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**The Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Arthur Keller
Conducted by Ron Frankum
March 1, 2000
Transcribed by Cecily Darwin**

1 Ron Frankum: Interview with Arthur Keller who's at his home in San Juan,
2 California, and I'm calling from the phone and it's March 1st, year 2000, and he served
3 for the USS *Consolation*.

4 Arthur Keller: Sure am.

5 RF: Great. Well, I guess maybe what we could do is I have some questions and I
6 know that some of them probably don't relate much to the *Consolation*, but maybe they'll
7 help bring out some stories or things that you remember of the actual event in Indochina.

8 AK: Okay.

9 RF: Really, the first question I have is just sort of as an introduction, I'm
10 interested to know about your service in the U.S. Navy and how you ended up on the
11 *Consolation* in 1954.

12 AK: Well, I was in the Navy for twenty years. After the war I was at—in the
13 early 1950s I was at Camp Pendleton with the Marines at the naval hospital. I didn't
14 relish going to duty with the Marines overseas. I was almost ready to go to sea and the
15 chief of medicine at the hospital at Camp Pendleton got his orders to the *Consolation*.
16 When he left I told him that if he needed a lab technician, well, I was willing to go. The
17 first thing I know I got my orders to the *Consolation*.

18 RF: Okay, so you served as a lab technician then?

19 AK: Yeah, I was the chief of the laboratory on the *Consolation*.

20 RF: Okay. Then do you recall where the *Consolation* was when you heard news
21 that you were going to be going to French Indochina?

1 AK: It was back in the States on dock to have some upkeep and on our way back
2 we went through Indochina, on our way back to Inchon. We was there for a month.

3 RF: What was the responsibilities, then—because the *Consolation* is a hospital
4 ship.

5 AK: Yeah, that's right.

6 RF: Did you have any direct contact with the refugee population?

7 AK: No, what happened is Dr. Dooley was on an LST (landing ship, tank) or
8 something, some such vessel. He was going to Haiphong and picking up refugees and
9 taking them to Saigon. Now Da Nang was just about midway and he would stop either
10 going or coming and he would pick up supplies. There was a supply ship, there was a
11 tanker and there was a hospital ship. We supplied him what he needed.

12 RF: So did you have interaction with Dr. Dooley?

13 AK: No, I never met him.

14 RF: Oh, you didn't? Oh, okay. Well, do you know what types of supplies he took
15 with him or things that he needed that the ship didn't have?

16 AK: Well, he wouldn't have much of anything on the ship for hospital care
17 except just emergency things. He picked up things that he needed when he was going to
18 take care of patients on the way down.

19 RF: Okay. I'm just curious what types of supplies he would've carried.

20 AK: I really don't know because I wasn't in that department.

21 RF: Yeah, it was a different department. Well, as a lab technician did you work
22 on samples of things? What type of work were you able to do during that time period?

23 AK: Well, we just took care of the ship company. We didn't take care of any of
24 the refugees.

25 RF: Oh, okay, okay. I was just wondering because I know that there in Dr.
26 Dooley's book *Deliver Us From Evil*, he does talk a lot about the disease that was fairly
27 rampant. I'm wondering if—I thought maybe you might've done some work in helping to
28 look at that.

29 AK: No, we didn't.

30 RF: Well, during your month, then, what types of activities were you able to
31 engage in, in terms of on the ship or were you able to go ashore and do things?

1 AK: Oh, yes. We'd go ashore in the daytime, but we couldn't go ashore at night
2 because the French Foreign Legion were there and that's when they were occupying
3 South Vietnam. They were pretty much the wild bunch. They would go into bars at night
4 with their guns with them and they would shoot the place up and stuff like that when they
5 got drunk. So they didn't allow us to go ashore at night at all.

6 RF: Yeah. Did they give any requirements to keep away during the daytime or
7 was that—in terms of keeping away from the Foreign Legion?

8 AK: Well, they were busy with other duties during the day. They weren't around.

9 RF: Yeah, they made themselves scarce, I guess. Well, what types of things were
10 able to do on shore?

11 AK: We just went ashore there as a tourist and took pictures and stuff like that.

12 RF: Was there anything that sort of struck you as unique or unusual about
13 Indochina at that time?

14 AK: No, not really because it was similar to Korea for that matter.

15 RF: Same with the people?

16 AK: Yeah, the people were about the same. What impressed me when we went
17 ashore all along the beach were sampans. The families were on them, they lived on them,
18 they cooked on them, they washed their fruit and vegetables in the river and they used it
19 as a toilet at the same time. It was just amazing to see something like that.

20 RF: Did any of the ship's crew ever try to rectify that situation?

21 AK: No.

22 RF: Actually, no, in today it still exists today down in the Mekong area and the
23 river is still used for those things in the year 2000. It's just kind of interesting. Well, was
24 there much discussion about the operation aboard the ship in terms of what it was you
25 guys were trying to accomplish at the time?

26 AK: No, it was just we were in there for that purpose and everybody accepted it
27 and that was it.

28 RF: I'm curious, I didn't realize that Dr. Dooley stopped on the ship. Hopefully
29 I'll be able to find some folks that had interaction with him. I know that he was a pretty
30 energetic figure.

31 AK: Now, whether he ever came on the ship or not I don't know.

1 RF: Oh, okay.

2 AK: Whether they just picked up supplies—

3 RF: But he did get the supplies, yeah.

4 AK: Yeah.

5 RF: I know that he on a lot of the other ships that he was in contact with he
6 would talk a lot about the situation that was going on in the North. I'm just curious if any
7 of those stories ever sort of pass your way?

8 AK: No, they didn't as far as I know.

9 RF: In terms of the conditions and things. Well, now on the shore, on your shore
10 parties did you have any interaction with the Vietnamese people? I guess you would in
11 bars.

12 AK: Not too much, no.

13 RF: Or bars or restaurants or anything of that nature, but not too much at all?

14 AK: No.

15 RF: I'm curious, just the reason why I ask is I'm curious, one of the questions
16 I've been asking is how the U.S. sailors handled the language barrier because not too
17 many Vietnamese spoke English and not too many sailors spoke French.

18 AK: Well, that's right. It just happened that's all. We didn't do much talking with
19 them.

20 RF: Yeah, avoid the language barrier, I guess, by not having too much
21 interaction. Was there any concern among the crew? I know you mentioned the French
22 Foreign Legion, but how about the Viet Minh, the Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese that
23 were fighting? Was there a concern of sabotage?

24 AK: We were just below the parallel where it separated the North and the South,
25 but we never had any contact with anything like that.

26 RF: Okay, no special preparations or things of that nature?

27 AK: No.

28 RF: Well, now, when you had the orders to go over did you personally know very
29 much about what was going on in Indochina at the time?

30 AK: No, I really didn't. We knew that the French Foreign Legion was there, but
31 we really didn't know too much about it. No.

1 RF: How about afterwards did you follow the events of South Vietnam, having
2 been there and experienced the people and the country?

3 AK: Well, especially when we got in the war, that's when we realized that we
4 had been there ahead of time when the French Foreign Legion was there, but I don't
5 know, we didn't seem to be too concerned about it then.

6 RF: One of the things I found pretty interesting is not too many people even
7 know that the Navy was involved in this operation in '54.

8 AK: Yeah, my daughter, when I showed her the letter I got from you she said,
9 "Well, I didn't realize you were over there." So she never even knew it.

10 RF: Yeah, and that seems to be sort of the general trend.

11 AK: Yeah.

12 RF: What do you think, you know, as myself as a historian and working on this
13 particular project, how would you characterize the *Consolation's* role in the operation
14 and really how much it fit into the history of the operation?

15 AK: Well, just from what we were there for, we were there as support. If they
16 needed support we were there to help. That's about all I can say.

17 RF: Were there instances where they really did beyond the medical equipment,
18 where they really did need support?

19 AK: No, we never got any patients or anything like that.

20 RF: Is that unusual or is that pretty normal?

21 AK: No, that's pretty normal, probably, with those people. They were just
22 transporting them from Haiphong down to Saigon to relocate them.

23 RF: Yeah. I know there were some births and some deaths along the way, but I
24 suppose nothing was ever transferred over to your ship.

25 AK: No.

26 RF: Well, now, you said you joined the Navy in '51, is that right?

27 AK: I joined the Navy in '37.

28 RF: Oh, in '37 so you served—

29 AK: Twenty years.

30 RF: Twenty years then. Were you in the Atlantic or the Pacific during the Second
31 World War?

1 AK: The Second World War I was in the—I went over to the Atlantic in June of
2 1941.

3 RF: Oh, okay.

4 AK: I was on a cruiser, on the *Philadelphia*, and we were transferred from
5 Honolulu over there to go in the North Atlantic convoy.

6 RF: That's right, yeah.

7 AK: We convoyed in the later part of '91 or '41 before Pearl Harbor. We were in
8 Boston Navy Yard when Pearl Harbor was hit. Then I left the ship in February and went
9 to Norfolk to the training center for about six months. Then I went on a mine sweep in
10 the Atlantic for eight months and then I went to Trinidad. I was down there about
11 eighteen months. Then I came back to the States and was promoted to warrant officer.
12 Then I went to Earle, New Jersey, to the ammunition depot for about six months. Then I
13 went down to Bethesda to malariology school for a month and got my orders to
14 temporary duty to Mare Island in San Francisco Navy Yard. Then I was due to go to the
15 Philippines, but I got to Mare Island on VJ Day (Victory over Japan). So I stayed there
16 until, oh, about in 1948, I think, when I reverted back to chief and was shipped over.

17 RF: So you almost saw every aspect of the war, had you been over in the Pacific.
18 How about in the Korean conflict, the Korean War, were you involved?

19 AK: I was over there two years.

20 RF: Two years.

21 AK: On the *Consolation*.

22 RF: Okay. So you were involved, then, in the Inchon operation. That must've
23 been interesting. How do you think the Navy changed in that period from—because you
24 really, I think, were part of a really important part of the U.S. Navy?

25 AK: Well, the Navy's changed a hundred percent. As far as I'm concerned,
26 they've lost discipline same as all the armed forces. They no longer have the discipline
27 we had then.

28 RF: You think that's today though, right?

29 AK: Yeah.

1 RF: How about the change between the—because you really were there before
2 the war, the Second World War began through the Korean War and then through this
3 Passage of Freedom, do you think the Navy changed then at all?

4 AK: No, I don't think it started to change much until, oh, probably around 1950
5 or something like that. That was just before the Korean War, but—

6 RF: But today you would characterize it as a different Navy.

7 AK: Oh, it's entirely different, yeah.

8 RF: Yeah. Now looking back at this Passage to Freedom and certainly in the role
9 that you played, do you think the overall operation was a success or a failure?

10 AK: Well, I couldn't say. I would say it—

11 RF: Or your part in it, I mean. I guess the *Consolation* they did their role, they
12 did their job.

13 AK: Yeah, we did our job what we were supposed to do and then we left.

14 RF: Actually, I could ask it another way. If you were able to turn back the clock
15 or given the chance to do it all over again, would you?

16 AK: On that project?

17 RF: Yeah, yeah.

18 AK: Sure, it didn't make any difference to me. I was at sea and I had sea duty to
19 do and it didn't make any difference where it was.

20 RF: Yeah, okay. That's actually, yeah, that makes sense to me. Are there any
21 other sorts of stories or memories or history about that time that I didn't ask you about?

22 AK: I've been thinking about that and I can't think much of anything else that I
23 can tell you.

24 RF: Well, one of the things I'm going to be able to do this summer is I'll be able
25 to go out to the Navy Yard and the National Archives and get copies of the ship logs and
26 I've been asking the people I've talked to if I've planned some interesting events or
27 questions if I could give you a call back later on in the summer or the early fall.

28 AK: Oh, sure.

29 RF: And conversely, if, after we hang up you think, "Gosh, darn it. I should've
30 asked him or should've told him about this," to let me know so I can sit down and I can
31 give you a call and we can talk again.

1 AK: Sure.

2 RF: The end result of this will be it'll be a book on the operation which will
3 combine the official records with the individual histories and stories of those who
4 actually manned the operation come alive. So the more stories and the more things that
5 individuals remember, I think the richer the work will be.

6 AK: I'm sure it will.

7 RF: Actually, a lot of the questions that I normally have, they do deal with the
8 refugee population. So really that's all the questions I have.

9 AK: Did you ever know Dr. Dooley?

10 RF: No, sir, I didn't. Actually—

11 AK: He died shortly after he was out there.

12 RF: Right, he died in January of 1961.

13 AK: Yeah.

14 RF: I wasn't born until 1967. So I'm a young one, I guess. But, no, I'm familiar
15 with a lot of what Dr. Dooley did in Laos and he actually was, visited Lubbock, Texas, a
16 couple of times. So we have some papers of his visits and his impact on the community.
17 A very interesting man and I know he did as much as he could to help the plight of the
18 refugee population.

19 AK: Yeah, he was pretty busy on that.

20 RF: I never had the opportunity. Okay, that's really all I have.

21 AK: When are you going to publish your book?

22 RF: Well, I'm probably looking at a good twelve to eighteen months away. I still
23 need to do a research trip out to Washington, which won't be until this summer. Then it
24 really depends on my workload here in the archive of how much time I have to do the
25 writing. I hope to have it done in about eighteen months.

26 AK: Well, if I'm still around I'd like to see it.

27 RF: Oh, you bet. Oh, you better be around.

28 AK: Well, I don't know. I'm way up there now. I was born in 1916.

29 RF: Oh, is that right?

30 AK: Yeah.

31 RF: Well, then you're still young.

1 AK: Yeah.

2 RF: But, yeah, I do hope to get it out and I will make sure that a lot of the
3 association's people know that it's out there for anyone who wants to take a look.

4 AK: Very good.

5 RF: Well, I thank you for your time.

6 AK: You're very welcome.

7 RF: I hope you have a good day today.

8 AK: Thank you, bye.

9 RF: Bye-bye. That ends the interview with Arthur Keller who was at his home in
10 San Juan, California, and served on the USS *Consolation*. March 1st, 2001.