

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
Thomas J. Peltin  
Electronics Technician, Navy, USS Epperson, Vietnam War.

2002

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**Peltin, Thomas J.** (1946-2004). Oral History Interview, 2002.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (ca. 60 min.); analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Transcription: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

Military Papers: 0.1 linear ft. (1 folder).

**Abstract:**

Tom Peltin, a Madison (Wisconsin) native, discusses his Navy service as an electronics technician aboard the USS Epperson during the Vietnam War. Peltin explains that enlisted in the Navy right after high school graduation in 1964, attended boot camp at San Diego (California) Naval Training Center, and received electronics training at Treasure Island Naval Base (San Francisco, California). He recalls that on his way to Yokoska (Japan) Naval Base, he flew on the same plane with Ann Margaret, who was received with much fanfare in Tokyo. While in Japan, Peltin relates that he received burns from a steam line and spent time in a Navy hospital before a circuitous route to his assigned ship, the USS Epperson (DD-179), a destroyer. He mentions that on his assignment "dream sheet" he asked to be assigned to a destroyer in Vietnam. Aboard the Epperson his duties included; repairing radar, radar scopes, identification with the Lauren Navigation System, look-out, and operating radar. Peltin tells that he had his own room because he was sleeping in the radar transmitter room and describes conditions aboard the ship as "spartan," including typical institutional food, lack of fresh food, and drinking water they desalinated themselves. He mentions that his land accommodations in Pearl Harbor were also minimal. Peltin addresses the Epperson's assignments and the three Vietnam cruises he participated in between November 1965 and August 1968. In addition to the Vietnam cruises, the Epperson was responsible for testing recovery techniques for the Apollo and Gemini space capsules while in Pearl Harbor in 1967. Peltin converted measurement charts for the NASA space program. He recounts that during the first two years the sailors mostly drank alcohol when they got off the ship, but later realized they should see the sights and went to shore at Subic Bay once a month and traveled to Sydney (Australia) for Coral Sea Week, Taiwan, Tokyo, and the Japanese countryside. Peltin discusses supporting the Army and the Marines while shelling North and South Vietnam, including at Phan Thiet base, near Dong Hoi, and docking at Danang Harbor. He recalls that the Epperson provided gunfire support, air guard, and harassment and interdiction. Peltin describes standing bow sentry in Sasbo (Japan) and the weapon he was given, "It was an old M-1. I don't think they even gave us ammunition for us. I guess we were supposed to hit somebody on the head if they came aboard." He examines the actions he took as a young soldier that unnecessarily put him in harms way such as stepping out onto the deck while receiving counter-battery fire. His Navy unit received a combat action ribbon for supporting the 3<sup>rd</sup> Marines at Quan Tre. Peltin recalls that in August of 1968 he flew back to Travis Air Force Base and then reported to Treasure Island. He tells a story about being assigned to sweeping the decks and being discovered by a lieutenant who reassigned him to the calibration lab and he states: "I was there for

about an hour and the chief petty officer comes over to me and says, Where you've been, what've you been doing? And I tell him I had just got off a ship and where I had been. And he said, we don't really need the help here. Just call in every day and tell me you're still alive." He recounts being well-received by friends and family, but had a difficult time dealing with anti-war protests. He describes his feeling about the war as mixed: "Well, it was a total waste, but it was really well intended." Peltin addresses his need to get back in touch with other Navy personnel and deal with questions he had about his involvement in the war and discusses his activity creating an association of veterans who served on the Epperson between 1949 and 1975. He explains the association's activities include newsletters, reunions, and collecting memorabilia such as berths, signal lamps, and pot helmets. Peltin also explains his involvement as president of the "Tin Can Sailors," the National Association of Destroyer Veterans, which involves mostly camaraderie and includes about 24,500 members.

### **Biographical Sketch:**

Thomas J. Peltin (1946-2004), born in Madison, Wisconsin, served on the USS Epperson during the Vietnam War as an electronics technician. He was present for three cruises to Vietnam and also was stationed in Subic Bay (Philippines), Taiwan, and Pearl Harbor. He returned to Wisconsin to earn his bachelor's degree in 1976 from the University of Wisconsin-Madison and worked in the Wisconsin Legislature and the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

Interviewed by Jim Kurtz, 2002  
Transcribed by Michael Chusid, 2006.  
Transcription edited by Christina M. Ballard, 2008.

**Transcribed Interview:**

Jim: -- Peltin, it's P-e-l-t-i-n. It's December 5, 2002. And my name is Jim Kurtz, the interviewer. Tom, could you tell us a little bit about your career: where you were born, where you went to school and all of that, before you went in the Navy?

Tom: I was born in Madison, Wisconsin. And I went to local grade schools and Wisconsin High. And – which was a university high school. And I enlisted just a couple months after I got out of high school.

Jim: Okay, now was there a reason why you enlisted when you got out of high school, and what year was that?

Tom: That would have been August of 1964. And I was probably a directionless student who knew that if he went to college would be aimless and probably flunk out, so decided he better do something else in the Navy as an alternative.

Jim: And how long did you enlist for?

Tom: Four years.

Jim: And where did you go after you were enlisted?

Tom: Ah, they gave me a choice of boot camps. And I could either have Great Lakes, Illinois, or San Diego, California. And I thought San Diego sounded a lot more interesting. So I went there for boot camp.

Jim: And when was that in 1964?

Tom: That was from August 31<sup>st</sup> of 1964 til sometime in October – 77 days in total.

Jim: Did anything particularly memorable happen there in boot camp?

Tom: Um, just that I had to make the decision that I – I went in initially on a program that would have been six years. That would have been in nuclear subMarines.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: But then when it came time to ask for a two-year extension for nuclear power school, I decided I wasn't that excited about it. But then, too, there was a war going on –

Jim: What war was that?

Tom: This was Vietnam.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: And it sounded like it would be interesting to be part of it. And it didn't sound like a nuclear submarine was going to be part of it.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: So I decided I'd just stick with surface Navy.

Jim: Okay, so what was your next step in the Navy then?

Tom: The next step was electronics technician, class A school. And again I had the choice between Treasure Island, California, which is right in the middle of San Francisco Bay, or Great Lakes, Illinois, and I again thought Treasure Island sounded more interesting.

Jim: And how long was that school time?

Tom: That school was 38 weeks.

Jim: 38 weeks. And did you get any leave or anything while you were there? Or is that 38 weeks straight through?

Tom: There were 38 weeks of classes, so it actually took closer to a year to get through out of school.

Jim: Okay. And what did you do at this school? Was it classroom, hands on – were you on ships?

Tom: This was pretty much classroom. And it was everything from basic electricity on up through fixing radars, um. It was pretty much radars, transmitters and receivers and computers. And identification: friend or foe.

Jim: Okay, and was there anything particularly memorable there? Did you meet any interesting or exciting people, either as instructors or as classmates?

Tom: Nothing stands out about the school itself. No, there was nothing really about it that was that exciting.

Jim: Well, then, when you completed school, what happened? Did you come on leave back to Madison?

Tom: I had a leave back to Madison and I had orders for a ship.

Jim: And what was the ship?

- Tom: Well, the orders were to a ship that I never got to. Apparently there had been a directive that 2700 enlisted billets had been reassigned. And so a friend of mine couldn't figure out why I had orders to a ship. I had an airplane ticket to Japan, but my ship was booked out board [?] of his at Pearl Harbor. And he wrote me and told me that. But I figured I wanted to go where my plane ticket was, and as it turns out, they had changed my orders and never told me what ship I was assigned to. So I actually did not know what ship I was going to for quite some time.
- Jim: So how did you fly across the Pacific Ocean – by commercial air?
- Tom: Flew by commercial air. Same flight as Ann-Margaret [actress] going on a publicity tour to Japan. She had a little more of a welcoming committee than we did.
- Jim: Oh, I can believe that. So did you fly from Madison to Chicago to Los Angeles?
- Tom: Let's see. I went: Madison to – I don't remember just how I got there, but I ended up going from San Francisco to Anchorage to Tokyo.
- Jim: So you landed in Tokyo. Then what happened when you got to Tokyo?
- Tom: Then we went to, I think it was -- Well, we went to Yokoska, which was Y-o-k-o-s-u-k-a. It looks like Yo-ko-su-ka, but it's pronounced Yokoska.
- Jim: Is that a Navy base?
- Tom: It's a Navy base. In Japan. Large Navy base. Was a big World War II base for the Japanese.
- Jim: Okay, and what happened when you got there?
- Tom: Well, that's when I actually – I got there – I got – Let's see, I guess a couple of things happened. One, I got burned in an accident –
- Jim: Was that a military accident?
- Tom: Yeah, in a steam line. Before that, one thing which I had forgotten about but which was later reminded, was that I did end up on a working party with someone who was wounded in Vietnam. That was my first exposure to people who had been in combat, and –
- Jim: Were these Navy people who had been wounded?
- Tom: Yeah. These are our own Navy. I'm not positive if that actually –

Jim: Was so was this at the Navy base where you were on a working party with them?

Tom: Yes.

Jim: Okay. And what year was this? 19—

Tom: This would have been late '65. Probably late October, November of '65.

Jim: Okay. Go ahead and tell me more about that if you could, please.

Tom: It was just interesting that later on, years later, when I was having problems wrestling with some of my recollections with some of the war, it was Bob Cook, C-o-o-k, at the Veterans Center here in Madison, who – when we were going over my history – reminded me of a lay at a Navy [?] and that I was maybe more – oh, I don't know – I had a few things I was not remembering that might have been because of the amount of time I spent in that hospital area.

Jim: Okay. So there was a major Navy hospital at this Navy base?

Tom: Yes. Very large Navy hospital.

Jim: Okay. What happened then while you were in Japan? Did you stay in Japan for a long period of time, or did you leave, or –

Tom: Well, I got burned, and that of course took me off all kinds of duty. And then they fly me from there to Subic Bay, Philippines. And by this time, I was still puzzled as to which ship I was going to, but I was going along for the ride, you know. They told me where to go. So they flew me down there on a commercial airplane – a Douglas DC-4. Pretty scary aircraft to be on board of.

Jim: And what kind of aircraft is it? A two-engine, four-engine jet?

Tom: It was a four-engine airplane, but it was a four-engine propeller plane. But it had been pretty much retired in the U.S. But those Japanese airlines were still flying them for Navy charters.

Jim: Okay. And what happened when you got to Subic Bay, and that's spelled S-u-b-i-c.

Tom: That's correct. Well, I sat around there for a couple weeks, while waiting. That's when I found out that I finally had orders for the U.S.S. Epperson.

Jim: Can you spell that for us, please?

Tom: E-p-p-e-r-s-o-n. Her hull number was DD719.

Jim: Okay. And what kind of a ship was that?

Tom: This was a destroyer.

Jim: Right. And what class? Do you know?

Tom: This is a Deering Framwiller [?] destroyer. And finally somebody told me why I was there – they told me what ship I had orders to. ‘Cause I had been looking for a totally different ship for some weeks at this point.

Jim: Were you interested in getting on destroyers, or did you just want to get on any kind of ship?

Tom: When I got my dream sheet back in A-school [?] –

Jim: What is a dream sheet?

Tom: It’s where you request where you want to go. And they had down: country where you wanted to go. And I put down: Vietnam. And they put down: type of ship. And I put down: destroyer.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: Which just goes to show – if you ask for things that most people don’t want, the Navy will give it to you.

Jim: [Laughs] So you got to the Epperson. What was your job there?

Tom: I was an electronics technician.

Jim: And what does an electronics technician do on a destroyer?

Tom: Well, repairs on all the radar and radar scopes, identification: friend or foe, navigation – it was a Lauren navigation systems. Um –

Jim: What’s a Lauren navigation system?

Tom: It’s a hard system to describe – It picks up various signals and tells you where you are within a couple of miles. At the time it was the best thing we had.

Jim: Okay. So you didn’t actually operate any of the electronics equipment? When it was broke, you fixed it?

Tom: Actually because we were short on radar men, I became an operator – that’s an interesting point. When I got there, first of all, a couple of things were odd.



Number one, I had probably the only private room on the ship other than the captain.

Jim: Why was that?

Tom: 'Cause I was sleeping up the radar transmitter room, because there was no room in any of the bunks anywhere. In fact, from November 10<sup>th</sup> until about February 10<sup>th</sup> –

Jim: That was '65 to '66.

Tom: -- that I had my own private room. No accommodation other than a mattress laying on a deck. But that was my own room. And of course I had to traipse down all the passageways, trying to get to the head [bathroom] to take a shower. But, you know, it was sort of funny having your own room. Then, also on board at that time was a junior man who would have also been a head cleaner, the "head", of course, being the rest room in the Navy. Well, fortunately for me, someone junior to me came on board very shortly after I was there. So I was head cleaner there only a very short period of time – actually, a matter of days.

Jim: So this junior person has responsibility for all the heads on the ship? Is that correct?

Tom: Well, we had the after-cruise head, which is the biggest one. Which our division was responsible for. It was fine with me that he was ordered to take over that for me.

Jim: I can understand that. So did you stay in the Philippines area when you were on the Epperson?

Tom: Well, living – Because we were so short-handed, I had to learn to be a look-out watch, and I had to learn to be a scope operator. I guess they figured if we could fix them, we could operate them. And as it was it turned out that I had a much more interesting time than I would have, had I just been a repairman. Because I got to learn to actually track contacts, do all the things rudermen [?] did, and as a look-out watch, I got to learn a lot about what the look-outs did and –

Jim: Okay, what did the look-out do?

Tom: Well, watch for low-flying aircraft, watch for small boats in the area. Just generally, it was the greatest seat in the house for gunfire missions, 'cause you could sit there and watch the shells hit.

Jim: And where physically on the boat was the look-out?

Tom: It was up above – it was called the flying bridge – it was up above the bridge area. So now I was obviously gotten [?] off the ship, and the way I got there was that they put me on board an oiler.

Jim: What's an oiler?

Tom: It's a replenishment ship.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: To carry oil. It was the U.S.S. Sacramento, which was the city of Sacramento in California. The Sacramento, and that's how I got from Subic Bay to my ship. And eventually I dropped off the bottom of a helicopter onto my ship. And then began my career on board the Epperson.

Jim: Okay, and when was this?

Tom: This was November 10, 1965.

Jim: So how long were you on the Epperson?

Tom: I got off August 8, 1968.

Jim: So you were around there two-and-a-half years?

Tom: Something like thirty-three months altogether, I think, is what it came out to.

Jim: Was that unusual for a person to be on one ship that long?

Tom: I think that was pretty typical.

Jim: Can you describe the things and highlights of your time on Epperson?

Tom: Oh, golly. Well, a lot of the time we – We made three cruises to the Vietnam area.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: And what you did is –

Jim: How long was a cruise?

Tom: Typically about six months.

Jim: Can you describe to me each of those as you remember them? I mean, just what the highlights of them were, and then, between cruises, what did you do?

Tom: Well, the first cruise – I got there in the middle of it, and the ship was already shooting. In fact, within hours of the time I got on board, all those on board were standing look-out watch, and I was up there with a ship that was on call-fire mission. The activities of the ship varied. The most interesting was gunfire support.

Jim: Okay, could you describe what you remember about that?

Tom: Well, that why they gave us a target of some kind, whatever it happened to be. Gave us coordinates and we just came and shot at it.

Jim: Okay, was this supporting ground troops? Or destroying facilities? Were you in North Vietnam, South Vietnam waters?

Tom: This varied a great deal. We moved from all the way – In 1968 we did Cedar [?], which was shelling North Vietnam. Prior to that, we only shelled South Vietnam. The – Generally what it came down to was we had daylight missions, which were primarily – it varied so much, because sometimes there'd be spotter planes that located, say, some junks like at the mouth of a river, and our job was just to go in there and shoot them out. And then sometimes it would be a shore target, and oftentimes it would be – if they were going to do a landing zone kind of operation, they'd want us to come in and shoot, before the troops came in.

Jim: Was this in support of Marines or Army?

Tom: Both.

Jim: Both. So on the first cruise, you got in there in November of '65 and it terminated when?

Tom: Well, we went to the Coral Sea Week in Sydney, Australia in the first week of May in 1966, so we were out of Vietnam before then.

Jim: What is Coral Sea Week?

Tom: Well, they still, at least then, had a week-long celebration of the battle of Coral Sea.

Jim: Which is in what war?

Tom: Which is in World War II. And that was the turning the tide of the Japanese advance. And coming down towards Australia, we celebrated with them. In fact, the first time we were down there, there were like 10,000 people waiting to welcome us.

Jim: And what part of New Zealand, I mean Australia did you land in?

Tom: This is Sydney.

Jim: Sydney. And how long were you in Australia then?

Tom: It was about eight days, I think. It was what we would have been there.

Jim: Did you get shore leave?

Tom: Oh, yes.

Jim: Is there anything memorable about that?

Tom: Well, every private club was open to us. There were sign-up lists for anybody who wanted a sailor to come home. Have dinner with their families. I think later on, they had enough of our guys go there that it wasn't quite such a hospitable place. But when we were there it was just – They welcomed us with open arms, literally.

Jim: And what was R&R? I mean, what were the people doing? Were they from Vietnam?

Tom: Well, I think later on it was more R&R. When we went there, we were the only ones there.

Jim: Then when you left Sydney, what did you do?

Tom: Well, at the end of that cruise, we went back to Pearl Harbor. And at the end of that cruise then, we pretty much at that point started up on Apollo and Gemini recovery techniques.

Jim: And what was that?

Tom: First of all there was Gemini, because that was the system that was coming up next. The Mercury space program had been in operation for some time. And now the next ones to go were Gemini. And the Gemini capsule, of course, was different than the Mercury capsule. And so they needed to practice on the destroyers to pick these things up, because they didn't know where it was going to land. It was supposed to land next to a carrier, but if it didn't, they had to have other ships to do the recovery. And destroyers were the ones that were selected. We were low in the water, and they could mount a recovery crane on the ship. So they'd mount a recovery crane, and then we'd go out and develop the techniques for recovery. And it was boring but yet it was very entertaining, 'cause we'd steam up north of Hawaii, couple hundred miles, throw this big boiler-plate capsule in the water, steam a few hundred yards away and then make an approach

-- try and pick the thing up. Gemini, as I recall, was fairly straight-forward. It wasn't that hard to pick up. The following year is when we did Apollo. And Apollo had a couple of interesting characteristics. It had two different stable positions. Stable one, which was sitting the way it was supposed to in the water. Stable two, which was sitting inverted in the water. The problem with stable two was there was no way to hook up any recovery lines, because there was just the heat shield on the bottom. And the assumption was that any recovery points, I think, would have burned up by then. So we had a lot of trouble trying to pick this thing up when it flipped over. Eventually they melted recovery balloons, essentially, around the neck of the capsule, and the recovery mounts [?] would turn it right-side up again. But when we started on these techniques, these balloons didn't exist. So we had all this trouble trying to pick these things up.

Jim: So how long were you involved in working on these space capsule recoveries?

Tom: Well, it was some weeks – I don't remember just how many. The other thing that was interesting about Apollo in particular was that the thing was really shaped like a sail. And a pair of rescue divers had to come practice picking up, attaching the lines to this capsule, and what they found was that if there was the slightest breeze, those Apollo capsules just took off like a sailboat. And so time after time we had to go pick up these guys – they were just swimming like mad after those capsules. And the capsule was just drifting away from them. We pick them up 'til the helicopter could come and get them. And take them back for another trip out. But eventually they figured out how to time their jumps, so they would land ahead of the capsule.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: So that's about it for Apollo in general.

Jim: Okay. Then you went back to Pearl Harbor after you completed –

Tom: After each of those trips. In fact, we went back home – it was nightly.

Jim: Okay. And did you have anything memorable happen in the Pearl Harbor area?

Tom: Nothing really comes to mind at that time.

Jim: So when you completed this part, what happened next?

Tom: Well, then, later that year we deployed again for the South Pacific.

Jim: And that was 1966?

Tom: This was later in '66, '67.

Jim: Okay, where did you deploy – Was this your second cruise to Vietnam?

Tom: Yes. First we went to Japan to off-load the nuclear weapons you didn't have. And then went down to the Vietnam area. And missions tend to be two types from that area. Either gunfire support, which is just what it sounds like, or plain guard, which is sitting aft of an aircraft carrier in case one of the aircraft goes in the drink – you're back there to pick up any pilot that happens to go in the water.

Jim: Did you work with aircraft carriers regularly?

Tom: Often. [?] blowing, and you also got all the stacks on the aircraft carrier, which wasn't much fun to breathe. You know, we wanted to be on gunfire missions – that's what we thought we were, was a gunfire ship.

Jim: Right. So that second cruise was mainly – the air guard and – What part of Vietnam waters were you working on that second cruise?

Tom: Again, it was pretty much from the DMZ all the way south. And, as I had mentioned too, one of the other kinds of fire-missions was called H & I: harassment and interdiction.

Jim: Okay. Could you explain what that –

Tom: Those generally were a nighttime mission. And what would happen is that there would be an airbase usually, or maybe some Marines, who needed protection. And we would just sit a couple miles off shore, and just drop perimeter around their base, and just sit there and lob random shells. Usually one a minute from 10:00 pm until four in the morning. And it was just to intimidate the infiltration of the base much less easy.

Jim: Okay: Anyway, when you did fire missions, were you controlled by somebody on shore? Or from the air? Or was it both or –

Tom: H & I fire was strictly a ground spotter. And there wasn't a whole lot of spotting going on – you were just given an area and told to shoot at it all night. With other kinds of missions, sometimes there were air spotters and sometimes there were ground spotters, depending on the mission.

Jim: Okay. And as an electronic repairman, how – how aware were you when these things were going on?

Tom: Well, especially when I was still doing the radars, [group?] watches and doing flying raid watches, I was probably more aware than 90% of the guys on the ship. Later on, when I didn't stand those watches, I became somewhat less aware of it. But at that time I was such a part of the radar and culture [?] that I was able to go

up and spend a lot of time with those guys, and I generally knew what we were doing and why.

Jim: How long were the watches that you stood when you were on station?

Tom: It varied, but usually it was four hours on – well, we did a lot of four hours on, four hours off. We did some eight on. And then there was a three-section watch with eight hours on, and then sixteen hours off.

Jim: Okay, is there anything more about this cruise that we should talk about?

Tom: Nothing really comes to mind on this one.

Jim: Okay. Then what happened – When was that cruise over?

Tom: Well, mid to late '67.

Jim: Okay. Then what did you do?

Tom: Back to Pearl Harbor, and I think that's actually when maybe when that Apollo stuff took place.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: Actually, I really went out and did a couple of real Apollo missions at that point. Um, a couple of strange things about the actual Apollo mission. Our radar is written out in yards, and NASA of course wanted everything totally run in meters. So they gave us a conversion chart. So I set it up all night one night, drawing up a conversion chart. That was my contribution to the NASA space effort. And the other thing that was strange that I set up was that we thought that we were out for a real Apollo recovery mission. You figured that you'd be part of this great radio network world-wide, where you'd know everything that was going on. Well, we knew we had to know what orbit they were on, 'cause where we were supposed to be for pick up depended on what orbit the space craft was on. But what determines how you figure out what orbit they were on. And finally at the back of this 900-page operation order, we found a list of commercial radio stations that we could listen to and find out what orbit they were on. I think we were all kind of crestfallen, because we wanted to be part of this wonderful international media network, and it turned out that we were going to be listening to the radio like everybody else. But the other difficulty with that was our ship's [entertainment?] system wasn't wired to go all over the place on the ship. And that was the only way we had commercial radio stations. So we had to do some fancy wiring in a hurry to run some additional speakers, so we could know where we were, or know where we were supposed to be.

Jim: So how long were you involved in these Apollo recovery missions?

Tom: Again, that was probably just a matter of weeks.

Jim: And did you meet any astronauts or anything as a result of this?

Tom: No, we never actually had to pick up a real capsule.

Jim: Okay. Then when you completed that what happened?

Tom: We deployed again in February of 1968 for our final cruise, the final cruise that I was on.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: And at that point, we thought initially we might be going to Korea, because the Pueblo had just been seized. And as it turns out, we did not go to Korea.

Jim: Was the third cruise comparable to the first two cruises you were on?

Tom: It was very different, because the Tet offensive had started off.

Jim: Okay. What role did you have in that?

Tom: We just shot a lot. We shot – I think in the previous years we had shot maybe six thousand rounds in the course of a cruise. In 1968, we fired over 16,000 rounds.

Jim: How were you resupplied?

Tom: In some cases almost daily we had to go alongside an ammunition ship, and they would swing over palettes of bullets to us, powders and projectiles.

Jim: And is that the way you got your food and that, too, from supply ships like that?

Tom: Yes, right. And also we had to get our fuel from ships like that.

Jim: So when you were on a six-month cruise or what, you never went to shore?

Tom: No, we would go to shore. Every month or so we be on shore.

Jim: Where did you go on shore?

Tom: Usually Subic Bay. Sometimes we walked [?] on Taiwan patrol. We had to do a large Taiwan patrol going on [?]. Which is in electronics intelligence.

Jim: And Taiwan is between –



**[END OF SIDE A, TAPE 1]**

Jim: -- is between -- dealing with the Red Chinese and the National Chinese, is that correct?

Tom: Yes, that was --

PAUSE

Jim: -- the Taiwan Strait patrols and the third cruise. So, are there any highlights with the Tet Offensive? What part of Vietnam were you supporting American troops in during the Tet Offensive?

Tom: It varied. It went all the way down to -- I think the base was called Phan Thiet, which I think P-h-a-n-T-h-i-e-t, which is down by I think it's called the Four Corner region.

Jim: Okay. And the Four Corner region was where?

Tom: It was extreme southern Vietnam. And during this year, I also did Cedar Raygun [?], which was the shelling of North Vietnam.

Jim: Okay. And what part of North Vietnam did you go up to? Up by Haiphong or down by the DMZ?

Tom: It was north of the DMZ up by a place called Dong Hoi. D-o-n-g-H-o-i.

Jim: Okay. And why was Dong Hoi a target.

Tom: There were bridges there and highways. And we went in and shot things up as best we could. And also we got counter-battery fire from [Ardien?]. We got counter-battery fire, I think, three or four times on this cruise.

Jim: What is counter-battery fire?

Tom: That's when they shoot back at you.

Jim: Okay. Anything come close?

Tom: We had shrapnel hit the ship. Nobody got hurt. We were very lucky.

Jim: Did you see any North Vietnamese aircraft or anything when you were up there?

Tom: No. North Vietnamese Aircraft came out to challenge when we were out there.

Jim: What about the North Vietnamese Navy?

- Tom: Nothing ever came out where we were. There were small boats, you know, merchant type that we would attack, but nothing by way of combatants.
- Jim: In the three cruises you did in Vietnam, did you ever dock anywhere in Vietnam?
- Tom: Um, to the best of my recollection we never actually – We docked in Danang Harbor, but most of us would not have left the ship – only a few people ever left the ship.
- Jim: Okay. And was that for resupply or repairs or just –
- Tom: That would have been exchanging of probably radios or intelligence information or whatever in preparation of a mission.
- Jim: Okay. And in the three cruises you were involved in, were you involved in something called Market Time at all?
- Tom: Well, I don't know that we were actually ever part of Market Time. Market Time was more to destroy escort, lead and picket ships. The smaller ships.
- Jim: Okay. And could you describe what Market Time was?
- Tom: Well, it was again more of a – It was an intervention in commerce, but the bigger ships like us, they kept more for -- See, we had the bigger guns. We had the five-inch guns. The destroyer-escorts only had three-inch. So they couldn't do very much in the way of shelling shore targets. But we had the big ones by comparison.
- Jim: Is there anything more that you'd like to tell us about the third cruise you had in Vietnam?
- Tom: Well, a couple of things stand out, I guess. One, when we were on Sea Dragon, it was a classic case of stupid sailors. Buddy of mine and I were on watch in the radar transmitter room, and we could tell from the phones what was happening, we could tell from just the shaking of the ship what was happening with the guns. And then we heard over the sound-wired phones [?]: counter-battery fire, counter-battery fire! So we did what any two stupid sailors would do – we opened up the door to the [?] deck and walked up that side and watched the war. And we were standing there watching these shell splashes, maybe a hundred yards off the side of the ship. And we finally decided that if somebody saw us we could get in trouble. We didn't decide we could get ourselves killed, we decided that we would get in trouble if somebody saw us. So we closed the door and went back inside and of course after this was all done, we went out and picked up shrapnel from exactly where we had been standing. And it just points out how stupid you can be when you're just twenty years old.

Jim: Now when you were doing these fire missions, you had specific duty stations on the boat? Is that correct?

Tom: Yes. I would have had a very specific job.

Jim: And did you wear life-preservers and steel pots and the like?

Tom: We had on this pot helmet, and I think usually I had a flak jacket and a life-jacket.

Jim: How many five-inch guns did a destroyer have?

Tom: Ours had six, I'm sorry, ours had four. Some had six, ours had four.

Jim: Where were they on the boat?

Tom: Two forward, two aft.

Jim: Okay. Did you have any other armament on the boat?

Tom: Nothing that applied to this kind of warfare. Everything applied to anti-submarine warfare instead.

Jim: Was the Epperson a World War II destroyer or was it post?

Tom: She was built at the end of World War II, but she wasn't commissioned until 1949. She was of a World War II type, though.

Jim: Is there anything more that we should talk about on the Vietnam experience?

Tom: Just that – On Tet Eagle [?], when it was very intensive, we were shelling day and night. That's where we got our Navy unit commendation for.

Jim: Okay. And what was that specifically?

Tom: It was just that we were supporting the Third Marines. The commendation is not very specific.

Jim: So were you supporting them at Hue or Da Nang?

Tom: Quan Tre.

Jim: Quan Tre. And that's up right by the DMZ?

Tom: Yes. And that's where we were, and we got shelled up there, and we shelled them and they shelled us. That's why we have the Combat Action Ribbon, which is sort of the Navy's equivalent of the Combat Infantryman Badge.

Jim: Okay. Now did individual sailors get that too, as a decoration?

Tom: Yes. Yes.

Jim: And is that in the form of a ribbon?

Tom: Yeah, it's a ribbon.

Jim: Okay. Is there anything else that -- about the Vietnam experience?

Tom: Um, I guess just that even in the intensive days of those onerous times it seems things were -- you could always end up with sort of a, little odd twist of something, like if we shell some night, we might shell, like, 719 shells, which was our hull number: TD719. And you know that every one of those was picked, because it was needed. I think one night we carved our hull number in the ground out there in support of an air base. I think we --

Jim: That was in a "H" and -- Harassing and Firing, right? Okay. Did you have any lasting friendships from your time on Epperson?

Tom: Oh, yes. To this day, many. Many of the guys off the ship I try to stay in touch.

Jim: Okay. We'll talk about that in your veterans experience. Are we ready to talk about how you left the ship and when you left the ship? I mean -- Or is there something else you want to talk about on your ship experience?

Tom: Well, just looking at my notes, I did have one little story that I was going to -- interested --

Jim: Please tell it to us.

Tom: Um, my first experience hitting a port after I got on the ship -- so this would have been December 1965 -- reported to Sasbo, Japan, and I was supposedly the bow sentry, which meant I was standing on the forward part of the ship with a rifle. And it was cold -- man, it was really cold.

Jim: What kind of rifle did you have?

Tom: It was an old M-1. I don't think they even gave us ammunition for us. I guess we were supposed to hit somebody on the head if they came aboard. Anybody who came aboard in that weather was pretty dumb anyway. So I was standing bow sentry. And it just struck me how ironic it was that -- the guy who was on the

watch before me had left his radio for me. So here I am – this 19-year-old kid, first Christmas away from home in his life and listening to the Armed Forces Network playing Christmas carols, standing there about as lonely as you can possibly be in this world as the bow sentry on a destroyer in Sasbo, Japan. And this story just kind of stuck with me – a kind of “Silent Night, Lonely Night” kind of story. So.

Jim: What did you do, before we get you off the ship, what did you do in the off-duty hours? Did you have hobbies? Or did you just sleep? Or –

Tom: Well, it varied. If we were deployed and we were overseas, the first couple of years mostly we hit the bars. Which was pretty stupid, but that’s what we did. The last year a couple of us realized that we would probably never get back to this part of the world again. So we started playing pretty serious tourist. And so when we went to Taiwan, we took side trips to Taipei. When we went to Japan, we took side trips to Tokyo. So we finally got smart and got out and saw some of the countryside. Which is something many of my shipmates didn’t do, and I think they probably regret it. Back at Pearl Harbor, we had an apartment of our own.

Jim: And what kind of a lease did they have – a weekly lease or a monthly lease?

Tom: It was a few months at a time. It was a dive.

Jim: So it was kind of like a military ghetto?

Tom: Yeah, it wasn’t very nice.

Jim: On the ship did they have recreation facilities for you?

Tom: Not on board. The bases had gymnasiums and so on.

Jim: So it was boring off duty?

Tom: It depends on, you know, if your cellie had a car at Pearl Harbor, then – I finally got a car, then I had things to do.

Jim: Okay. Are you ready to tell me how you left the Epperson – is that when you separated from the Navy?

Tom: Yeah. August in 1968 we pulled into Subic Bay, Phillipines, and a couple of us would go over to the base exchange and, whatever, look for camera lenses and on the way back, coming back to the ship, noticed that the guys on the quarterdeck were yelling at us: “Get moving!” When we got there, we found out that they had our plane scheduled for later that day. So I came back on Flight X-254 on Saturn Airways. It was a charter, and I had never heard of Saturn Airways before, and I wasn’t sure I wanted to fly them.

Jim: What kind of a plane was it?

Tom: It was actually a DC-8, which back then was a new airplane. But I just wasn't very confident in anything called Saturn Airways.

Jim: Sure. Where did you land when you –

Tom: Travis Air Force Base, California.

Jim: Then what happened?

Tom: Put us on a bus and took me to Treasure Island, California.

Jim: Okay. And what happened at Treasure Island?

Tom: Stayed there for a week while they processed me out. Actually, I spent a lot of time over on, on the beach. The first day I was there I was assigned to sweep down the decks – that's for officers' quarters. And so I went there and I got a Galway broom and I'm sweeping down the ladder-stairways at their end. And this lieutenant comes by and says – I was saluting -- he wondered what a petty officer was doing sweeping down the decks, the ladders. And I said, "It's my work assignment." He said, "We don't have anything better for petty officers to do?" And I said, "I'm doing what I was told, sir, in the transit barracks." So he told me to come with him, and we made a couple of phone calls. And after that I was assigned to a calibration lab, where they had broken test equipment.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: I got assigned to the calib lab, and I was there for about an hour and the chief petty officer comes over to me and says, Where you've been, what've you been doing? And I tell him I had just got off a ship and where I had been. And he said, we don't really need the help here. Just call in every day and tell me you're still alive. So at that point I didn't really have any work to do – I could just hit the beach and go to San Francisco all day long.

Jim: Okay. So that was until you got separated there?

Tom: Right. So then August 16, 1968 I got separation orders.

Jim: Okay. That meant you were out of the Navy?

Tom: I was off active duty.

Jim: Off active duty. Did you have a reserve commitment?

Tom: I had a two-year reserve commitment at that point.

Jim: Okay. So you came back to Madison, then, from Treasure Island?

Tom: Yes.

Jim: How did you get back to Madison?

Tom: I flew back.

Jim: Okay. What was your reaction to Madison in August of 1968 and how were you received by family, friends?

Tom: Well, I was just glad to be back – well, actually, my return to family and friends wasn't nearly as traumatic, like I said, as it was for other people. Certainly my family was just happy to have me home. And friends – Friends at that point had somewhat drifted apart. Most of them had gone on to college and I was about to start as a twenty-two-year-old freshman. And really my focus at that point became registering as a college freshman. So I didn't see very many of the people I knew from before.

Jim: What was your reaction to what was going on in Madison at the time?

Tom: Well, it was pretty hard to deal with, because, you know, we thought we had been over trying to do a good job. And obviously nobody here seemed to think that.

Jim: Did you have any interaction with the protesters or confrontations or anything like that?

Tom: Mine were really minimal. I didn't seek anybody out in order to be confrontational. You know, you couldn't be completely inconspicuous, because you'd be taking like a freshman college English class and you're twenty-two years old, and the question comes up: Where you been the last four years? But I think the Navy bothered people less.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: I don't think they knew we had been involved with the war, so there wasn't any real reason to pull it out.

Jim: I'm just going to stop –

PAUSE ON TAPE

Jim: Before we talk about some of your veterans experience, whether you have any last thoughts about Vietnam, then or now, whatever?

Tom: Well, it was a total waste, but it was really well intended. And I think knowing what the decision-makers knew then, I'm not sure I can fault them. And I don't know that in or out [there wasn't a reasonable?] effort, and certainly I wish it had turned out differently. When I look back on it, I have a hard time saying it was a complete folly, or anything like that. It may have actually served a significant purpose, I don't know.

Jim: Now, we'd like to talk briefly about your experiences as a veteran. Did you have any active reserve commitment? Did you have to go to meetings or anything like that?

Tom: We had no commitment. I went to one meeting and decided it wasn't for me.

Jim: Okay. Then did you join any veterans' organizations after this?

Tom: I was briefly involved in an attempt to start a VFW post here, but I really didn't get very much involved in that.

Jim: Okay. Did you make any effort to stay in contact with the friends you had made on the Epperson?

Tom: A couple of the guys I stayed in contact with for a while, but then I lost track of them.

Jim: Okay. Then did you think that there was a need to try and find some way to get back in contact with these people?

Tom: Um, was triggered it was I had some questions about our involvement in the war, and mine in particular, and I took an opportunity to get a meeting with Bob Cook at the Vet Center here.

Jim: Okay. And what was Bob Cook's job?

Tom: He was a counselor there. And Bob was very helpful, helping me understand what my problem was and that I didn't know that the answers were and that I didn't know what the questions were. And just trying to understand a little better about what I had been involved in. And as part of those conversations, Bob encouraged me to get in touch with some of my old ship mates. So one day I decided to pick up the phone and I thought I'd try to track down a couple of them. And all of a sudden [?] I had created the U.S. Veterans Association and had had success in finding over a hundred of the guys I knew. And a total of about five hundred guys from the ship during her a career.

Jim: Was this from the time it was commissioned until –



Tom: Right. Throughout her entire life span.

Jim: And what was the life span of the ship?

Tom: 1949 to 1975.

Jim: Okay. And how did the association – what did the association do?

Tom: Well, we put out a newsletter. And then we started holding reunions.

Jim: And where were these reunions held?

Tom: The first one was in California, and, let's see, the second one was near Chicago, and the third one was in San Diego.

Jim: Okay. And how many people attended these reunions?

Tom: We had about 150 people show up.

Jim: And was this all ex-sailors?

Tom: Some spouses too.

Jim: Did any officers attend these reunions?

Tom: Oh, yes. Including former commanding officers.

Jim: Do you know how many commanding officers the Epperson had?

Tom: Total in her career?

Jim: Well, just how many showed up at the –

Tom: I think about three of them came to the reunions.

Jim: Okay. And were the reunions just good friendship? Or was there any focus to it?

Tom: No, it was just camaraderie. It was just – Guys hadn't seen each other in a long time, getting together again. Very positive, very fun events.

Jim: Okay. Did you have any other interest in your destroyer crew, I mean, did you call any collection of information or equipment or anything like that?

Tom: Well, we started collecting things – we thought it would be fun for reunions. So we ended up with a large amount of memorabilia.

Jim: So did you take this stuff to the reunions and set it up like in a hospitality room to show this stuff? Could you describe some of that stuff?

Tom: Oh, I had a table off the mess deck of the destroyer that you could sit down at, just like you were about to sit down to a meal. I had three of the berths off the destroyer that we slept on. I had a signal lamp that we used to signal from ship to ship. Binoculars and pot helmets and sound-cover foams and all that sort of stuff.

Jim: So how did you collect this stuff?

Tom: Well, I don't even remember how we got a lot of it. Some of it came from a museum in Baton Rouge that was willing to part with it. Much of it I found at auctions, not on line – this is too far back for that. Auction houses.

Jim: And is this some of the stuff that you're contributing to the Wisconsin Veterans Museum?

Tom: That's correct.

Jim: Is there anything else that you need to tell us about this experience?

Tom: Well, over time I got more and more active with the tin can sailors.

Jim: What's that?

Tom: That's the National Association of Destroyer Veterans.

Jim: Okay.

Tom: First I ended up on the board of directors, and then I ended up as the president and executive director of the association. I'm still actually president, and I was executive director until a couple of months ago. Because of my cancer, I had to give that up.

Jim: How many members are there of this association?

Tom: About 24,500.

Jim: And do they have a reunion or annual meetings?

Tom: They do an annual meeting, and they do a lot of regional meetings. Again, they do a newsletter.

Jim: And is this an educational organization? Or is it camaraderie –

Tom: It's camaraderie, for the most part.

Jim: And is there an annual meeting somewhere every year?

Tom: We have a small annual meeting. There's only about 500 people.

Jim: Okay. And then you said the regional meetings. Is that people that just take the initiative of trying to form them?

Tom: Well, we call them bull sessions. We do twelve to fifteen a year, and they draw anywhere from 25 people to 300 people.

Jim: And are these veterans of all wars that destroyers were involved in?

Tom: Yes.

Jim: And the Cold War, I presume?

Tom: Yes. Yeah, we work on the Cold War guys too.

Jim: Okay. Is there anything else that you should tell us about that association and your involvement?

Tom: No, I think that's about it.

Jim: Okay. I guess – Is there anything else you'd like to describe? Now we didn't really talk about living conditions on the destroyer. Do you want to talk about that – the food and that type of thing, or is that –

Tom: Well, the living conditions were rather spartan. We slept on three-high racks, which were an aluminum piece of pipe with a canvas stretched between it with ropes to hold it. And a mattress over that – about a two-inch thick mattress.

Jim: Did you have sheets on it?

Tom: We were given sheets, yes.

Jim: What about blankets?

Tom: Sheets and blankets, right. And actually the mattress itself was in something that was referred to as a fart sack, which was just a mattress cover, and then you had a sheet over that, and then a blanket. We were three high. The lockers were underneath the lowest rack, meaning that if somebody was sleeping on the lowest rack, getting your gear out was always a challenge.

Jim: Okay. And how big was the locker?

Tom: About two feet by one foot.

Jim: And that's where you kept all your personal belongings?

Tom: Um-huh.

Jim: So how many uniforms did you have?

Tom: Well, they taught you well how to pack your uniforms. 'Cause you had to get a couple pairs of dungarees, whites, blues.

Jim: Okay. What kind of food did you have on the ship?

Tom: Oh, I guess you'd just call it standard institutional food. Except when you were on Hawaii, you didn't have fresh milk or fresh – You know, if it could be carried on a refrigerator ship, fine. If it couldn't, you couldn't have it. And sometimes the fresh food you got was already so rotten, you had to throw it overboard.

Jim: What kind of drinking water did you have on board?

Tom: We had excellent drinking water, 'cause we made our own.

Jim: Desalting.

Tom: Yeah, we had a distilling plant.

Jim: Did you see any sea life while you were out there? Any whales, sharks?

Tom: Every once in a while we'd see some whales or sharks, yeah.

Jim: What about birds?

Tom: Yeah, I guess there were birds out there too. I never paid much attention to them.

Jim: Okay. Is there anything else about the everyday life on a destroyer you'd like to mention?

Tom: No, nothing really comes to mind. Just usually a dull routine, like most service.

Jim: Well –

**[END OF INTERVIEW. END OF TAPE 1, SIDE B]**