

Vietnam Archive
Oral History Project
Interview with Ann Peterson
Conducted by Ron Frankum
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Transcribed by Tammi Mikel Lyon

Ron Frankum: This is Ron Frankum at the Vietnam Archives speaking with Ann Peterson who was a nurse aboard the USS Consolation, March 1st, year 2001. She is at her home in...we'll go ahead and we're rolling. Really the first question I have for you is I'm interested in how you got on the Consolation and really your service in the Navy. You were in the United States Navy?

Ann Peterson: Yes.

RF: When did you...

AP: I went in in '52, after I graduated from college and my schooling. I had to go home and take care of my grandfather, but I had wanted to be a Navy nurse from the time I read a Navy nurse book when I was about ten years old! My father was Army, everybody was Army in our family and they said, "Why Navy?" and I said, "Because I want to travel!" As soon as my grandfather passed away I called the recruiter in Denver, I was in Silverton, Colorado. He made a special trip down. My father had a fit; he didn't want me in the Navy at all. I said, "Pop, I want to travel. Don't worry about my morals, they're fine! If I've gotten through five years of college I'm doing okay!" Anyhow, he came down and I signed up, right then and there. Then I had to go up for my physical and so forth and I was sworn in...let's see, I think that was in August and then I was to be...and they gave me a bunch of choices, the three choices to where I wanted to go and I picked anything but Virginia and that's what I got. Anyhow, when I went to get sworn in one of the chiefs there in the recruiting office in Denver said, "Oh no, no, you don't want to go there!" and I said, "Well I cant do anything about it now!" He said, "They have big signs, 'Sailors and Dogs Keep Off the Grass!'" Well he was thinking of wartime and people were wonderful [?]. I had to go to St. [?] on Long Island for my indoctrination and then they shipped me and several of the other gals from my group down to Portsmouth and then this nurse called me over after I'd been there almost...oh, my time

was running out, and she said, "We want you to sign over, Ann," and I said, "I won't sign over unless I can get on a ship." I said, "I want to see the world," and I said, "I'm not seeing it here," and two days... it was about two days later I got a call from the chief nurse in Washington and she said, "I know you wanted the diaper run from Germany but you don't have enough rank yet." She said, "Would you go on the hospital ship that's going to Korea, the Consolation?" I said, "I'd go on anything just to get on a ship." So, I immediately had orders from the chief nurse and there were just 16 of us but I was to report in at August into Long Beach and catch it and we sailed from Long Beach on the 10th of August. But, I can remember she called me and it was July that I left Portsmouth. They gave me a long leave at home before I went. That's how I got on that ship is I just said, "I won't sign over unless I can see the world!"

RF: That seems like a pretty fair request.

AP: Well I thought it was awfully nice of the chief nurse. In the mean time, the chief nurse, and she had been a prisoner of war, was transferred from the Consolation, came to Portsmouth, and she called me to her quarters and I thought, "Oh my gosh, what's this all about?" and she said, "I want to tell you how you are to behave on that ship," and gave me a long talking to.

RF: These were moral lessons or whatever?

AP: Edwina Todd, she as quite a nurse.

RF: What was her name again?

AP: Edwina Todd.

RF: Edwina Todd, okay.

AP: She'd been a Japanese prisoner and I guess going back out there was very difficult for her. My husband was on the cruise before mine, too, and he said that every time they hit Japanese waters she just kind of fell apart, which is very understandable.

RF: Yeah, I think so.

AP: She's passed on now, but she was quite a gal.

RF: Well now in your college education, where did you go to college?

AP: Well I ended up my high school years in Silverton, Colorado in a little mining town, class of seven graduated, and I wasn't like the kids of today. If my parents told me what I was going to do, I was going to do it. My dad didn't want me to be a

nurse first of all; he just had a real thing about that. But, they said, "You are not ready for any kind of college but a college..." so they sent me to Colorado Women's College in Denver and I took all pre-nursing courses, and the dean there, we had to take these tests to see what we were qualified for and he called – Dean Baum, I'll never forget – and he called me in and he said, "Well Miss Herlinger, what do you want to do when you grow up," in so many words, and I said, "Be a nurse. I'm taking all pre-nursing courses that I can, plus all my necessary courses," and he said, "Thank heavens," and wiped his brow. He said, "That's all you qualified for!" [laughs]. So, from there, then I put in for Colorado University for their nursing degree program and they had fouled up all my papers and had me going in as a freshman and I was going to have to hold out. So I checked into it, and I'm an Episcopalian, and I checked out St. Luke's in Denver and they were affiliated with Denver University with a degree program. So, that was about two weeks before they were to start and my dad had sat there at the table one night and said, "Just what the devil are you going to do?" only he used stronger words, and I said, "Oh Pop, I don't know!" I went up on a mountain and sat on my rock that I meditated at, and I thought, "Well..." so I called [?] who was in charge of the nursing school and she said, "If you can get up there tomorrow," this was a Sunday night and I called her Monday morning, she said, "Get up here tomorrow because we're starting our classes in two weeks." I went up and I was accepted there. I had to go out to DU to take my intelligence test, and started in there and took extra night classes that first year when we weren't on the wards and finished up there, and then took extra classes all through the year to keep up my CEU's. In fact, when I joined the Navy I had planned on going on to get my masters and stuff and instead I got married. Okay, I don't know...anyhow, my whole total education between...well, the University of Wisconsin, both medicine, Milwaukee, Marquette, you name it, when I add up all the courses I took my total education was eight years!

RF: Okay, well that's pretty darn impressive. So then you boarded the Consolation...

AP: August 10th.

RF: August 10th, and that was of '53 or '52?

AP: No, no, no, '55.

RF: Oh, '55?

AP: Yeah, because that was the only year of Passage to Freedom.

RF: Actually, '54 was Passage to Freedom.

AP: Well, it was. I beg your pardon. They put cruise itinerary '55, but it was, yes, August '54. We ended in '55.

RF: That's correct. Were you then...did you know that you were on your way to Indochina? When did you first find out that you were on your way?

AP: We went to Pearl Harbor and one of the officers gave us a wonderful luau and then we went on to Subic Bay in the Philippines and we were there from the 18th to the 31st of August and we were notified while we were there in Subic that we would be sent instead of on into Korea immediately across the China Sea to Tourane Bay to help the French. It was just after Dien Bien Phu.

RF: When you heard you were heading out that way, did you know anything about what was going on in Indochina at the time?

AP: Only very little because we got very little news on board ship. But, we had heard about Dien Bien Phu and that there was a crisis over there, and that the French had had to give up. They went down to...they were stationed, the ones that we...we went into Tourane Bay which became Da Nang.

RF: Right.

AP: Then we took care of a lot of sick people and so forth with the understanding that we were going to take all the refugees on over to La Havre, France, and then we found out the Haven was going to come in and do that little job, nifty little job.

RF: Actually I don't think I have any information...I didn't even know that the Haven was involved in this operation.

AP: Yeah, they went on to Le Havre, France, and I know a nurse from the Haven but she wasn't on for that passage.

RF: Okay, well I just wrote myself a note so I'll do a little bit of searching on that and see what I can find. Let's see, if you would, describe a little bit about what your primary responsibilities were, your day-to-day jobs on board the craft.

AP: I worked practically every ward, had some horrible...well, you mean at Passage to Freedom?

RF: Well I think in general and then I think in Passage to Freedom. I'm kind of curious because I really don't know anything about it.

AP: We didn't have many sick people in the wards while we were there at Da Nang, but we helped with physicals and shots and this sort of thing. Actually, we ended up more goodwill than anything when we were in Tourane Bay, and by the way, I never did watch China Beach, that show. The Ajax was in there as a supply ship and they named that beach, and it's the same darn beach, it was our recreation area because it was so hot there, the fellows got to go off and go over and swim, it was called Ajax Beach but it became China Beach for that TV show.

RF: See, you just helped me out again because I didn't know that the Ajax was over there, either.

AP: Yeah, see?

RF: This is great!

AP: And mainly we went ashore and went and visited orphanages and the French Foreign Legion had all the nurses over for a tour and we went in a jeep – well not all the nurses because some of us had to be on duty, but I happened to be one of the lucky ones that got to go over – they took us out to the front, and we're in an open jeep. There are helmets in the jeep but they're the most casual bunch, those French Foreign Legionnaires, I've ever run into. We heard pot shots and they were shooting at us I guess, and finally he said, "Oh, I think you gals had better put on your helmets!" So we went up to the front and then came back and they put us a big swing ding party at the officer's club. They just treated us royally of course. So, it was quite an experience for me. The smells there just threw me for a loop, the beetle beans and the smell and the human excretion, the water, and living off the boats.

RF: Actually, tell me a little bit about that. You said you visited some of the orphanage but also I understand that a lot of people lived in the sampans?

AP: Oh, whole families, grandmother right on down. Those sampans were absolutely loaded, and my husband, in fact we crawled up... he was still Mr. Peterson to me, I didn't know him that well, but we wanted to be sure he was at the helm taking us in because that whole bay was loaded with those sampans and we had to anchor out. There was no place to go in to shore. We had to anchor out and take captain's [?] in. That

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whole shoreline and river and entrance into Tourane Bay or Da Nang was absolutely loaded with these sampans with total families with cooking on them. They did all their cleansing and clearing over the side of the boat, and it was just the most foul smelling, awful place, as far as smell, that you could imagine.

RF: Unfortunately it's still that way today in terms of using the river.

AP: I have no desire to go back. I'm sorry. I can still smell it. I can smell Korea, I can smell Indochina, I can smell it all. I can look at the pictures as I'm looking right now and oh gosh!

RF: I can appreciate that. How were the orphanages like?

AP: Oh pathetic, absolutely pathetic; nothing but old, old things and these poor children that were just emaciated. It was heart breaking. A group of us went over and literally went out and just bawled. We were just heart broken because we couldn't do anything to help them. We took over food. We took over a little bit of clothing because we didn't have things for children, and we helped that way. But that's a one time or two time deal there.

RF: But it's better than nothing, though, when you look at it. That's actually an interested thing because I know certainly with the troop transport ships that move refugees down, there was a lot of cases of individual sailors going out to the ship's stores and buying things.

AP: Oh, we did that in Korea, too. We were always...the chaplain and the group would always be going up to the orphanages for Christmas and for other times and we'd have the orphans on board the ship, and by the way, I need to give you a date of how long we were there.

RF: Okay.

AP: We were there from the 4th of September to the 27th.

RF: Okay. that's...

AP: And by the way, we went through they say heavy seas as we were crossing the China Sea. They weren't heavy as far as I was concerned, they were typhoons, but I was the only nurse that didn't get seasick and I was on duty for 36 hours begging somebody to just relieve me, and they were all just laying in their bunks.

RF: You probably didn't get seasick because you were so occupied.

AP: Well I never have gotten seasick.

RF: That's good.

AP: I like it. The rougher it is, the better I like it.

RF: I'm wondering...I am curious about whether or not...were there any cases where you had to bring some of the Vietnamese aboard the ship to treat them?

AP: Yes, in fact I special-dutied...no, not the Vietnamese. This was in Korea that we had to. No, we did not treat any Vietnamese at that time.

RF: How about any of the French Foreign Legionnaires?

AP: They came on board but we did not keep them on board as patients.

RF: Were there any...oh, I guess the equivalent of a sick call then, because you mentioned going to the orphanage and bringing in the food and blankets and things of that nature, were there any...I guess it would be called a sick call, wouldn't it, going out to the places...

AP: Well it was more a mission of mercy.

RF: Yeah, but what I'm thinking of in terms of Dr. Dooley and what he did in Laos.

AP: Oh, we treated some of the...like immunizations and this other thing. They brought them on board ship for immunizations and this type of thing.

RF: But it was a quick rotation to bring them on?

AP: Right.

RF: How did you handle the language barrier?

AP: With smiles.

RF: With smiles? Yeah.

AP: And hand language.

RF: Did you or any of the other nurses speak any French? I imagine Vietnamese, that would have been very unusual.

AP: No. No, none of us did so we had to do strictly the trying to show them what we were going to do like giving shots, but they were very friendly, very nice people, very honorable, I should say, and very appreciative of us.

RF: Was there any sort of fear of the unknown as it were? You're going on...I imagine a ship the size of the Consolation was probably something that most Vietnamese had never seen before.

AP: They were amazed by it. It was like the big white hope out there. I was, too, for that matter.

RF: Oh, I think...I've only seen pictures and I'm amazed by it. It really is quite an incredible ship, I think. But I'm curious, because I know that there was a lot of concern. There were also a lot of the Viet Minh, the Vietnamese Communist propaganda that said if they took you out to the ships they would do terrible things to you. I wonder if that ever translated out to the role that you guys had?

AP: No, we had no problems whatsoever. They left us totally alone.

RF: Well that's good.

AP: I was so young; nothing bothered me, even the pot shots from the Viet Cong. "Oh, isn't this interesting? Wait until I write home about this!"

RF: One of those things that you're just so...you're too young to realize that you're...

AP: In danger!

RF: You're in danger, yeah.

AP: In harm's way, as the saying goes.

RF: Tell me a little bit more about Tourane Bay or Da Nang and the surrounding areas because I think you probably had more exposure to the land than a lot of people.

AP: Well of course it was extremely hot, but quite...and filthy, but the trees...quite beautiful with everything in bloom all the time, lots of flowers, lots of...very dusty because nothing was paved. We didn't do any shopping there or anything like that. We never went to any of the black market, so to speak, and that sort of thing. But, I was quite entranced by the beauty of the greenery.

RF: Yes, I know what you mean.

AP: Another thing that totally amazed me, I still wish I knew what they used because like the popasans and so forth in Korea, they wore the white and it was so immaculately white and so clean!

RF: Yes, what they call the Ao Dai.

AP: It just amazed me that they could look so clean and be so dirty, and washing off their sampans and so forth on these old scrub boards and this sort of thing. I thought, "How do they get these things clean with rocks and rubbing on them and so forth?"

RF: I do know what you mean. I was in Vietnam twice in 1999 and you would have very elegant women in the Ao Dais, the white Ao Dais, riding on motor scooters, as graceful and elegant.

AP: It was mostly very few motor scooters at that time.

RF: Yeah, in '54.

AP: Almost all bicycles and the little carts they pull you in. I can't think of the name of them now, like they have in Hong Kong.

RF: Yeah, I know what you're talking about. Actually, taking it back a little bit, for your preparation, because the Consolation was in support of this operation, did you have any special types of preparation in terms of different... oh, diseases you might encounter?

AP: As we went out, we were... all of us were inoculated for every possible thing like cholera, all the inoculations that we could have they gave us. I think everybody had sore arms, one shot after another. They made sure that we had every inoculation right up to snuff.

RF: And that was for the entire crew?

AP: Right.

RF: Did they give you any prep on what you might expect in terms of the people you would deal with?

AP: No.

RF: You were pretty much trained for just about anything I would think?

AP: Yeah, and I don't think, from the captain on down, we knew what we were going to run into because we got these orders so rapidly that there really wasn't time for any... nobody as far as I know gave anybody any idea of what to expect until we just pulled in there.

RF: And it was just rely on the good training that you had really in the organization?

AP: Right, right.

RF: Were there any births or deaths on the ship at the time as far as from the population that came in? I guess there really wouldn't be any.

AP: No, not then. We did in Korea, but none in Tourane Bay.

RF: I'm curious, and I hope you think this is appropriate, but what was it like to be one of 16 women on a ship like that?

AP: We were treated like queens.

RF: Yeah? Good gentlemen all the time?

AP: Well, I heard stories from my husband that I couldn't believe, to tell you the truth. I was so naïve. He said, "I have never met anybody as naïve as you are." He said, "You didn't know what was going on because there were a few affairs going on." I had no idea! But, that's why Edwina had called me into her... down to her quarters because she wanted me to certainly behave and I had assured her, I said, "Well, my father felt the same way," and I said, "I assured him my morals were high." I didn't believe in fooling around, so to speak, and I said, "Don't worry about me, Ms. Todd. I will certainly tow the mark in any which way that I can."

RF: I would think probably, too, your normal day's work...

AP: I beg your pardon?

RF: In your normal day's work, you probably put in very long hours.

AP: Actually, they weren't as long... well, they were always good long shifts when... yeah, and night duty and of course, like I said, when they were all sick 36 hours. When we were in port and so forth we got quite a bit of liberty and R&R in Japan and R&R in Hong Kong and so forth.

RF: Was there would you say sort of a unique comradery between the nurses?

AP: Very definitely. We've talked about this at our reunions. There was a kinship. I mean, we were going through something that nobody else was going through, and nobody would understand us when we'd try to explain something, the heartbreak of what we'd seen and so forth. They couldn't understand it.

RF: I've talked to quite a number of Army nurses from the American Vietnam War in the '60s and '70s and I'm just struck by the incredible amount of stress that was placed upon them without really any recognition for the work that they did.

AP: That's right, and I'll tell you who else. We were lucky. Here we sat on a ship that was air conditioned, had table linens, had silver, had washing machines and showers, and we used to ask...this was in Korea, of course, but we'd ask the MASH nurses over and they were just overwhelmed because we'd just welcome them aboard and feed them and tell them to bring their wash with them, bring their stuff so they could take a good shower, wash their clothes, and they were the most grateful bunch of gals we ever ran into. I think the men are the opposite, the same thing to the doctors that came on board and stuff.

RF: Would you say that in addition it's a pretty strong support group...

AP: Oh definitely.

RF: ...amongst the nurses and women who served?

AP: Very definitely. We stood by each other. I felt closer and more at home there than I ever felt anywhere because we were all under the same, like you said, stress and feelings and knew what was going on, and the heartbreak that was going on.

RF: I guess there's a certain amount...I've read a few pieces by women who have served.

AP: Have you read In Harm's Way?

RF: No, I don't believe I have.

AP: Or In and Out? I have that book. I'm mentioned in it a couple of times on crazy things that happened to me. If anything was going to happen crazy it was me. I did all kinds...I called stairways ladders and portholes windows, and I was...

RF: Sounds to me like you were just logical! I would do the same thing. One of the things that I learned earlier that Dr. Dooley, when he was up in Haiphong and on land in the camps, when he would come down he would stop and get supplies from the Consolation. Did you ever come across him at all?

AP: I never came across him but I knew that he had visited the ship, Tom Dooley.

RF: I'm curious, I've been trying to find out what types of things he got from the ship.

AP: I'm sure he got antibiotics and immunizations of all kinds. We had gotten resupplied there at Subic and we had to go...we used up all our supplies giving them out

at Tourane Bay and we got R&R in Hong Kong and then went right straight to Japan to resupply again because we were out of all of our antibiotics and necessary, you know, [?], bandages. We put out everything that we could.

RF: All the first aid and sundries, things of that nature?

AP: Yes. Anything they asked for and we had it, we gave it to them.

RF: That was not just the US Navy, that was also... were there established doctors in Da Nang, or in Tourane Bay?

AP: There were some doctors with the French Foreign Legion.

RF: And were they of French training or do you recall that at all?

AP: As far as I know, they were, yes.

RF: That's sort of another interesting side note I suppose of what kind of medical care after...

AP: Well they really didn't have much to work with towards the end.

RF: At that point?

AP: At that point, yes, everything was used up.

RF: Now I think you've already mentioned that there weren't really any attempts by the communists to infiltrate the ship or disrupt your particular operation, other than taking pot shots at you.

AP: But that was when we were on land; nothing, nothing at all. I felt, and I think we all did, perfectly safe. We'd go over to that Ajax Beach. I only went over twice I think it was when they had big beach parties and sometimes it was for the officers, sometimes it was for the enlisted, and we didn't intertwine. That was a no-no. There never was any fear at all, none whatsoever.

RF: That's good to know. How would you describe your emotion... and I think you've done this a little bit already.

AP: I beg your pardon?

RF: I apologize for the redundancy of the question, but really what do you sort of take away from your own particular participation in the operation in terms of your feelings and your emotions and what you look back on?

AP: I look back on that whole tour as one of the high points of my life. It was the most learning, emotional experience - other than once I was raising my own children -

that I had ever been through. You could be happy one minute and so darn sad the next with these different... well, a typical one was a burn case. This was of course in Korea. He came in and I was the only nurse that knew how to use a [striker frame]. Now you said in your letter that you're a doctor, right?

RF: But not a medical doctor.

AP: Oh, well a [striker frame] is for burn cases. It's like two cots so you can turn the patient and tie it down and swing it around so that you keep their circulation going on these burns. But, this boy was... well, when I held up my hand out of the 16 and said, "Yeah, I've used a [striker frame]," just before I graduated. So, I was assigned to him and I think it was the second night and we knew he was 80% third degree, and I knew he wouldn't make it. But, he said, "Ma'am, today's my birthday," and he was going to be 19 and I just went to pieces. Then when we transferred, we had kept him on board, he was on board for about five weeks. We went every six weeks back to Japan and transferred off the bad cases to the Ukuska Naval Hospital and I accompanied him to the hospital and I talked to the nurses there and I said, "Please, all he wants to do is get home to Oakland Naval Hospital," and I said, "Would you please, please keep in contact with me," and I gave them how to reach me and everything, and they did, and he did make it home before he passed away with [?] poisoning. But, he was a heart breaker.

RF: Absolutely. I guess I understand the incredible amount of emotional swings that would occur.

AP: The emotions ran real high.

RF: Absolutely. Well, are there other individuals, other nurses or doctors that sort of stand out during this period in September of 1954?

AP: Well, you know, I think I told you before I'm about the only one who shows up from our group at these reunions. We had one of the finest neurosurgeons. He'd graduated from... oh, shoot, I can't think of the name of that medical school up in Montreal, Dr. Conner. He was a neurosurgeon and even though my husband was a deck officer, they all played bridge together, Dr. Conner. Anytime he got called, and Conner is not the correct name, darn it all. He was one of our anesthetists. Oh, and we did have a female anesthetist on board, too.

RF: Was that unusual?

AP: Yes. There weren't too many female anesthetists at that time.

RF: Just in general there weren't?

AP: No.

RF: Oh, okay.

AP: But if he got called down for like shrapnel in the brain and so forth he would tell the fellows that were playing bridge, say, "Come on with me, guys," he said, "You've got to help hold up X-rays so I can see where I can pull this shrapnel out." So my husband went down and got in his operating room paraphernalia and mask and everything and held up X-rays for him so that he could find those pieces of shrapnel in the brain. We had a wonderful medical doctor. We had one case come on board where the kid was almost dead and nobody could figure out what was wrong with him and we were all working over him like crazy and finally we discovered it was vodka poisoning. You could smell it on his breath and he had been out partying with the guys and drank too much vodka and we pumped his stomach and got him cleaned up, and this was one of the doctors that had done that. Now practically all the doctors were reservists called back in. There were very few regular Navy doctors on board that ship. We had a couple whooptie-dooos, too. Our psychiatrist was...he needed help! He used to come down to the nurses wardroom before inspection because he didn't have anything on right and we'd have to dress him for inspection. He was really offbeat. We'd all just shake our heads and say, "Here he comes again!"

RF: It's a good thing you guys were there!

AP: He was something else. I'm trying to think of some of the other...I called him Sneaky Pete, our head doctor. See, we had two captains, the captain of the ship and the deck, and the captain of the hospital, and Captain Worthland and Captain Laller were the captain of the deck and the hospital, and Captain Laller would come by and make sneak inspections and our nickname for him was Sneaky Pete because he'd show up at the most inappropriate times. I had to take care of a Korean woman who was shot by the North Koreans in a rice field, rice paddy, and she had a newborn baby with her and we had just put her in a ward by herself and I got a corpsman to come and help me, and we had to hand wash diapers and hang them on all the bunks, and the corpsman was having an absolute fit. He said, "We'll never pass inspection. We'll never pass inspection!" and

I said, "Frankly, I don't care. We've got to dry these diapers and this is the only way we can do it," because we had to hand wash them and hang them, and Captain Worthland came by and I went over to the door and greeted him, and I said, "You'll just have to put up with this mess but this is the only way we can do it." He didn't say a word, he said, "I'll pass you right now."

RF: Oh that's great. Couldn't have been that bad of a guy, huh?

AP: No, he had his moments, but he was also very understanding when it was something like that.

RF: Now I guess were there... actually, before I ask this question, were there... after the operation was over and you left in September, it actually continued on for a little longer. But did you, as a result of your time off the shores of Indochina; did you follow what was going on in Vietnam in the 1950s at all?

AP: Oh definitely, very definitely because we knew some of these places, and oh yes.

RF: Yes, it's interesting. A lot of people I've talked to really never did.

AP: Oh no, in fact after I got married and my husband and I, we'd be talking about this or that that had happened and where it was located and so forth; oh definitely.

RF: That's interesting. I guess the next question I really have, it's sort of the last one, but it's very open-ended, and that is are there any sort of other memories or stories or history that you think should be included about the Consolation during this operation that I just haven't covered?

AP: You mean Passage to Freedom?

RF: During the Passage to Freedom, yeah, or any other thoughts or ideas.

AP: It was just an eye-opener of how lucky we are as Americans to live the way we do. I couldn't believe the way other people had to live until I got over there and saw it. I mean, being brought up in a good home and food on the table and everything, I was literally overwhelmed with the poverty, and yet they could smile and be polite and sweet. I thought, "Oh boy, you better appreciate what you are and what you have."

RF: Right, right. When I went over to Vietnam in 1999 and one of the first things I discussed with some other people when I came back was every student should go

over to another country like Vietnam so that they can appreciate all the things they take for granted.

AP: I think the youth of today have no conception of how lucky they are.

RF: Oh, I agree.

AP: They need their eyes opened and they're not being opened, and I think that's why all the drugs and all the poor morals and the whole thing, I feel like it's the rise and fall of the Roman Empire here, and if they had just been able to see what we saw, both in Vietnam and Korea, they'd have a total different aspect on their lives and realize how darn lucky they are. I have told my girls over and over again; in fact, I was writing about it so that they would have some kind of memoir of what it was like. I've told them stories of how I just said, "Look you girls, you're just so darned lucky," because I said, "You have no concept," in their mind, "Of how the rest of the world lives."

RF: Yeah, coming back from Vietnam really reinforced that point. I agree with you completely. Well, now are there... you said you haven't really kept in contact with any of the other nurses there?

AP: I've tried to, but like I said, so many... there were two of us that were very young. I was only 24... 23 and 24 on board. It was one that was a couple of months younger than I was. The rest of them averaged about five to ten years older than we were, and most of them have passed away. I've called and found out... each reunion is sadder. You find out now Captain Laller was at one, here he was... he was so funny. It was in San Diego, and his daughter brought him down. He was in a wheel chair and everything, and he had attended our wedding, and it just broke my heart. But his daughter had to go out and get something for him and I can't remember what it was until we were at the hotel, and I said, "I'll stay with him," so I stayed with him and he said, "Go get me a drink," and told me who it was, and I said, "You know what? I will, and I'll be happy to," but I said, "We're not in the Navy anymore." I said, "You don't have to order me. You could say 'please'!"

RF: I bet that got a big smile!

AP: It did, he just started hooting. I said, "We're equals now, sir!" I'm more in touch with the crews before me. I'm very close to the Browns and the... well, he was still on board when I went on board but she had gone off. I was in the same room as she was,

we found out. Another gal, there are about five of their group that show up and I room when we go on these trips now with Babs Wheeler. They adopted me because I was the only one that ever came to all of them. I've never missed a reunion.

RF: Well that's fantastic. One of the things I'll be doing over the next few months, I'll be able to go to Washington D.C. and get all the ship logs and doing a lot of the overall history, so what I've been asking is if it's okay with you after going through some of the logs and reading a little more about the overall operations, if there's any questions I have if I can call you back?

AP: Oh, anytime.

RF: Oh good, thank you.

AP: Certainly.

RF: I guess the reverse of that is if after we hang up if you think, "Gosh darn it, I wish I had told him about this," please let me know and that way I can...

AP: I'd love to tell you about...you're strictly interested in the Passage to Freedom, right?

RF: I really am, yes, for this.

AP: Because we had some fascinating experiences, we went into Hiroshima on a good will mission and so forth.

RF: Oh, is that right?

AP: Uh-huh, and that was heartbreaking, let me tell you.

RF: I bet it was.

AP: But, that's another story now. But no, anything I can think of or you want to ask, feel free to call anytime. I'd be more than happy to fill you in if I can.

RF: I really do appreciate that and I appreciate you taking the time this afternoon to talk with me.

AP: It's emotional, I'll tell you. After I talked to you and I started going through my crew's book again, I shed many tears because of not only that, but because of my husband.

RF: Well, I appreciate that. It even makes me more thankful that you've taken the time to talk to me.

AP: Well it was a very, very special time for me, and I appreciate you calling me, too.

RF: Absolutely. When this all comes out, I'll make sure everyone knows that it's available when I get the book published.

AP: Yes, I would certainly like to have a copy with your signature. Just let me know what it costs and I will...

RF: I will. We're probably looking at about a year and a half away.

AP: Well hopefully I'll still be around.

RF: Oh you will, you better be! Okay, well again, I thank you for your time.

AP: Well you're more than welcome, and good luck with your book, and I'm delighted you're doing this. I felt like we were kind of the unsung... nobody knew we had done this. When I told the girls about it, I said, "Oh heck, I was in Vietnam before it was Vietnam. It was French Indochina." "You were WHAT?" So I explained it all to them because we had three daughters, and I just said, "Yeah, Da Nang was Tourane Bay and China Beach was Ajax Beach," and I said, "I've been there, been there, done that!"

RF: Well you know the one thing I hope I'll be able to do is educate a lot of the population, or those that want to listen or learn, that this happened.

AP: Well they need to be educated because they have absolutely no concept of any of this.

RF: I'll give them the opportunity; I can't make them.

AP: Good!

RF: Well thank you so much, and enjoy the rest of your evening.

AP: Thank you. By the way, I'm taking my grandchildren, I only have two grandsons, but I'm taking them to Washington D.C. on their spring break, and I said, "First thing's first," because my husband's at Arlington and I saw them bury him and I will join him when I go. He was 12 years older than I was but he died of cancer from radiation, and I said, "I get one day out of this week. We're going to Arlington, we're going to the Navy Memorial, we're going to the Women's Memorial, we're going to do all the Navy things, and then you guys can do anything you want to, the Korean Memorial." You have been to Washington, I assume?

RF: I actually lived...I used to live in Northern Virginia. I spent seven years there.

AP: I'll tell you, that Korean Memorial got to me because it's like they're marching up the hill saying, "Well here we go again, boys, to Vietnam."

RF: You know, actually I've never seen the Korean Memorial.

AP: It's unbelievable.

RF: I moved away before it was up.

AP: They're walking facing towards the Vietnam Memorial and I started just bawling when I saw it and I said, "Look at this!" and they're all in their gear with their ponchos on and guns, and these grim faces, and they're bigger than life sized, and it's like they're marching towards the Vietnam Memorial like, "Here we go again," and I said, "My gosh, I don't believe this."

RF: Well I don't think you'll have any objections from your grandchildren in terms of seeing all those. Those are all very important things.

AP: If I do, they're in big trouble!

RF: You've got that right.

AP: Because I'm paying for the trip!

RF: Well I think they'll learn a lot.

AP: I feel this is most important that they find out about their roots and their grandfather and the whole thing, and that Navy Memorial is quite interesting.

RF: I agree. That's good. Well enjoy that trip as well.

AP: I'm looking forward to it. I just hope that...when I took my oldest daughter back, the first trip back, the cherry blossoms were in bloom and it was the most beautiful, gorgeous thing to see and I was absolutely thrilled to see Washington that way, and I'm just hoping that this winter wasn't too hard and we have that opportunity again for the cherry blossoms to be in bloom.

RF: Absolutely. It is a sight; I agree with you.

AP: Well listen, I'm not going to take up any more of your time, either, but I do appreciate this and it's been very moving.

RF: Well thank you, thank you, ma'am.

AP: Well feel free to call.

RF: Thank you, I will.

AP: Okay.

RF: Bye-bye.

AP: Bye-bye.

RF: That concludes the interview with Ann Peterson, March 1st, year 2001.