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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with William Bennet
Conducted by Ron Frankum
Date Unknown
Transcribed by Cecily Darwin**

1 Ron Frankum: I guess probably the first question I have is what exactly did the
2 USS *Consolation* do in French Indochina?

3 William Bennet: Okay. We were the medical support for the forces that were
4 involved in the evacuation process.

5 RF: Okay.

6 WB: I don't know too much about the going zone and the medical department
7 because I was in—there's two, there's a hospital on the ship and then there's ship's
8 company and I was in ship's company not connected with the medical department of the
9 ship.

10 RF: Okay. What exactly did you do in ship's company?

11 WB: I don't know if you know anything about the military ranks, but I was a first
12 class yeoman which is kind of like stenographer, secretary, secretary to the captain.

13 RF: Okay. Do you recall exactly when the *Consolation* or approximately when
14 the *Consolation* was dispatched over to French Indochina?

15 WB: No. I've gone through my papers and some are missing. I guess if you—I
16 retired in '68, and of course we've moved about three times since then. Papers get lost
17 and whatnot, but I was onboard the *Consolation* less than a year and when I went
18 onboard I believe she was in French Indo—Inchon in Korea. Then from there we went
19 down to Tourane and before that action or whatever it was.

20 RF: Right. Yeah, that's present-day Da Nang.

1 WB: Yeah. I don't know where they landed, if they took the refugees on into
2 Saigon or what, but I went over into the city of Tourane, which is now Da Nang. I went
3 over several times, you know, just to have something to do to get off the ship. You
4 couldn't go to any of the clubs or bars or anything over there. You had to carry your
5 water with you. I would go over just something to do, you know, we could go over
6 between twelve and five.

7 RF: Okay, sort of—this was shore liberty, essentially.

8 WB: Yes.

9 RF: Okay.

10 WB: I didn't see any crowds of people. It was very—well, you can see some of
11 the slides I will send. There is a couple of scenes and there's just no people around, no
12 crowds of people. I remember a French garrison was there. We just walked around and
13 catch the boat back to the ship. Of course, I noticed on the list of the ships that you had
14 you had the USS *Delta* listed. Her hull number is 9. You had her listed, she's an AR, a
15 repair ship. I think you had AK something or the other as the designation.

16 RF: But she's AR-9.

17 WB: AR-9, yes.

18 RF: Okay. Well, that's good to know.

19 WB: I served on her in 1950.

20 RF: Okay. Then well you're pretty familiar with her, then.

21 WB: I think the *Ajax*, which is a repair ship might've been involved, too, because
22 they had built some floats at the beach there in Tourane Bay where we would go over and
23 have barbeques and drink lots of beer and swim. They had these little pontoons that went
24 out into the water where the Liberty boats could tie up. That was about the extent of
25 recreation there.

26 RF: From my understanding is the terrain was really—that was the R&R (rest
27 and recuperation) area for those that were transporting people from North to South. So
28 they would get the refugees and load them up in Haiphong and they would take the day
29 or two-day trip, depending on what kind of craft they were on, down Saigon in. But I'm
30 wondering even on the *Consolation* itself were there ever any refugees that were—

1 WB: Uh, no, I never saw any on the ship. I don't know what the—if they were
2 what our government regulations are in that regard if they're allowed to treat the local
3 people or what. I never saw any on the *Consolation*.

4 RF: Okay, okay. Yeah, I'm trying to figure out the role of the *Consolation* itself.
5 I've spoken with a few people and I'll be interviewing them I think later on this week
6 who do know of some refugees that were onboard, but I'm not sure what the
7 circumstances were, but they were also in Medical Corps.

8 WB: Well, yeah, those are the people that can tell you about that, but I'm sure in
9 emergencies they would. I mean, you're not just going to let somebody go without
10 assistance if you can help it. It wouldn't matter where they were from.

11 RF: Oh, sure, yeah. That's sort of standard procedure, as it were, to make sure
12 you knew what was going on. Well, now, what did you think of Tourane at the time? Or
13 Da Nang, I guess it would be.

14 WB: Well, I found it interesting. It was a tropical climate so it was kind of warm
15 and hot. We didn't have to wear our uniform. We went over in sort of dungarees and
16 whatnot. It was pleasant walking around. We carried our canteen of water. We couldn't
17 even get a soft drink. There was, I remember, a movie theatre. I have a picture of that on
18 the slides. You can tell a little bit and right as you come in and when the boats would go
19 in there was always a lot of little houseboats that people lived on like the little tiny boats.
20 Have you been to Hong Kong?

21 RF: Um, I haven't, but I've been to Vietnam.

22 WB: Oh, okay.

23 RF: I know what you're talking about.

24 WB: The little ones and actually people live onboard and it was interesting to see
25 those when you come in. They had an unusual method of catching fish. They'd build kind
26 of towers out in the bay, little platforms and have a net out and I don't know when they
27 would pull it up, but they always had these fishing towers as we would be coming with
28 their nets out on a pole. It was some kind of a square thing and was picked up with strings
29 coming from the four corners and whatnot. That was a long time ago.

30 RF: Oh, sure yeah, absolutely.

31 WB: And, of course, memory fades.

1 RF: Well, yeah, it does, but even faded memories is better than none at all.

2 Right?

3 WB: Yes. I have an interesting little map, too, I'm going to send along. It's the
4 Vietnam conflict map. I don't know if you have one of those or not. It gives a
5 chronological list of events leading to the conflict. It starts in 1945.

6 RF: This is the one that includes the American involvement?

7 WB: Yes.

8 RF: Yeah, actually—yeah, we do have a couple of copies of that here. The
9 *Consolation* was really in support of this operation. Did you ever—was there any sort of
10 news as to what was going on at the time in the operation? Did you guys ever get a sense
11 of—?

12 WB: Oh, yeah, oh, yes. Even back then we had the daily teletype news that
13 would come out and come over the teletype and they would post it. We always had our
14 plan of the day published every day giving orders of what would be taking place on the
15 next day, et cetera. There was always little news bits in there about what we were doing.
16 Everybody knew.

17 RF: What did you think of that whole operation and the fact that you were in the
18 middle of it?

19 WB: It was something that had to be done. There was no other way that the
20 people who wanted to go south there was no other way they could've gone without help
21 from the outside.

22 RF: Yeah, yeah, without the United States sort of getting them on their way.

23 WB: Right.

24 RF: I guess as your job you probably weren't really, you weren't involved at all
25 in the medical side.

26 WB: No.

27 RF: So you probably didn't have a sense of what types of patients were onboard
28 at the time.

29 WB: No. I don't even know how long the operation lasted.

30 RF: It was three hundred days total, but I believe the *Consolation* was only there
31 for about a month.

1 WB: Yeah, that's what I think. We were there for about a month and then I think
2 we left there and I don't know if we returned to the States. I know we had a little stint in
3 Hong Kong and Yokosuka and San Francisco. I left. I didn't even believe I was aboard
4 for a year and then I left for duty in Sasebo, Japan.

5 RF: Okay. Yeah, I guess I'm curious and maybe I can find this in the documents
6 of why for that one-month period they deployed you to Indochina. I haven't been able to
7 figure that out yet, but hopefully I will.

8 WB: Oh, why they deployed the ship?

9 RF: Yeah, yeah.

10 WB: Well, I don't know—I guess for emergencies in case there was any sort of
11 hostilities because the *Consolation* even then they rigged the pontoons up on the side and
12 she could have two helicopters landing on either side and one on the flight deck and this.
13 So they would fly them right in from the battlefields during the Korean conflict. Soldiers
14 would step on mines even after the cease fire, they would zoom them right in by
15 helicopter. So I imagine that's what she was doing here. I don't know if we were relieved
16 by another hospital ship or not.

17 RF: That's what I'm not sure of, either.

18 WB: Well, maybe not because at the little beach over there where we used to go
19 swimming there was beer. They had the people that went over to take part in recreation
20 built all kinds of things out of empty beer cans. I mean, soon as the ship pulled out they
21 looked back and somebody says that people came down from the hills and were grabbing
22 up the beer cans and anything else. I guess they could make things out of them. I know in
23 Japan you can scratch the little furry toys back in 1946 and you could see Swiss beer or
24 something like that written under them.

25 RF: Yeah, I think you recycled for just about anything.

26 WB: Yeah.

27 RF: Anywhere from housing to—

28 WB: Oh, yeah, they make stove pipes out of caps.

29 RF: Did you ever come across any of the French troops?

30 WB: Yeah, I never talked to any, but we went into this one garrison into the little
31 courtyard and there was some French soldiers out and they were killing a chicken. They

1 were going to have it for dinner. That was kind of grotesque because they just stuck a
2 knife in the chicken's neck and caught the blood. That was for the sauce.

3 RF: Yeah, yeah.

4 WB: We didn't talk. I couldn't speak French and the officer that I was with, he
5 couldn't speak French. We just nodded and they knew that we were American forces, et
6 cetera. So nobody tried to talk to anybody.

7 RF: There wasn't really any interaction.

8 WB: No, no. I didn't see any massive troop movements. The town was really
9 quiet and, as I say, very few people moving around.

10 RF: Do you think that was a product of the war that was going on or just the fact
11 that it was a pretty sleepy town?

12 WB: Well, you know, it might've been people just were not coming out. They
13 were staying hid because who knows what kind of information had been published for
14 them.

15 RF: Right, that's true.

16 WB: Like I know when—I had friends that I met in Korea who were in Japan at
17 the time of the war ended there. There they published, the Japanese authorities published
18 this, "Don't approach any Americans. They'll kill you on the spot." He said he was really
19 trembling and scared the first time he approached an American soldier after the end of the
20 war, the Second World War. So I imagine that the communists probably published all
21 kind of information.

22 RF: They did indeed, yeah.

23 WB: You know hide and stay out of the way.

24 RF: Certainly a lot to the refugees that were in Hanoi and Haiphong at the time
25 they went out on the ships, they would be thrown overboard, things of that nature. Did
26 you ever come across any children at all? Because they're usually a little more
27 adventurous than most adults.

28 WB: Yeah, just there may have been a couple. I just I can't remember.

29 RF: Okay, that's fine. I would be very interested in seeing your photographs.

30 WB: Okay. Well, I'll send them off, they're slides.

31 RF: Oh, slides, yeah.

1 WB: Yeah, you needn't worry about sending them back or anything, the slides, I
2 mean, because they absolutely would mean nothing to anyone that I know.

3 RF: Are you sure?

4 WB: Yeah.

5 RF: Well, what I can do or if you would like is I can put them in the archive and
6 then just start a collection under your name and that way they'll be preserved here in the
7 archive for any researcher along the line. I would probably do that after I get my book
8 published, though.

9 WB: Yeah, well, I hope I'm still around when your book's published.

10 RF: Well, I'm only looking probably about eighteen months away, maybe two
11 years. So I hope you better be.

12 WB: Oh, great, yeah, I hope so. Well, I'm in zone now. So we all reach the zone
13 at one time or another.

14 RF: Well, yeah, I suppose so, but—

15 WB: It's just interesting to me that here I've spent twenty years in the military
16 and I figured, well, the whole thing was kind of just like here today and gone tomorrow
17 and then all of a sudden I get your letter and maybe there's a little something that I'd
18 done that might help somebody out someday down the line or be of interest to someone.

19 RF: I think it's an incredibly interesting—I wouldn't be writing the book if I
20 didn't think it was interesting. So I guess I'm a pretty non-objective audience.

21 WB: Right.

22 RF: From what we were able to do at the time, given the incredible amount of
23 people and materials that we moved from North to South, I was shocked that I couldn't
24 really find anything on the subject, which was really what spurred me to begin this
25 process of researching and then talking to those that were a part of it. It's been really
26 rewarding for me. Hopefully others will share at least in a part of the interest that I have
27 in it when it comes out.

28 WB: Well, great, I hope so, yeah. Another little interesting thing, what makes it
29 so interesting for me is I was there in 1954. I was also in the Tonkin Gulf in 1964.

30 RF: Oh, were you?

1 WB: The *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* had just come in and relieved the destroyer I
2 was on and we went back to our home port in Yokosuka and the families of the married
3 servicemen onboard this little destroyer had just arrived to set up housekeeping and spend
4 two years with their husbands in Japan. We were there that night. I think some time
5 during the night we got underway. They had supposedly sighted the torpedo boats that
6 had some torpedoes firing at them. Well, we got underway and half of our crew was left
7 in Japan. We pulled into Manila and picked them up there and went on over into the
8 Tonkin Gulf again.

9 RF: So you went into the Tonkin Gulf after August of '64, after the incident?

10 WB: Yeah, we had just left.

11 RF: What destroyer were you on at the time?

12 WB: *Rupertus*, DD-851.

13 RF: Okay.

14 WB: You know, that's what we'd done for the two years was just patrol in the
15 South China Sea.

16 RF: You were part of was it Operation Market Time?

17 WB: Well, we were at Whiskey Station or Alpha Station, Yankee Station, in fact,
18 and right off of Da Nang a couple of times, which I thought was interesting.

19 RF: Yeah, kind of like revisiting the past. Did you ever have any contact with the
20 Viet Cong or the North Vietnamese?

21 WB: No, we'd done just shore bombardment with our five-inch guns and they'd
22 give us the coordinates and then we would fire and that would be it.

23 RF: Okay, so you did combat support, fire support.

24 WB: Yeah, we did take a couple of, I guess, shells exploding too close and
25 fragments would fly around the deck a little bit, but no one on our ship was injured or
26 anything.

27 RF: That's good. Yeah, that's another whole chapter in this episode.

28 WB: Yes, it is. Oh, yeah, in fact, it's surprising. People, they don't know that
29 Laos and Cambodia were part of the whole French Indochina peninsula thing there. Then
30 what was it? Back in '46 or somewhere back in there it was divided up with French
31 connections, I think they say.

1 RF: That's right, yeah, the French—

2 WB: Laos and yeah.

3 RF: What year did you join the Navy, then?

4 WB: I went in, in '46 or '45 and came out in '46 and then went back in, in '50

5 when the Korean War started. I knew I'd be called so I just went. I volunteered, yes.

6 RF: Okay, that's interesting. Well, let's see. I guess, is there anything else about

7 that period in '54 that you think would be of good interest for the story?

8 WB: Uh, no. Do you have any connections with medical personnel?

9 RF: We do have some, yes.

10 WB: Okay, I do remember a quartermaster aboard the ship whose name was

11 Fernista from Ohio. His brother was also onboard. He was a corpsman at the time and I

12 think he is now a doctor. So they were there at that time. I think I have their address

13 somewhere and I'll see if I can find his address.

14 RF: Is it—they're Harry and Lewis Fernista?

15 WB: Lewis, yeah.

16 RF: Yeah, they live in Dayton, Ohio, now.

17 WB: Oh, you contacted them.

18 RF: Yeah, I sent them actually the same letter that I sent you.

19 WB: Uh-huh, oh, great.

20 RF: I have not heard from them—well, you know what? Maybe not wait a

21 second. I talked to someone—no, I didn't. I talked with another gentlemen today, Lewis

22 Magluski.

23 WB: Yeah, yeah, Lewis Fernista.

24 RF: Okay. Well, yeah, hopefully they'll be able to, one of them will call me, one

25 of the brothers, and I will be able to talk with them.

26 WB: Well, yeah, I'm sure his brother, I don't know what his brother's name was.

27 RF: Harry.

28 WB: He was in the medical department. He would be able to give all sorts of

29 information from that end.

1 RF: Okay, well, hopefully. I've had a couple of people. I sent out quite a number
2 of letters because Ted Pevenski was kind of enough to help me out there. I've had pretty
3 good response back so far.

4 WB: Well, the *Consolation* has a reunion every two years or so.

5 RF: That's right, yeah.

6 WB: I have never been to one. I didn't have any close ties there.

7 RF: Sure.

8 WB: You go—this was the sad thing about the military. You'd meet people and
9 you would become close for two years and you would almost go out and kill for each
10 other, but you're transferred and you never hear from them again. Well, I didn't have
11 any—I didn't bond with anybody when I was on the *Consolation* because I was there, I
12 think, a little less than a year. I haven't kept in touch with anyone.

13 RF: Well, who knows where the next reunion will be? Maybe you can go visit.

14 WB: Well, yeah, I think the last one was just in Long Beach, California.

15 RF: That's right. Yeah, it was in Long Beach.

16 WB: Yeah, okay.

17 RF: Well, you do have my address.

18 WB: Oh, yes.

19 RF: I look forward to looking at all the slides and everything.

20 WB: Yeah, I'll get those off. I'll put them in envelopes and try and indicate what
21 they are.

22 RF: Yeah, that would be very—

23 WB: Some of the slides I've written on but they—it won't hurt the picture.
24 They're in fairly good condition, that's surprising.

25 RF: Well, that'll be great. If I'm able to use any in the book I'll make sure that
26 you get the credit for them, that they're your photograph.

27 WB: Okay. The *Consolation* I think might've put a cruise book out at that time.

28 RF: I believe they did.

29 WB: Yeah. So I don't know if you could get a copy of it. I don't know how you
30 would get a copy of it because unless you could find somebody that had one. I don't ever
31 remember having one, but I think they did put a cruise book out.

1 RF: Yeah, but if I'm not able to find someone who has one I'm sure they would
2 have one at the Navy Historical Center. I'm planning to go there this summer.

3 WB: You know what? I guess I don't remember too much about the *Consolation*
4 because it was kind of—you know had a very, not a strenuous job, but a very unusual
5 one. To get promoted you compete in a fleet-wide examination for your different pay
6 grades. On the *Consolation* in the medical department the corpsmen had taken the exam,
7 okay, and the department projects a percentage of second class will make first and, et
8 cetera, fleet wide. The percentage on the *Consolation* was almost as much as the exams
9 were fleet wide. So there was a big investigation and I had to record that. So that took up
10 quite a bit of my time.

11 RF: I bet it would've, yeah.

12 WB: But I think there was—it ended up there was no evidence of any kind of
13 collusion or anything.

14 RF: Just one of those things that happened.

15 WB: Yes, yes.

16 RF: Those happen even in the Navy, too, don't they?

17 WB: That's right. Oh, and another interesting thing I just—today, now, women
18 serve onboard most all ships. Back then there was nurses on the *Consolation* and a couple
19 of female doctors and it was real strange to walk to the little ship's store on the
20 *Consolation* and see all that stuff women use, hair nets, deodorant, perfumes, and all the
21 personal items that they use. So that was an experience.

22 RF: Actually, this Thursday I'm going to speak with Ann Peterson who was
23 onboard at the same time. She was a nurse.

24 WB: Oh, okay.

25 RF: She's in El Paso. So I'll get a chance to get her perspective, which I think
26 will be interesting.

27 WB: Well, great. Oh, okay, that'll be good, yeah.

28 RF: I've been very fortunate that a lot of people responded. So I really appreciate
29 the opportunity to be able to have a chance to talk with all you guys.

30 WB: Probably everybody wants their ten minutes of fame.

1 RF: Well, you deserve it. I think you deserve it, at least, if I have anything to say
2 about it.

3 WB: Just to know that somebody is writing about something that you
4 participated, well, you know, it kind of gives you a good feeling.

5 RF: Well, good.

6 WB: I wish you great success.

7 RF: Well, thank you. Thank you very much. When this eventually does come to
8 fruition inside I'll make sure that people know about it.

9 WB: Oh, great. But anything I can remember I'll either send you an email or
10 through the regular mail or something and I'll get these slides off.

11 RF: Oh, fantastic. Well, thank you so much for taking the time.

12 WB: Oh, my pleasure.

13 RF: I certainly appreciate it and I'll be looking forward to seeing those slides. I
14 will let you know when I get them, so when they arrive so that you know that they're
15 here.

16 WB: Good.

17 RF: Well, thank you so much.

18 WB: Oh, you're welcome.

19 RF: I'll speak to you later, bye-bye.

20 WB: Bye-bye.

21 RF: That was William Bennet. Today is the—