John Ketwig oral history interview

Sergeant United States Army
Vietnam

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Abstract: Vietnam War veteran (1966–69), John Ketwig discusses how he was drafted into the Army and sent to Northern Vietnam against his will. While he spent most of the war repairing military vehicles and equipment, Ketwig also speaks to broader material and environmental conditions facing soldiers, secret missions in which he unwittingly participated in Laos, and a near-death experience he faced while driving in a convoy. Ketwig explores how perceptions of the war among media and the public changed over time and shares what made him decide to write about his experiences in …"and a hard rain fell and Vietnam Reconsidered".

Transcript Notes:

Transcriber:	TEMI
Abstract by:	Kyle Rogers, VWM Intern
Additional Notes:	
	JK: John Ketwig
	KR: Kyle Rogers

Interview Transcript:

[0:09] KR: I'm Kyle Rogers, and today we're here with John Ketwig. This is the 6th of October, 2020, and we are working on the Oral History Project for the Virginia War Memorial. So to start things off, Mr. Ketwig, could you tell us a little bit about where you grew up.

[0:24] JK: Western New York, most of the time I was up on a hill overlooking the farthest-west and smallest of the Finger Lakes, and then we moved to a community nearby: Avon, which everybody pronounces it "ay-von," but it's "ah-von."

[0:45] KR: OK.

[0:46] JK: South of Rochester about 30 miles.

[0:50] KR: Gotcha, I know where that is, OK. How aware were you of what was going on in Vietnam at the time, as you were growing up?

[0:58] JK: Not very, and I actually, I've talked to a couple of my history teachers from high school. In senior year, we had a class, and I graduated in 1965, so—

[1:15] KR: OK.

[1:16] JK: That was after the [John F.] Kennedy assassination [in 1963] and everything. And we had a class called "Problems of Democracy," and the teacher was a Korean War vet. And there was no mention of Vietnam; it didn't exist, you know? The supposition was that we would graduate and go to college and change the world and everything. And for a number of us, that didn't quite work out that way.

[1:50] KR: So, at the time, around 1965, was what was really going on in the war kinda kept secret from the public, or did you just not talk about it very much in New York?

[1:59] JK: Well yeah, I think it was—the grown-up generation that had survived World War II and Korea, to a point, were trying to sort of shield us from all of that. And uh, you know, it was a lot better to focus on baseball, hot rods, you know fun things like that; the Rock & Roll music that was exploding at that time.

[2:36] KR: That makes sense! What kind of music were you listening to?

[2:38] JK: Oh, The Beatles, and the Rolling Stones, and all the rest; the Byrds and the Animals, and (laughs) you know? But, Rock & Roll.

[2:51] KR: All my favorites too. So, prior to your military service, did you have any opinions about the Vietnam War?

[3:00] JK: Shortly prior to. I ran into a coffee house in the city, and it was neat. It would be folk singers with acoustic guitars and, uh, real low tables like in Japan; there were pillows on the floor, and you sat around cross-legged with candlelight and listening to the music and talked. And it was

a lot of college people, you know, who were really into the opposition to the war and talking about it and informing us what was going on: "What are you gonna do about the draft?" and all the rest of that. So you know, it was, it began to be apparent not long before the war. Then I got called for a Draft Physical; that made it *real* apparent.

[3:51] KR: Absolutely. So, how did your family and friends react to the news that you had been drafted.

[4:09] JK: I wasn't actually drafted.

[4:10] KR: You weren't?

[4:11] JK: It was inevitable that I was going to be,

[4:12] KR: Oh, OK.

[4:13] JK: being, uh, not exactly the brightest light in the string. I went over and talked to the recruiter, who assured me that if I volunteered, if I enlisted—with my name which is basically kinda German, and I had good marks in school; I just didn't have money to go to college—

[4:44] KR: OK.

[4:46] JK: I'd probably go to Germany, and [sarcastically] it'd be a wonderful trip. We'd stay in a barracks that was just like a college dorm, you know. And I was up against the wall: If you were drafted, the chances were very, very high you'd be Infantry and out sliding through the rice patties, and I was not at all enthused about that. The entire thing—let me make it real clear, Kyle—all of it was against my will. I had no intention of being a soldier, joining the Army, "saving Vietnam from Communism," or any of that, but I was forced into it. And so, instead of two years, being drafted, if you enlisted it was for three, and I did that (laughs).

[5:45] KR: Because you felt pressured into it.

[5:46] JK: And I enlisted to beat the Draft; that was a big joke in the Army (laughs).

[5:52] KR: (Laughs) OK. So how did that work when you enlisted? Did you get some kind of specialization or MOS? Did you get any autonomy?

[6:02] JK: Yeah, I was into cars; I spent my life under the hood of cars.
[6:09] KR: OK.

[6:10] JK: And uh, they had a course in Automotive, Wheel, and Track Vehicle Mechanics. And so OK, I took that, and uh, you know, learned a lot. Some of the things I learned, you never use in civilian life: how to change treads on a tank when you're in up to your ears, and things like that. But, I went through the class; I did well.

[6:42] KR: OK.

[6:43] JK: And then one day in morning formation, and they called out names and handed you a piece of paper, and it was orders to go to Vietnam. So, I was, I was scared. I was very unsure what the heck I was getting myself into, you know. But I, I went. When I said goodbye to my folks and went out the door at the airport, there was a brick wall there, and I punched it, and all the way down from Rochester, New York, the girl on the plane was trying to put Band-Aids and stuff and stop my knuckles from bleeding.

[7:30] KR: Gosh.

[7:31] JK: But you know, I went!

[7:36–8:40 Troubleshooting Zoom video issue]

[8:41] KR: So, what year was that when you did your training, and you were shipped out to Vietnam?

[8:45] JK: 1967

[8:48] KR: ’67, OK. And *where* did you do your training?

[8:52] JK: Oh, Aberdeen Proving Grounds, Maryland.

[8:58] KR: Gotcha, OK. So, you were trying to do automotive. What was your assigned duty in the Army?

[9:05] JK: Fix (laughs) Jeeps and trucks and tanks and anything that came down the line. Um, I got to Vietnam in September of ’67, and by November or so, they discovered that I had done body and fender work and painting in civilian life, and they needed that. So, I kinda got transferred over into body and fender work.

[9:47] KR: Oh, OK. What was that like? Were you assembling vehicles, or were you doing more major repairs?

[9:55] JK: No, it was repair. Um, if you picture an Army truck, and the really crude dirt roads in Vietnam; nothing was paved. They would shake apart and have big cracks up the side of the fenders and everything. So, we had to weld that back together. We got vehicles in that had been shot up or shrapnel damage, or you name it. And we had to patch that kind of stuff up. In the same place, the same building and so forth, there was radiator repair, glass repair, canvas repair; so, anything anybody needed. And in addition to that, we had [to] paint everything. There was a colonel—and I was not actually *part* of the Fourth Infantry Division, but we were attached to it—and there was a colonel over there who, when he was around the base and everything, wanted his Jeep shiny, shiny. So, we mixed gloss black paint with the Army OD green and made a real dark shade of green that could be polished. And so, we would paint his Jeep and make it all look pretty and nice and everything, and he had a little canvas cover for the spare tire; he was just a sport. And then when he decided he had to go out where there was some combat going on, he brought it in, and

we gave it a quick coat of dull, OD green paint over everything, and off he went. He came back in a week, and we painted it with the gloss paint again. But that was what we did to a large part. We were also welders.

[12:12] KR: OK.

[12:13] JK: And I was really fortunate: There was a guy there that was a certified shipyard welder and extremely good, and he taught us all a lot.

[12:27] KR: Oh, great.

[12:28] JK: That's part of the story. We'll get into that later, but that played a major role in where I ended up.

[12:37] KR: I see. OK, so what part of Vietnam was that where you were stationed?

[12:42] JK: I was in Pleiku in the Central Highlands, which was quite fortunate; it was a little cooler than the Mekong Delta or something. I've actually got up in the morning and seen a thin layer of ice on the top and puddles. So, it got pretty chilly.

[13:08] KR: What did you do during your downtime?

[13:12] JK: (Laughs) slept!

[13:13] KR: Did you not get much?

[13:14] JK: To a very large degree. We were working about 16- or 18-hour days.

[13:23] KR: Oh, wow.

[13:24] JK: And it was hot most of the time, and you were working with really heavy equipment, so, you know, you were hot and sweaty; if you could, you got a shower and caught some sleep before next time; wrote letters home.

[13:49] KR: I was gonna ask how often you kept in touch with your family by letter. So, how often did you get letters from home?

[13:57] JK: I would say once or twice a week, probably. Yeah, they were trying to stay in touch. The interesting part of all that: There was an organization in Western New York, called Operation Morale, that encouraged people to send letters and boxes of candy and stuff to the guys from hometown over in Vietnam. They went into a hospital school of nursing in Rochester, and one of the students—well, all of the students there—agreed that they would pick names off a list of guys from the area and write to em. So, this particular young lady closed her eyes and chose three people off the list. And gee, you know, there was a sergeant, and a lieutenant, and a private first-class. And she said, "I don't want to write to any private first class." And they said, well, "That's part of the agreement, you know? You have to write to em." So, she wrote to me great letters. She, the

school was right down the street from where I used to work, and she would walk around that area and told me about Christmas decorations, and where the local bands were playing, and all that type of thing. When I came home, I looked her up and, you know, gave her a call, and she invited me over to her house, and the upshoot of that story is we've been married; we just celebrated our fiftieth wedding anniversary.

[15:54] KR: Oh, that's so wonderful!

[15:56] JK: You know, absolutely out of the blue. At the same time, a friend from high school had a sister, who was going with a guy that was on ham radio, and he put my address out, and somebody in Cincinnati picked it up and put it in the paper: "This guy in Vietnam would like to get letters." And I got more letters than I could read. I actually handed them out to the other guys.

[16:32] KR: Great!

[16:33] JK: You know, so very strange stuff. But the moral of that story is, when you hear that people back home didn't' care about the guys in Vietnam, and they were opposed to them, and they spit on 'em when they came home at the airport, everything that's pure baloney. I'm sure it happened a couple of odd incidents, but the truth is nothing like the myth that goes around.

[17:18] KR: That makes complete sense, OK. So, did the Army provide any kind of entertainment for soldiers, or did you mostly spend your downtime writing letters and just resting.

[17:22] JK: Well yeah, there was a club—kind of a Quonset hut.

[17:27] KR: Mhmm.

[17:28] JK: A club. And—gee, I don't know how often, once a month or something like that—they would have a band, usually from the Philippines, come in and play. And other times, they would come in with a trailer—a flatbed on the back of like an 18-wheeler-type tractor—and that was a stage. And they would have USO entertainment, which was again usually from Korea or the Philippines. Once in a while you'd get actually an American band, but this was rare; this was really an *occasion* when those kinds of things happened.

[18:18] KR: Do you remember specifically any of the American bands? Did you go see any of those?

[18:26] JK: No, no, there was certainly nobody. At Christmastime, of course Bob Hope came. Half of us could go see Bob Hope, and the other half, a few days later Connie Francis came, and I got to go see Connie Francis. And she was incredible. She was *wonderful*. I've often wished I could figure out how to send her a note and say, "Boy, you don't know how much we appreciated that." But, that was really all as far as American bands you could name.

[19:04] KR: I gotcha, OK. So, what was your most memorable experience during your Army service? What stuck with you the most?

[19:12] JK: (Laughs) oh, probably about a hundred things. Um, when I—again, I arrived in Vietnam in September of '67

[19:29] KR: Right.

[19:30] JK: In November of '67, there was a major battle or string of battles at Dak To. Dak To was our northern outpost. We kept a tent garage up there, and some parts and tools to fix trucks that got bad fire and needed help to get back. We had guys assigned up there that rotated around everything. And in November of '67, the Battle of Dak To—and a lot of people remember the Battle for Hill #875—was the biggest battle of the war up to that point. And one more thing, we had a morning formation, and they said, "Any of you guys want to drive? Would you like to drive a truck and, uh, do something different?" And I raised my hand, you know, and you always hear, "Boy, in the Army, the last thing you wanna do is volunteer for anything." Well again, not being too smart. And so, they gave me a truck and loaded it up with ammunition for big guns—this was Howitzers and ammunition—

[21:06] KR: Howitzers, OK.

[21:07] JK: And I got some guy I'd never seen before assigned to ride shotgun in the truck, and off we went. And in those early days, the road was so narrow that the tree limbs brushed against the mirrors on both sides.

[21:26] KR: Wow.

[21:27] JK: And we're rollin' along at I'm gonna say 60 miles an hour or so, really, you know, at it. And the truck ahead of me was a flatbed loaded with ammunition, and he hit a mine.

[21:43] KR: Oh.

[21:43] JK: And it was the biggest explosion you could ever imagine. Just, and he was not far ahead, and I just drove through it and came back the other side like, "Wow, what the hell was that?" You know? We got stopped, and everybody got out their rifles and laid on the side of the road; you couldn't' see three feet in front of your noise, you know. But there came a point where they decided it was all clear, and we all went back to see what had happened. The truck was just *gone*. There was an engine laying over there, wheels over here, and whatever. The two guys that were in it, they found like maybe a helmet with dents and holes and then a boot. They were just gone.

[22:42] KR: Wow.

[22:43] JK: And uh, I had to get back in my truck, which had a busted windshield.

[21:48] KR: I was gonna ask, how much damage was there to your truck from driving through that explosion?

[21:52] Not *bad*, and you know, the front portions of it had gotten sprayed with a lot of debris and whatever. And the windshield was shattered. Again, it was extremely muddy; it was rainy season. And now there were no wipers or anything; you just had to do the bet you could. And, "Get back in! We're goin' up the road!" So we did and landed at Dak To, which was under rockets and mortars and all sorts of things coming in all the time, and had to spend the night there in a muddy trench. And get up the next morning and head back home. It was just absolutely horrendous, the entire experience. You looked out, and there were American guys' bodies out there, and they went out with an armored personnel carrier and opened the back door and tied a rope around their ankle and went over to the next guy and tied him with a rope, and they ended up with this string of bodies like a string of fish, you know when you're fishing? And they were shot at and everything, and they got them in and brought the bodies in. That's the kind of thing you see, and you don't ever forget. I don't know, there were so many incidents. Kyle, the other part of the story that's important to know is when my year in Vietnam was about up, I would have 15 months left to do in the military.

[24:51] KR: Right.

[24:52] JK: And the normal supposition was (laugh), in Vietnam, "I'm going home! (Laughs) Damn, the day I can get on that plane and get out of here is that's the most sacred thing of all." But I discovered, if I didn't do that, we had troops in Thailand, which was a little west. Instead of going east to go home, I went west to Thailand. I spent a year there. They were on our side; it was another Southeast Asian, Oriental society, but they were on our side. And it gave me a year to settle my mind, you know? A skin diver can't rise too fast; he'll get the bends. I used that time to get my head together and figure out, "How are you gonna walk down the street at home and look people in the eye and everything?" So, that entered to, uh, you asked about my whole Army experience; that was a big part of it. Thailand was wonderful; it was like visiting *National Geographic* or something and seeing a civilization and a society that you might have read about in a book, but you never thought you'd ever see it. It was really spectacular.

[26:33] KR: That does sound really interesting. So, were you doing the same things in Thailand that you had been doing in Vietnam?

[26:40] JK: Yeah, that's a story too. When I arrived, there was no platoon sergeant. I was a Spec-4, and here I come to Thailand. I'm so glad to be out of Vietnam. And they called me in the office, the commanding officer and first sergeant and said, "Do you know how to fix 155 track vehicle Howitzers?" They had a design flaw: They were a cast aluminum body, and when the gun would fire, and the barrel would recoil back, the gas, the diesel fuel tank was right behind that, and it would crack down at the bottom.

[27:40] KR: Oh, that's not good.

[27:40] JK: And the well would fill up with diesel fuel where this gun was recoiling, and it would catch on fire, which made it a really good target. And I had done, I don't know, two–three–four of them in Vietnam, and I walked in. They said, "Do you know how to do this?" "Yes I do." "Well," they said, "we're in a bind. We desperately need somebody that can take care of those guns. You're a Spec-4. We can make you a Sergeant E-5, and you can be platoon sergeant over this whole

operation"—all the things I listed before. I won't go down the list but—"if you agree to fix these guns when they break." And I was kinda like, "I'm in Thailand, right? There's no war here." "Well, there's war nearby, and we have to support them." So, I'm thinkin', "More pay, I would have a room to myself with my bed and everything instead of being out on the floor of a—in this case—a real genuine barracks. But all you had was a bunk and a locker. I would have a room to myself, wow!" So, I said yes. Again, never volunteer! And as we were going through all of this discussion, they said, "Take off your clothes, if you would please." You know, "Excuse me?" "Well, we have to check you for tattoos and birth marks." So, I had to take off all my clothes and be examined, and I didn't have any tattoos or birth marks. And they said, "Look, when you get the call on this, you'll get a set of clothes—fatigues—with absolutely no patches of any kind. You are to leave your wallet home, here at the base; you are to leave your dog tags; take no identification of any kind. They took me down, and here's my truck, which was a three-quarter-ton truck, with all the welding equipment and everything in the back, absolutely devoid of any identification. Everything had been ground off and painted over. So OK, and the time came when I get a call, and we go and back the truck up and go over to this field, and in comes a helicopter: a Chinook, with the two rotors.

[30:41] KR: Yeah.

[30:43] JK: We load the truck in the back of the helicopter. That too has no identification, no numbers, no "United States," no anything. All the guys on there are wearing fatigues with no identification, and we went up in the air and went awhile and came down, and it was absolutely incredible. If you've ever seen the movie *All Quiet on the Western Front*, they look out ,and it's just fog and mist and craters where the artillery has landed and everything. That was it, and I said, "Woah, man, where are we? Where am I?" And the guy says, "We don't have any people in L-A-O-S, so you ain't nowhere, man." You uh—
[31:41] KR: The Secret War [in Laos].

[31:42] JK: You had fallen off the face of the Earth. So, (laughs) it's nighttime. If, you know, the firing of the Howitzer and the diesel fuel on fire didn't make a good target. I get all of that put out and bail out the stuff [diesel] with rags or anything you could use to try and get it dry enough and start welding. And then, of course, that starts things on fire. But the welding makes a big, green glow—

[32:19] KR: Which gives away your position.

[32:20] JK: Bad guys said, "Wow, that's neat! Look at that! I want to shoot at that awhile, you know?" I got my head down in this hole, and I'm kinda hanging over the edge. Got the gun fixed, and we called the chopper back, and he came in, and we drove the truck on it, and went up and came down, and it was like nothing had ever happened. I'm back in Karat, Thailand, and I believed I did three of those guns when I was in Thailand. It only happened a couple of times, but absolutely *scary*. And years later, when it dawned on me what that was all about—and it was top-secret, you cannot tell anybody. Don't write to anybody about this or anything. Well, the bad guys, whoever they were, knew we were there. There was no question. But what they wanted was for us to keep this all hushed up and not tell the people back home. If you remember the huge disturbance that came about when openly Americans went into Cambodia, that's what they were afraid of. And, so

that was a major experience. There were a lot of major experiences, but the operation I ran in Thailand—it was a warrant officer, and I was the platoon sergeant—and we ended up, we had 43 people: all of the wrecker service, welding, body and fender work. We had a machine shop. All of the canvas repair, boot repair, glass repair, and radiator repair for all Army operations north of Bangkok, in Thailand, which included Laos (laughs). But, that was a hell of an experience—amazing. I was, when I came home finally in 1969, I was 21 years old. I arrived in Vietnam at 19, and I arrived in Thailand at 20. So, I was extremely young. I'm an old guy now, you know. To me that's, like, very, very young. You know, you're fairly young. You probably think, "Well, you know, man I'm as mature as that." But it was a lot for a young person to get my head wrapped around and try to figure out what happened, and why did they need me, and hat was my part in it, you know.

[35:24] KR: So, when you got home, were you thinking a lot and reflecting on that a lot, and trying to figure out what your service had meant?

[35:30] JK: To be honest with ya, no. That came later. When I came home, all my classmates from high school had gone off to college; they were in their last year; they were gonna graduate; they were lining up their career and everything. And I was way, way behind them. And in Thailand, when I was trying to get my head together, the reality of it was Vietnam and everything that's happened is the past; it's like, geez, I don't know anything from kindergarten to Cub Scouts to the Junior Prom, that's the past, and you have to look to the future. You're gonna have to build a career. You know, the day will come when you'll meet somebody and get married and have kids, and you've got to be able to fit into that kind of a world. So, that was my focus. A lot of guys came home, didn't get jobs for a long time, hung around the house I guess. And I didn't have much of that. From the day my feet hit the ground, I was looking for a job that would lead to a career, and how I was gonna deal with the future.

[37:00] KR: So what was your next step when you got home in 1969?

[37:05] JK: First step was I bought a set of drums, new set of drums.

[37:10] KR: Cool!

[37:11] JK: I started to save money for all the time I was overseas. And then, I went looking for a job, and I found a job as a salesman in a foreign car dealership: Lotus, Triumph, Jaguar, Fiat, Saab, and Volvo was the main breadwinner in all of that. And I had, you know, white shirt and a tie, and I was so respectable, and I tried to sell cars. And I wasn't particularly great at it. But, and then it started to snow (laughs), you know? I remember looking out at four feet of snow and the snowplow going by, and "Wow, this doesn't happen in all the parts of the world," you know. So, it was a pretty interesting time.

[38:20] KR: I'll bet! So how did people treat you as a veteran when you returned home? Did they comment on your service or ask you any questions about what it was like in Vietnam and Thailand?

[38:32] JK: Very little.

[38:33] KR: Very little.

[38:37] JK: Our next-door neighbor, you know, I was home a few days, and we were sitting in the back yard, grilling hamburgers or something on the grill. And he came out to mow the lawn and waved, you know. It was a friendly wave, but [he] certainly didn't come over to ask, "Hey, how was it?" or any of that. Where you got quizzed a little bit was at a job interview. It was like, "Oh, let's see! You graduated from high school in '65; now it's '69. Where have you been? What did you do in between?" And the obvious answer was to say, "I was in the Army." "Oh geez, did you go to Vietnam?" "Yeah, I was there." "OK, well we'll call ya if we decide you're the candidate we need." And the phone never rang, you know. Nobody was openly antagonistic, but they didn't know what to say…

[39:44] KR: OK

[39:45] JK: If you met at the water cooler or something like that (laughs). And I certainly didn't know what to say and wasn't particularly outgoing about it. But it wasn't, there was never antagonism. It was just *not* talked about.

[40:08] KR: Gotcha.

[40:09] JK: And that's really the way it was. Now, when I called Carolyn, who had been writing to me, and we started talking on the phone, she asked *some*, I guess, but never wanted to make me uncomfortable or anything. So, again, for the most part nobody talked about it.

[40:36] KR: OK. For you, did being in Vietnam change your perspective of the world? You talked about Thailand was kind of eye-opening because it was so different than what you had known in America.

[40:46] JK: The entire experience changed me,

[40:37] KR: Yeah.

[40:48] JK: my view of the world a lot. How can I say this, uh, diplomatically? We saw things that changed my view of America a lot: a lot of very, very ugly scenes. And it was pretty obvious, almost from the start when you landed in Vietnam, the people didn't want us there. They were trying to win their independence, and they didn't see us as any different from the French, who had been there for years before, and they were against us. We were the "bad guys," and that was something you had to, had to deal with, you know? "Everybody here hates ya, and they're out to find a way to kill you or eliminate you or something." So, I saw a lot of horrendous things, and the Tet Offensive and on and on. I was on the other side of the world, hearing the news when Martin Luther King was assassinated, Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. I had seen Bobby Kennedy campaign to be a senator in New York. I was a huge Bobby Kennedy Fan, and then he was blown away. Then the Democratic National Convention is warfare in the streets: the anti-war people versus an army of police. I get to Thailand, and all of a sudden we get news an American man is landing on the moon, which was "Wow!" you know, and a chance to be proud to be an American. And I was, at that time I had a house downtown, and I was spending my nights and weekends

downtown. That night, the astronauts took a plaque with little reproductions of flags of—I believe it was 53 countries, and one of 'em was Thailand—and left that on the—

[43:18–43:20, Ketwig's audio cuts out.]

[43:21] JK: You went downtown, and you couldn't *buy* anything to eat or drink. It was, "Ah, you're American!" They had televisions outside the stores, on the street, and chairs, and everybody was sitting, their mouth hanging open and watching this whole thing. "Oh, come on!" you know, "Have dinner with us! Have a drink!" It was a totally unusual thing, and all of those experiences—I could talk until your ears would fall off of the things I saw—all of it certainly changed my outlook on life, on people, on being an American to a very great extent. But, I couldn't do anything about it openly back home. I found a job—again, selling cars—but got rid of my American car and bought a Triumph sports car, and now I got a car payment. And you gotta go to work; you gotta get up in the morning and go to work. So, when you hear about Vietnam veterans, who are down at the capitol building throwing their medals back and everything. And it's like, "Geez, I *should* be there, but I've gotta be at work." So, it was some years later when I go involved and began to take part in some of their activities and Veterans for Peace. And, you know, but I saw enough of war that it's *insane*. It makes no sense. It is *horrifying*. It is brutal beyond words to describe it. And, you know, I see our, so much of our economy now is wrapped up in militarism and providing for war. I like to say, "Today I've worked for Rolls Royce for seven years. Today the ultimate status symbol is *not* a Rolls Royce. It's not a Rolex oyster watch. It's having a defense contract. That's when you know, boy, you are number one. You have the power; you have the money." And I'm very, very skeptical of the whole thing. Wars we're in for 20 years in Afghanistan, based on lies to start with, totally unnecessary. We've killed probably hundreds of thousands of people in the Middle East. Nobody counts that number. We've got veterans of those wars coming home with PTSD and an epidemic of suicide, and the fat cats are just getting fatter. You know, we've got the biggest militarism budget—they call it "defense," but it's not—it's offensive in every sense of the word. We have 800 military bases around the world, overseas military bases. The rest of the countries in the world *combined* have 23. You know, we're spending more than the next 11 countries' biggest spending on militarism in the world *combined*. If we cut our defense budget in half and use the money for education and healthcare and fixing the, uh, the roads and the bridges and everything, we would still outspend Russia and China combined! And it's like, this is insanity. Everything I saw in Vietnam was *insanity*. And Thailand and Laos was *insanity*. This is not making anything better for anybody. Somebody's getting rich; somebody's getting a promotion in their job and getting an office in the Pentagon or something. But it's just, we're expendable. You know, it's just brutal that so many people are bombed or burned to death with napalm or poisoned with Agent Orange. And we had no idea of what Agent Orange was at that time, but, you know it made all the green turn brown and fall off the trees, which gave the bad guys a lot less cover. And we thought it was a pretty good thing until we got home and…

[49:00] KR: And Rachel Carson published a book, *Silent Spring.*

[49:04] JK: Oh man, a lady named Maude Victor was working in a VA hospital in Chicago, and a guy—oh boy, Paul Hanneker [sp?] or something like that—all these guys were coming in with cancers. And they'd all been sprayed with this chemical in Vietnam, and she was the one who put it together and then went out into public and said, "Boy, we got something going on her!" And she

met, oh, from one of the news, TV news things did a special on it, just raising the question. And her life was never the same. She was persecuted til the day she died, but she's a great hero in my book. People who told the truth of what was going on were not popular. But there were whistle blowers there too, and thank God. That's a long answer to your short question (laughs). I'm sorry, Kyle.

[50:22] KR: No, that was a fantastic answer. Thank you for that. Tell me a little about Veterans for Peace.

[50:29] JK: Well, Veterans for Peace is an international organization of veterans that see how ridiculous this whole thing is, and how unhealthy, and try to lobby and demonstrate and write letters and so on to change the government's mind and push for sensibility. There's a very big emphasis right now on, under Trump, to privatize the VA: to take more and more of their health-giving activity and farm it out to the civilian medical establishment. And we're all opposed to that; there's a movement called Save Our VA within Veterans for Peace to try to forestall some of that. Right at the moment they're very proud of the fact that they're going to send more and more emotional and mental cases to the outside and not take care of em at the VA system, which has been strained. You know, but we've got 22 guys a day, average, across the United States—veterans—committing suicide. Some of em are actually women too; but that's the progress we've made since the Vietnam days. The outside mental health establishment, um, is not at all familiar or trained with the problems that combat veterans have. And there's, now that they've established that they're gonna send a lot of these cases outside the VA, there's a bill in Congress that will require that any provider has to have VA training and familiarity with the special needs of this group they're going to be dealing with. I don't know if that piece of legislation will get passed or not, but that's the kind of thing we're trying to do…

[53:18] KR: I hope so.

[53:19] JK: to get the best help—not just, "we sent you to a guy's office," you know—we'd like it to be, "We sent you to somebody that knows what they're talking about and is familiar and knows all the things that the VA has dealt with from day one. So, that's their emphasis. Vietnam Veterans Against the War used to be these, you know, real radical guys. You may have seen the movie *Born on the Fourth of July* with Tom Cruise playing Ron Kovic and so forth. VBAW Now demonstrates and takes part in demonstrations and things against the war, publishes a fantastic twice-a-year magazine. Veterans' Day and Memorial Day they put out a big, thick newspaper with great articles and what's going on, things to think about. Again, the VA situation, it's—so, there's a lot. And I'm also a member of Vietnam Veterans of America, who are all lobbying for trying to make sense of the care we get as veterans, and what the government is. They created the monster, you know: They required us, by the Draft and everything, to go and be in these situations. And now, as we sit and think about what we saw, what we participated in, and have major fits of conscience—which is called PTSD, to a large degree—try to help us live with it and assimilate into our civilian lives. So all of these organizations are really trying to encourage the government to do more of that. They keep making veterans; they just haven't made much sense in how they deal with veterans' problems yet.

[55:41] KR: Right, right. That leads me to my next question: So, for listeners who may not know, you later became an author, and you published two books about Vietnam. So, I wanted to ask, what made you decide to start writing about your experiences fifteen years after you left the Army?

[55:57] JK: Yeah, and that's what it was. It was well after, and I was, my career was up and going by that point. And one night in 1982, January, a Saturday night, my wife was putting the kids to bed upstairs. And in those days you turned the dial to go through the television channels. And I stumbled on a show that became really important, called *The Uncounted Enemy*. It was a CBS documentary about how General Westmoreland at the time of the Tet Offensive had put a ceiling on reports back to Washington of the number of enemy out there with their guns aimed at us. His ceiling was 350,000; it could not go any more than that. And there were over 600,000 bad guys out there. And this came out, and ultimately he sued CBS for besmirching his reputation, and it went to trial. And when he saw there were 28 field-grade officers—majors and colonels and generals—28 waiting in line to testify that, "Yes, that's exactly what happened. That was real." He dropped the suit. He asked CBS to agree not to besmirch his wonderful reputation and went home to South Carolina and got God-knows-how-much to give a speech and whatever. But the whole thing was over. So, I tuned into this program on a Saturday night. It blew me away. Just, "Oh my God, the truth is coming out, and somebody is really looking at what happened." And I was a mess, and my wife put me back together, and on Monday I went out the door, went back to work, like nothing had ever happened. But it *had*, and I knew I had to deal with Vietnam. I like to say I put Vietnam in a box on the shelf, and that night my box fell of the shelf and splattered all over the floor.

[58:36] KR: Yeah.

[58:37] JK: The next thing that happened was my wife was home with the kids and watching television one day, saw a show with a nurse who had worked with civilians in Vietnam and had written a book. And Carolyn said, "Oh, wow, I gotta get that book! She's saying the same things my husband said." Went and got the book, and she's on the couch reading, going "Oh my God! Oh my God!" And she would tell me these things, and she's a registered nurse. The idea that you would cut somebody open for surgery and find six-foot worms in there, she found very upsetting. And I said, "Yeah, nothing surprises me. Nothing was allowed to surprise you in Vietnam." So, she was a local lady, and Carolyn got in touch with her and talked with her, and she said, "Bring your husband over, and I'll be happy to talk with him." In the meantime, we went to the mall, and there was a bookstore. And I said, "I wonder if they have any books about Vietnam." And it was a short shelf, three–four feet across. I bought one of every title. I went out of there with two shopping bags full of books and went home and started reading one after the other. I couldn't believe that anybody could write about anything so huge, so important, and make sense of it, organize it in a fashion that it would be a book. So, I don't know. One day I went out on the back porch with a yellow legal pad and a pen and started taking notes. All of those books were valid; there was nothing wrong with them. But they weren't what I needed *my kids* to know, what I wanted them to know about what I had seen, and what I had learned.

[1:00:56] KR: Sure.

[1:00:57] JK: And I started takin notes. And in all my years of school, Kyle, the only course I ever failed was typing. And what we discovered was, if it was supposed to be the index finger of my right hand, I would use the index finger of the left hand. It was like a form of dyslexia, but I didn't know.

[1:01:20] KR: Woah.

[1:01:21] JK: We had a little manual typewriter. I wrote on the yellow legal pad til I got a very bad case of writer's cramp. I started with this typewriter, typing out my story. And at the time, I spent a lot of time just thinking, "What was that all about? How do you describe that?" you know? And putting it into an order and into a somewhat-organized telling of what I had seen, and what it meant, and what it, you know, what I needed my wife and my kids to know. Now, my kids were little toddlers at that time. Again, we're gonna put this on the shelf, and when they're old enough, they can read it. I would type late into the night, 3–4:00 in the morning, sitting there—this finger types, and this one makes capitals—and I'm typing up my story. And in the morning, I would hand the pages to my wife and go off to work, and when I came home that evening, we'd, many times, talk about it—with two kids running around and everything—but, you know. Anyway, by a strange, absolutely bizarre set of circumstances, that pile of papers became a book. I had never written more than a letter or a term paper in high school in my life, had no intention of writing a book, had no thought of that, and geez, it just came about; it just happened like a cosmic set of circumstances. And it became a book! And that was scary, but you know…

[1:03:20] KR: But that was the way you, like, you recalled everything and processed everything finally after you took that box off the shelf. Was writing just your way of making it make sense.

[1:03:31] JK: Yeah, and it was private.

[1:03:33] KR: Sure.

[1:03:34] JK: Nobody was cross-examining me or interrupting and, you know, in any way stopping the flow of this thing. I would put on old '60s records and put myself back the best I could. There's still situations that I cannot remember how I got where I got, and how some of that came about, but for the most part I just was trying to describe what happened, and what I took away from it in 1982–83. Sort it out, figure out what it had done to me, and what I needed to let my family know about all of this.

[1:04:38] KR: Right, I get that, OK. So we're running a little short on time, and I really wanted to ask you about your books, but since we only have four minutes left, I want to get to this question because our hope at VWM is that these oral histories will be sued as educational tools in the classroom, so that students can get a real person's perspective on events like the Vietnam War that they've only read about in textbooks.

[1:05:02] JK: All right.

[1:05:03] KR: So I wanted to ask you, if you were speaking to a high school classroom about your books, and a student told you that they had learned about the Vietnam War and understood that it was important but didn't really understand *why*, what would you tell them?

[1:05:15] JK: Well, that's exactly the question I get. I like to go to high schools and colleges, and it took another book (laughs) to really answer the question. But you need to understand that this was—number one—unnecessary. The decision to go to war was, um, trumped up—that's probably the wrong word, but it's the one that comes to mind right now—and a total bunch of lies that we got involved in this war: "We're gonna stop communism from spreading all over the world." The Vietnamese didn't know communism from anything; they were trying to win their independence. They kicked the French out. We had, uh, benefited greatly from the Viet Minh, the "communist" bad guys in Vietnam helping us against the Japanese in World War II. And there'd been an agreement with FDR that after the war he would try to end the colonialism that the French had enjoyed for a long time. The French were like slave owners; the conditions that the Vietnamese had lived under, under France, were unbelievably brutal and harsh. So they finally kick the French out with the Battle of Dien Bien Phu [13 March–17 May 1954], and who comes along but the United States? There was an agreement that they would divide Vietnam into north and south, and after X number of years they would have an election and let the people decide and reunite the country. The United States decided, "We cannot allow that," and started sending in advisors and people to "help" Vietnam resist "brutal communism." And that's what it was all based on. We ended up bombing Vietnam, parts of Cambodia, and Laos with the most intense bombing in the history of the world. We killed somewhere between three and a half and five million people in the most horrendous ways possible and did nobody any good. In the end, the cost of that to us as Americans was so great, we ended up pulling out. The communists took over the country. Yes, they were, uh, engaged in trying to re-educate a lot of their people, and that was brutal and harsh. And that's brought up, but a great many of the people were overjoyed that they had overcome colonialism, and they were free and a united country. We did great damage in Cambodia, if you remember the holocaust there and the Khmer Rouge just killing anybody that had any education. And then in Laos, they were just bombed into almost extinction; it was unreal. That's our legacy. I read last night that someone has introduced legislation to go back and help these people with all the unexploded bombs and ordinance and everything that's in the ground, that's still killing people in Vietnam 50 years after the war, to help clean it up and prevent those deaths. Whether that legislation will pass or not, I have no idea. But it was terrible! It was awful! And an awful lot of people saw it and are having a very hard time living with what they saw, and that's the cause of a great many of those 22 veterans that commit suicide every day. It was *damaging* in every way possible. A lot of people, a lot of corporations, sold bombs and artillery, and helicopters, and uniforms, and all the things that went into the war, and they got rich, and a lot of poor people and innocent people died. And I'm sorry, but that's what I saw and what I've come to understand. I've got 500 books about Vietnam; I've read a lot of 'em. That was what I boiled down to, and that became the second book: *Vietnam Reconsidered: The War, the Times, and Why They Matter*. Because we're doing the same type of thing in the Middle East; that's based on lies. It certainly has not been good for the people in Afghanistan or Iraq or Syria. Millions of 'em have become refugees and taken over a large part of Europe and overwhelmed the resources that are available to 'em there. And we take no part; we will not accept any refugees into our country, not even the guys who were translators and helped our soldiers very directly. Nah, we leave em there; we don't want them as refugees. It's a terrible, incredible policy: "We'll make the money, makin' the bombs,

and the airplanes, and the helicopters, and all that. We'll get rich on that, and the people we've hurt? Sorry, you were in the wrong place at the wrong time." And that's my message. That's what I saw, what sense I can make of it. I think a lot of people see it the same way. When the book originally came out in 1985, we were overwhelmed with mail and phone calls, saying, "Yeah man, you got it right! Thanks for sayin' it!" Now I get emails once in a while (laughs), you know. But there's a lot of veterans out here who feel the way I do, who saw things the way I do, and I like to think I'm making a right out of a wrong, you know? I've taken a terrible, uh, event in my life and tried to make it into something that helps people, and that will be constructive, so.

[1:13:10] KR: Right, OK, absolutely. So, has the public response to your books been what you expected or more than you hoped?

[1:13:18] JK: It was on the first book.

[1:13:20] KR: OK.

[1:13:21] JK: Uh, the second book came out in…

[1:13:23] KR: Last year, right?

[1:13:24] JK: 2019, last year, and wasn't anywhere near as big a deal. First book was a hard-bound and was reviewed in all the major newspapers and everything. The second was terribly hard to get published at all and came out as a paperback. And I had all kinds of speaking engagements and everything lined up, and along came the Coronavirus, and schools and everything has been curtailed.

[1:13:57] KR: Everything's been disrupted, yeah.

[1:14:01] JK: It's gonna be hard to get it back, gaining any kind of momentum when things get back to normal. But that's life, you know. My message is out there; my website is there with a lot of interesting stuff on it. If people find that, they can get an idea what I think, and what I am trying to convey. And that's the best I can do, you know. You have to make sense where you can

[1:14:36] KR: Absolutely, yeah. Well, I don't want to keep you too long past our scheduled time, and I really appreciate everything that you've told me today. And you've answered all of my questions, and this has just been fantastic. But is there anything you wanted to get to that we haven't covered yet?

[1:14:56] JK: Not really. Not really. Just, there is a portion of America that has tried to sell a view of what happened in Vietnam. This thing about, "Oh, guys came home, and walking through the airport they got spit on by the protestors." And all of that is a total fabrication. It may have happened in a case or two, you know, very, very remote. Most guys that were in Vietnam, if they came home and walked through the airport, and a hippie spit on 'em, they'd kill the guy right then and there, you know? Beat him to a pulp. There is no record of any newspaper article, TV news report, anything about an incident like that ever happening anywhere in the United States. A guy by the name of Jerry—oh boy—did a book called *The Spitting Image*, researched this all over

American and couldn't find the first bit of proof that any of it ever happened. And you say that to a lot of vets, and they get all upset. And I think they built a situation in their mind, but the American people, anything like that would be totally out of character with the American people. My experiences with people trying to send boxes of letters and everything to support you, I believe, is a much better picture of the American people, and a lot more accurate. So,

[1:16:56] KR: Absolutely.
[1:16:57] JK: I don't know where all of these stories came from, and who's profiting, and who's benefiting, but there's a lot of baloney out there. And there's a lot of people who were in Vietnam, who had been quiet about it and came home, got a job, and built a family and a career and everything, and I still hear from them. And they say, "Man, thank you for sayin' it." That's what I know, and what I lived, and that's accurate to me; that's, you know, the greatest accomplishment I can make out of the whole situation.

[1:17:39] KR: Yeah. Well, thank you so much, Mr. Ketwig. This has been fantastic, and I really appreciate you taking the time.

[1:17:48] JK: It's my pleasure. I appreciate it, Kyle. Thanks for letting me get it off (laughs) my chest.

[1:17:54] KR: Oh, yeah!