heitz:
The Vietnam War still haunts our national collective memory. Whether the US should’ve gotten involved, stayed as long as we did, how our nation conducted the war, and the mass anti-war movement that inspired are still very politically fraught issues. Bet there is perhaps one thing we can all agree on, the importance of listening to those who were there, and experienced the conflict firsthand, and using their stories to help create constructive dialogue about not just the Vietnam War, but all human experiences with conflict and violence.

VIETNAM, DOCUMENTARY DIRECTED BY JOHN FORD, 1971:
It was a strange mixture of peace and war. A battlefield nowhere and a battlefield everywhere. Life during the day. Death at night. An ally at one moment. An enemy the next. A lush jungle mixed with a rusted barbed wire. It was all of the this. Those who wanted to find the war and made it had to hunt for it. Those who didn't want to find a war often became the hunted.

And around the world, and particularly the United States of America. There was another battle, a battle of words, a politics and debate. The question was, who was the hunter in Vietnam and who was the hunted? Who would define aggressor and defender? And there was the larger search for a definition of the word peace. Did peace mean only the absence of War. Or the absence of war and fear and oppression?

SERIES OUTRO

Kara Heitz:
Catch you on the flip side!

Tracy Quillin:
Humanities Kansas is an independent nonprofit leading a movement of ideas to strengthen Kansas communities and our democracy. Since 1972, HK's pioneering programs, grants, and partnerships have documented and shared stories to spark conversations and generate insights. Together with statewide partners and supporters, HK inspires all Kansans to draw on history, literature, and culture to enrich their lives and to serve the communities and state we all proudly call home. Join the movement of ideas at humanitieskansas.org.