

Wisconsin Veterans Museum  
Research Center

Transcript of an  
Oral History Interview with  
JOHN W. PETERSON  
Naval Officer, Navy  
1995

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**Peterson, John W.**, (c.1945-2009). Oral History Interview, 1995.  
User Copy: Transcript only.

**Abstract:**

John Peterson discusses his career as an officer in the Navy, focusing on his command of the landing operation of US and UN forces in Somalia around 1992. Peterson explains the tactics, strategy and goals of the effort to secure the port of Mogadishu (Somalia), the airport, and the US Embassy before rendering aid to the surrounding cities. He mentions the role of the UN, as well as the affect the media had on the operation. He explains the economic, social, and political situation in Somalia at that time, as well as the people's interaction with the US personnel. The reaction of President George H.W. Bush upon seeing Somalia is mentioned. Peterson also explains the social and tactical changes he has seen in the culture of the Navy in his years of service. Peterson details his role in the withdrawal of UN forces in Somalia. He mentions his work as the Commanding Officer of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps.

**Biographical Sketch:**

John W. Peterson (c.1945-2009) served as a pilot in the Navy aboard several aircraft carriers before commanding the USS St. Louis. He was in command of the landing operation of US forces in Somalia around 1992.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells, 1995.  
Transcribed by Joanna D. Glenn, 1997.  
Transcription checked and corrected by John Pike, 2011.  
Corrections typed in by Lauren Kelly, 2012.  
Abstract written by Rebecca Cook, 2015.

## **Interview Transcript:**

Van Ells: Today's date is March 28, 1995. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview this afternoon with Mr. John W. Peterson, a veteran of Operation Restore Hope in Somalia during the 1990's. Good afternoon. How are you doing?

Peterson: I'm doing fine.

Van Ells: Thanks for stopping in.

Peterson: It's a pleasure to be here.

Van Ells: Let's start the interview by having you tell me a little bit about how you got into the military in the first place. Where were you born and where were you raised? What were you doing prior to your entering the Navy?

Peterson: I was born in New England and raised in New England along the north shore of Boston. I went to Dartmouth College. My father was a Marine veteran of World War II but I had really no interest in the military in my early years, on my part. I was in a fraternity at Dartmouth and seven of my fraternity brothers were Naval ROTC folks and they sort of got me interested and I'm of a rather conservative bent politically and I decided somewhere around the end of my junior year that the Vietnamese War was a righteous conflict I guess and I decided I wanted to be part of it and the Navy seemed a way so without telling my folks, went down to the Naval Air Station--South Weymouth and took the test for aviation and passed. I had no intention of making a career and here I am 28 years later.

Van Ells: I see. I was going to ask how the Vietnam conflict impacted upon your thinking. Because the military things weren't—there was no “rah, rah” military thing, at that time.

Peterson: Dartmouth does seem to be out of phase with the rest of the country and I was there, graduated in 1966 and that was the beginning of the protest movement at Stanford and Kent State and at the University of Wisconsin. Although Dartmouth was, by and large, an extremely conservative if not almost right wing campus. So I really wasn't part and parcel or exposed to all that liberal thinking and the protest movements that many other students there were.

Van Ells: Having grown up on the sea coast, did that influence your decision? I just gave it away. I wasn't trying to lead you. Why did you choose the Navy as opposed to the other services?

Peterson: Basically because of my association with friends that were in Naval ROTC I think, although I remember vaguely seeing an ad on TV many times for aircraft being catapulted off aircraft carriers in the steam and it looked very enticing. I'd like to say that I had some greater calling or cause, but I think it was probably pretty much right place, right time and it appealed to me. Like I said, I had no intention of--I was, in fact, supposed to start at Yale Law School in the summer of '66 and decided to fly airplanes for a while with every intention of going back to Law School. I never did.

Van Ells: Did your folks take well to this decision?

Peterson: No. Not at all. Both of my parents are deceased, but until a week before my mother died suddenly, every time we'd see her or talk to each other she'd ask me when I was going to get out and get a real job. [Laughs]

Van Ells: Now, your father was a veteran.

Peterson: Well, he was three years in the Marine Corps during World War II.

Van Ells: Was he a combat veteran?

Peterson: Yes he was. He made landings--it's kind of funny both my father and my father-in-law were Marines in the Pacific campaign, although they never were involved in the same landings, they both made two separate landings. My dad was at Bougainvillea and Tinian, I think and my father-in-law was at Iwo Jima and the latter stages of the campaign in Okinawa.

Van Ells: How did his war experiences affect the way you viewed your service?

Peterson: Both these gentlemen will not talk about it. I mean, and I have tried since. I tried as a young boy with my dad I don't know whether it was too traumatic for him or what. I don't know. He was not wounded, my father-in-law was. My father was not. He just told me that it was one of those things we were going to discuss later. Somehow we never did get around to it.

Van Ells: I see. So you entered service in '67. You said you went into aviation?

Peterson: Ya. I was trained as a pilot. That's the reason I went in. I mean you went in in those days as a guarantee. I was commissioned in June of '67, got my wings as a Naval aviator in August of 1968 and then sent to training on the east coast of the United States in light attack airplanes, what the Navy calls light attack, diver bombers basically. Started out in an airplane called the A-4 Sky Hawk. I spent the majority of my career flying A7 Corsair IIs off of aircraft carriers. The last portion of my flying time in the Navy was in F-18 Hornets.

Van Ells: Now you flew between which years?

Peterson: Started flying. Started flying in *training* in August of '67 and the last time I flown a Navy tactical jet was 1991.

Van Ells: I'd maybe like to come back to Vietnam and the 1970's here.

Peterson: I will tell you I never served in Vietnam. Having decided that's what I wanted to do the vagaries of the system and where you get assigned, I actually never went to Vietnam.

Van Ells: I understand. There are some questions I'll have if we have time at the end. I'll try to remember to come back to them. What I want to get at now is who-- if you could describe for me the Navy fighter pilot. The Navy pilot. What sort of people become pilots and how do they get into it and what sort of wash-out rate did you have in training, etc, etc.

Peterson: The wash-out rate first is because I happen to have been given a briefing just earlier at the Air Force ROTC unit. I started my training in a class of 56 folks. We had 56 that started training. Thirteen months later I was given my wings and I was one of eleven out of the 56 that achieved their wings, I'm the only one out of that group that is still on active duty, and have been the only one for about twelve years. I think that was probably a little higher than normal because there was a lot of impetus with the Vietnam War on, to get people through and people got second and third chances but somewhere around a 70% wash-out rate getting to carrier aviation was normal. Probably closer to 50% overall and a lot of those wound up in transports and such. It's a demanding curriculum.

Van Ells: So on the scale of which pilots is more elite than the others, the carrier is the most prized.

Peterson: In the Navy it is. That's called tac air. We call it tactical air. Helicopter pilots were what we called maritime aviation is the P-3's antisubmarine warfare shore-based flying. Now you could talk to a helicopter pilot or maritime pilot and find out exactly the inverse. I think in general, from the Navy's perspective, I know that the way you went through training, each separate phase you were graded very rigorously and the top section, the top performers would go on to the next step in the ladder that was eventually to lead them toward flying a jet off an aircraft carrier. The theory being, I think, you know, which is more dangerous and the airplanes were more expensive. In those days a helicopter cost \$300,000 and the Navy jet cost \$3,000,000. So they tried to get people that were more in-depth at aviation into the carrier business and it was very dangerous. I lost a lot of friends over the years.

Van Ells: In training accidents?

Peterson: Oh ya. Yes. I lost three roommates; I had a hard time finding a roommate for a while there because in the space of about 14 months I had three roommates die in training accidents.

Van Ells: This is in your initial training?

Peterson: No. I say training actions. This was during my time in the fleet but we'd be over in the Mediterranean on a cruise and maybe there'd be a problem with the airplane or quite frequently pilot error. A lot of it involved landing on an aircraft carrier at night - a very dangerous business, very demanding and very unforgiving of the smallest errors.

Van Ells: So what sort of guys get to become pilots? I haven't seen Top Gun, I don't know I hate to use a movie metaphor.

Peterson: Top Gun is not my favorite movie. Wonderful aviation scenes, the cinematography of aviation is fantastic but it's a lot of poetic license, let's say. It isn't like that.

Van Ells: What sort of educational backgrounds? Was there some regional distinction, perhaps?

Peterson: Very competitive people. I never noticed a regional distinction. There have been a lot of studies done about what prompts people to go into carrier aviation in particular and somewhere in the 65-70% range are first born sons. This is real interesting, of course. 99.9% on the personality tests are heavy Type-A personalities. Right brain people, that type of stuff. I think all of course college educated but it ran the gamut from exceptional students to average students, to exceptional athletes to average athletes. Basically I would say well rounded and competitive people. And I have always enjoyed the outdoors. I noticed a whole lot of folks that I've been involved with over the years, a lot of people like camping, hunting, fishing, mountain climbing, I don't know why that would tie in but it does seem to. Probably the most telling attribute is competitive people because it is a very competitive business. Everything you do is graded from day one.

Van Ells: So you served, like, from '67 to '77 more than 20 years. Can you describe briefly some of the places you served, on which ships, where did you go, what were your duty stations?

Peterson: Well, I started out, as I said, in A-4's and you go through a series of squadrons progressing up the chain both in your responsibilities as an officer and the number of people that you are managing and also what you do in the airplane. You begin as somebody's wing man and you just hang on and hope you don't run into him until--near the end of my career, I was a stripe leader

and was constantly leading, you know, 20 or 30 planes in formation. I deployed largely to the Mediterranean I repetitively deployed a couple of times on the USS Saratoga, this is as a junior officer, a Navy Lieutenant, Lieutenant Commander, on the Saratoga, on the USS Forrestal, on the Independence, on the Kennedy. I later served as Executive Officer on the Saratoga as a young, brand new, first-cut Navy Captain I had command of an A-7 squadron that deployed to the Persian Gulf not during the Desert Storm War but before that during some of our other operations over there. From there I commanded an F-18, what's called a replacement air group. It was the first such squadron in the Navy and we trained people to fly the F-18. We learned how to fly it ourselves and then we trained others. In fact, we trained the Blue Angels, we trained the Canadian Air Force, we trained the Spanish Air Force and the Australian Navy to fly the airplane. So basically, the first 18 years are just a series of deployments. I had one what we call a disassociated tour and I was the catapult and arresting gear officer for three years on the old Franklin Delano Roosevelt aircraft carrier. That's the guy who stands out on the flight deck and twists his finger and touches the deck and shoots the airplanes off. A very exciting job. I flew a twin engine prop airplane to bring mail and people on board just to keep my hand in flying during that time. The rest of my career was involved in sea going squadrons and deployments, repetitive deployments to the Mediterranean.

Van Ells: The Mediterranean was kind of a hot spot in the '80's. Were you involved in any of these Beirut, Libya kinds of things?

Peterson: We used to say of course no one wants to be in a war but I'm sort of a day late and a dollar short. We planned, at one time I was involved with planning, a raid into the Beqaa Valley and I was going to be the strike leader and then it was canceled at the last minute and then three weeks later we were relieved by another carrier and went home and that other carrier then did the strike. Not exactly what I planned of course, they replanned it but the famous strike where we had an airplane shot down. I think, you remember, Jesse Jackson went over and got Lt. Goodman.

Van Ells: That's my era. Just to interject it.

Peterson: And there were a number of occasions over the course of a career in flying over there where we came very close. I did a lot of flying down below Gadhafi's line of death. As it turned out I never happened to have been involved in any of the sporadic actions we had with Mr. Gadhafi but I spent a lot of time down there jousting with his airplanes and it was an exciting time although at times just very tedious. It's a tedious life at sea, fly two or three hops every day seven days a week for weeks on end.

Van Ells: These are some things that I'd like perhaps, to come back to later, too. We'll touch on them briefly now in case we don't get a chance to. In your career in the Navy, how did the Service change over time?

Peterson: That's a very broad question. It is remarkable how it's changed. I'd have to ask a question back if that's allowed.

Van Ells: Oh, sure.

Peterson: I mean we could take you down the operational avenue, how we changed tactically, or operationally, or socially. How we changed socially is, I think, the most telling changes.

Van Ells: Socially. Let's go with that.

Peterson: The Navy that I joined was I think, to be honest if not brutally frank, was a fairly prejudicial organization. African Americans were limited to very few ranks. I, in fact, never met the first Black pilot in the Navy until I was a Junior Commander. I'd been in sixteen years before I happened to meet an African American who was an aviator. That doesn't exist now. So I was in the Navy through the throes of Equal Opportunity awareness and I'm very proud of where we have come. I think, quite frankly, the military as a whole and the Navy in particular has done a lot toward leading the fleet as a Navy term. Basically, we've been on the cutting edge of that. Certainly we still have our problems like all organizations do. We had the Navy of the mid-70's was a hot bed of racial unrest. There was a lot of drug involvement, we had a lot of social problems with our sailors and with our officers to some extent. But we took the problem seriously and today I can honestly say that it's sort of like that old phrase, "Some of my best friends are--" But it is a non-issue in the large core of the Navy today and it's kind of refreshing to all of a sudden realize that you've just got through dealing on a professional and high impact environment with a young man and suddenly realize, "Gee, he was Black." You just don't even think about it anymore. So, it's nice. Same thing is now I think happening with women in the Navy. I, of course, am the product of a Navy that stuck our heels in the ground and said, "No way. Not in my Navy" and, quite rightfully got that handed down our throat and I think we've proven fairly realistically that there is a place for women everywhere throughout the Navy. Albeit, I'm one that would say, and this is my opinion and not necessarily official Department of the Navy opinion, but we ought not to change standards. If you want to be a combat pilot and there are certain standards that always have been to be a combat pilot if you can meet them, I don't care whether you are female or not, but you better be able to meet them. Flying a combat airplane today's combat airplane with six, seven and eight G's, which is fairly common, is very physically debilitating. A lot of physical exercise has to go into preparation. A lot of weight training, a lot of aerobics training and if you can't hack it you can't hack it and should not say, "Well,

the women only have to do ten push-ups and the men have to do fifty,” and things like that. Which we are not doing right now, but there is a constant pressure to do that to get more women.

Van Ells: You’ve described what I suppose could be termed revolutionary changes. Is there a particular turning point or was this an evolutionary kind of thing?

Peterson: Oh I think a particular turning point I would say was the stewardship of a guy named Elmo Zumwalt who has become famous after the fact for having ordered Agent Orange. His son now has contracted some various bad diseases because of that. Admiral Zumwalt was the Chief of Naval Operations who just basically took the Navy by the bootstraps and shook it and said, “I’m tired of paying lip service. We’re going to solve these problems.” It created a lot of heat and discontent at the time and it was a very, very disruptive time but he was a visionary and largely because, I think, of his vision, we are a completely different organization. The Navy, of all the services, was the most founded in the eastern aristocracy, if you will, the privileged people, the officer class was supposed to be something different and he just - we were still sort of living in that inside the Navy in the 50’s and early 60’s, whereas the rest of the society had basically abandoned that approach to life. He forced us to do it. So I would say that was the watershed event, was his saying “Oh shit.” And I remember being a young lieutenant at the time and detesting it. I mean I was furious with what he was doing.

Van Ells: I was going to ask what the view was from the officers’ standpoint.

Peterson: From the trenches?

Van Ells: As a former enlisted man myself.

Peterson: He was not well liked. The majority of the enlisted men thought he was wonderful because he made a lot of sweeping changes extremely rapidly and most officers being of a conservative bent, said “You’re going too fast.”

Van Ells: Oh, is that right?

Peterson: “We’ll get there but you’re going too fast.” He said, “We’d been saying that for 20 years and we’re not getting there so we’re just going to make the changes and you’re going to have to do this.” I mean things like every officer in the Navy will undergo 30 hours within the next six months 30 hours of sensitivity training. We had to sit down with young enlisted people, black, Hispanic, male, female, whatever and forget rank, first name basis and figure out what makes you tick and what makes me tick. We all thought that was kind of foolish at the time, but I think history has proven that he had the right—it needed to be done.

Van Ells: What impact did the Reagan administration have? Certainly more funding came. From your perspective as a young officer at the time?

Peterson: Mid-rank by then. We almost didn't survive the Carter era, my opinion again. Military is a strange beast in that it consumes a lot of resources in peace time and it's tough sometimes to figure out why you should let it consume those resources. Under Carter's administration, we did cutbacks that were beyond rational thought. As an example, I was at the time in a squadron of only 67 airplanes and at one point, had one of them flyable, 66 airplanes that we did not have parts to fly. They were cocooned in white wrappers off to the side. We were taking turns flying. We were making 10% of our pilot goal per year. We were unsafe, accidents were happening in rapidly increases paces and a lot of it, most of it I think, attributable to cuts that were just too deep and to be honest, not well managed by the military. This time around, during the post-Bush years, we have taken a much more management oriented view of it and although they have hurt, they have not hurt as much and we are not in as bad shape as we were back then. The simple fact of the matter is that military hardware is so expensive these days that you can never get back to where you were. Not without a national crisis that would make the entire populace commit to undue hardship to be able to regenerate that type of military capability that we had just four years ago. You just can't do it. The first airplane I flew in the fleet cost \$365,000. The last airplane I flew cost \$19,000,000. And we haven't had that kind of an inflation rate. The percentage of the GNP [Gross National Product] if you were to buy like numbers of military hardware is impossible these days.

Van Ells: Persian Gulf conflict. You weren't actually in the theatre.

Peterson: No. I was the commanding officer of an amphibious ship that was home ported in Japan. As such, I would have thought I would have been one of the first to be sent, but what they wound up doing was sending groups of ships out of San Diego and by-passing us and going to the Gulf and I wound up spending 13 consecutive months at sea hauling Marines and parts and equipment between Korea and the Philippines and Japan on various exercises preparatory to those people going to Desert Storm. So, no, I never actually got to the theatre.

Van Ells: I see. Were you still flying by this time?

Peterson: No. I had ceased flying. Actually, I think I told you that my last flight was in 1991 but that's not true. It would have been '89 because I went from there to be the XO [Executive Officer] of the carrier and spent 15 months there and didn't fly in that job and from that job I was selected to command the U.S.S. St. Louis which was an amphibious ship home-ported in Sasebo, Japan. So I was not flying, I was a ship's captain.

Van Ells: So describe for me if you would, how you got to the position of commanding the initial Somalia operation. On what ship were you based? Where you were in the officer's ranks and how did you get into that position in the first place?

Peterson: As I said, I went from XO to carrier which is a senior aviator's job. Then you basically go to one of two directions in aviation. You either go into the surface business, you go command a ship with hopes of eventually commanding an aircraft carrier or you go be an air wing commander and I, quite frankly, my eyes were going bad, I wear bifocals and I thought I was probably unsafe to be flying off aircraft carriers anymore so I let it be known that if I were to be selected, I wanted to go and command a ship. I was selected to command a ship and that ship was the amphibious ship, the St. Louis. I was the Naval forces commander for Operation Sea Angel which was to rescue a bunch of people after a tremendous typhoon went through Chittagong, Bangladesh and I was also the Station Commander for Subic Bay during Mt. Pinatubo's eruption, Operation Fiery Vigil. It was just happenstance that I happened to be, my ship was in the vicinity and the only one who could go do those things. So because of that, I think, in my experience in amphibious humanitarian operations, instead of being selected for an aircraft carrier after that, I was selected as an amphibious group commander. So my next job after that was to go command an amphibious squadron III which is a staff that commands a group of ships and we had three ships, the U.S.S. Tripoli, which was my flagship and the U.S.S. Rushmore and the U.S.S. Juneau as our group. The way we're arranged in the amphibious forces, you have an amphibious squadron of ships and tied to them is a Marine expeditionary unit. Ours was the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit under the command of Colonel Greg Newbold and Greg and I were a team. I'm called "CAT," of commander of amphibious task force and he's called "CLF," commander landing force. We sort of mesh our staffs and we deployed in October of '92 and our mission was to go to the Gulf and exercise with the Kuwaitis and the Saudis and whoever and stand by.

Van Ells: This was just kind of a routine thing.

Peterson: Absolutely. Scheduled to be that way. There is two amphibious readiness groups deployed world wide 365 days a year. One from Norfolk and one from San Diego and it was just our turn in the barrel. We left on cruise mid-October and we had just visited Singapore as a port visit on the way over and we left there and we were going through the Straits of Malacca en route to the Persian Gulf when the call came to change course and head toward Mogadishu, Somalia with orders to follow. We, of course, knew that Somalia was a hot spot and we had been studying it and doing a little bit of in-house war gaming of what we would do, but never in our wildest dreams did it occur to them that they would order us to actually land there and secure the port and the airport.

Van Ells: But there had been some forethought that perhaps you would be doing it but is this kind of a routine thing?

Peterson: Before you go on a deployment, like that, an amphibious deployment, you contract with various Navy war gaming services, experts in the business who build scenarios for you and they'll build them real world. In other words, we did one involving Cambodia, you remember, there were some problems in Cambodia at the time that we supposed in this scenario that some Americans were held captive and we had to go in and rescue them. We did one involving Somalia, but what we did was assume that what we had to do was the country had gone to complete hell in a hand basket again and we would have to go in and rescue some people. We never really thought we'd go actually land there.

Van Ells: Yeah, I see. As you're going off on one of these amphibious cruises you are briefed and you even come up with contingencies on potential things or anything, you know. Genocide in Rwanda, or Yemen—these would be the things--

Peterson: Absolutely. We have entire contingency packages. We plan the staffs for contingencies and, in fact, have to have a number of our plans approved by higher authority before we can deploy. "What were you going to do in this case, Captain Peterson?" "And what are you going to do in this case?" Because once you get out there you're pretty much on your own. We also get brought back--Colonel Newbold of Marine Command and myself and some key members of our staff went back to headquarters, Marine Corps and to the Special Operations Command, and to Central Command down in Tampa and get briefings on the political situations in their areas of operation and what we could expect as possible hot spots, possible things we might get asked to do. So we were by no means ignorant of where Somalia was and, in fact, our predecessors, the people we relieved had been to Somalia too. They went in to support the insertion of about 300 Pakistani soldiers there in August-September of '92 and we had met directly with them and they said, "Boy, if you have to go there, it's a mess, you don't want to go there but if you have to here's some tips."

Van Ells: I see.

Peterson: They gave us all their charts and maps, such as they were, of the local area. But again, no indication at that point that we'd ever go do something on the scale of what we wound up doing.

Van Ells: So, describe for me if you would the events and the process that took place between getting these ambiguous orders and actually organizing the force to actually go on shore. What communication did you have at what levels and how did you go about organizing forces to get onto the beach?

Peterson: Well, the first communication we received was from CINCCENT, Commander in Chief, Central Command. Basically, it was to proceed direct to a point 25 miles off the coast of Mogadishu, Somalia and be prepared to support UN operations in the vicinity. That doesn't mean an awful lot, what type of operations. Almost immediately thereafter, a joint task force was formed and Lt. Gen. Johnston who is the Commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force in Camp Pendleton, was appointed to be the JTF [Join Task Force] Commander for the eventual joint task force. That's when it became obvious to us that this was going to be something bigger than a little humanitarian operation. From that point on, most of our official communications were directly with Lieutenant General Johnston back in Camp Pendleton. What is it that we are eventually going to do? He was meeting all the time with General Hoar who was CINCCENT and they were meeting with the National Command Authority and that was an unbelievably rapidly iterative process. The goals, the desires, what we were trying to accomplish changed literally on an every, I mean, six hour basis for the eleven nights it took me to get there, I didn't sleep more than about an hour and a half a night because you'd be up in the middle of the night and they'd be saying, "Forget what we told you yesterday. Here's what you're going to do." Then you get the two staffs together and we'd go through a drilled planing process where we'd take a look at the situation, we'd develop courses of action, we'd do estimates of supportability, in those courses of action we'd decide this is our primary one and we tried to plan that in detail. We'd get to about that point and then the objective would change again.

Van Ells: As this is going on, what's going through your head and those around you?

Peterson: Well some frustration, certainly some frustration. I had some conversations with Lieutenant General Johnston and with my actual administrative boss, who was a two-star Admiral Commander Amphibious Group III back in San Diego. Basically we're, "What the Hell is going on here? We're committing 2,500 Marines and about 1,500 sailors and three ships for what?" Classically, in the military operation, there has to be a desired end state before you launch military operations. You don't just say, "Go over there and beat up on people until we tell you to stop." I kept asking, "What is the desired end state?" And people kept saying that it was being determined. The President's trying to decide, the Joint Chiefs of Staff were involved. Now off-line during all this, both Greg Newbold, the Marine Commander and myself were making phone calls and we have a phone system on the ship that allows us to make phone calls anywhere in the world, just about. We were talking to our counterparts and contacts and various staffs back at the Joint Headquarters, at CINCCENT, at Pack Fleet and Fleet Marine Forces Pacific and particularly at NAVCENT headquarters up in Bahrain, Naval Central Command and a lot of people that we all knew over the years. Basically, off-line stuff, it's sort of circumventing the chain of command but it's the way things get done. "What are they thinking about now? What are the elephants in the planning room thinking

about now?” So we were getting unofficial “heads up” as to what was coming and you could see it day by day as the international media kept showing more and more pictures of the untold suffering over there and how wild it was. We were going to be told to go in and in some way, secure at least a portion of that country. So we had not been told to do that yet, but we were on the side planning that mission all along.

Van Ells: What’s the final plan that did developed? You were going to be sending troops in there. What did you expect?

Peterson: First thing we were requested not to go to Mogadishu. Mogadishu is a city of 750,000 people. It’s a big place, you know. About four times the size of Madison and if we took every human being on the three ships and gave them a weapon we’d have about 3,600 people, so we weren’t real happy with those odds and we asked to go to a smaller city in the south called Kismaayo and were told, “No, Mogadishu is where the action is.” It’s where the international press was and it’s where all the pictures were coming from so we were going to go there. We had been told by our predecessors that were there that an extremely militaristic and anarchistic society that there was no infrastructure and this all was true. No electricity, no plumbing, no water, no sewage, no fire department, no police department, no schools--hadn’t been a school open in over two years, no government and no commerce. Nobody’s selling anything to anybody. In fact, when we got there that’s what we found. A city of 750,000 that were basically just standing around waiting to die. There was no famine there. I want to stress that.

Van Ells: In Mogadishu itself.

Peterson: In Somalia. There was no famine. There was never a shortage of food in Somalia. There were warehouses stacked 50 feet high with grains and foods that were being held by the various war lords, Mohammed Adi, Ali Madi and Omar Jes and that food was power and they would try to bargain with another clan for rights to a certain piece of property and I’ll give you some food and then the clans would fight and the food wouldn’t get distributed.

Van Ells: So there were people going hungry, it was just a matter of distribution.

Peterson: Thousands of people starving. It was a horrible situation and there’s no doubt about that. I think the important point at least in my mind, I spent a total of about five months in Somalia, I was there at the very end of the U.S. involvement too is that it was a civil war among an extremely warlike people. Their history is such that most of the other countries in east Africa would not try to intervene because they have a war-like tradition that’s not - you and I really can’t relate to - there’s a Somali proverb that is a real proverb. It says “Somalia against the world. My clan against Somalia. My family against my clan. Me against my brother.”

Van Ells: Did you know this proverb before you landed?

Peterson: Ya. There was a lot of intelligence available to us. A lot of intelligence. We knew what we were facing. The first night we got there, which was about five days before the landing, you couldn't tell there was a city there. 750,000 people and it's a pitch black coastline. No lights. Nothing on. A couple of small fires burning, camp fires and stuff. Then about 11:00 o'clock or midnight every night before we did the landing it would erupt into gunfire and you would see tracers going off in the air and explosions all over the place. We had some classified, I really can't divulge in this tape the exact source, but we had some classified sources of intelligence on the ground that we could communicate with that let us know that basically it was intramural fire fights. Nothing really too organized, just a bunch of hoodlums that get high on their drug product, khat, that they chew and then they'd start shooting at each other. But with little to no real effect. Mostly, innocent civilians being killed and a lot of damage and destruction. We're watching that and it looked like the 4th of July in New York Harbor and thinking, "God Almighty!" There's a lot of weaponry going off over there and we're 1,900 trigger pullers was what we had. 1,900 armed Marines to go ashore with. Not many.

Van Ells: Were there fears that they would be attacked by these gangs?

Peterson: Oh yes. Absolutely<sup>1</sup> We were convinced, the Marine Colonel and myself, based on our intelligence estimates, that barring a miracle, we would find some fairly organized opposition. Now we were not afraid that we were not going to be able to succeed, they just didn't have the organization or the fire power, no matter how many of them there were, to overcome a well trained Marine Expeditionary Unit. But, we were also well aware that we were being perceived by the rest of the world and certainly by our government, as being on a humanitarian mission. We were going ashore to open up the lines of communication so we could deliver food and as I was saying to my troops the night before--it's not going to play real good in Peoria if we blow away 150 of these people on day one. That's not really an option. The phrase we used with our Marines and sailors and Seals before they went ashore was "You have to have an iron fist and a velvet glove." You're going to go ashore with a smile on our face but you're going to be prepared for combat. Well, perhaps the most memorable evolution that took place was the landings that were on CNN the morning of the 9th. It was Marines and Seals coming up out of the beach with their faces painted black and I know that at least initially, there was a lot of attempt to portray them as a bunch of buffoons and this is just a humanitarian operation. Why are you guys playing soldier? The fact of the matter is that I had Seals and Marine force recon they're called—very well trained reconnaissance personnel on that beach and in the port facility each night for the three previous nights. They would sneak in clandestinely, swim in from rubber boats and they'd leave the rubber boats our about 150 yards off

shore and swim in and each one of those nights they were involved in small fire fights with Somali bandits in the area. So we had every reason to believe that there would be some opposition. No doubt whatsoever that we would succeed in taking the land that we wanted, which was the airport and the port, but I was convinced we were going to suffer some casualties at a cost. We did not suffer any casualties in the initial landings. But I was convinced we would in the beginning.

Van Ells: I remember watching this on television. That was an interesting spectacle if nothing else. As the boats are going ashore, the main task force is going ashore, did you know that there were news cameras all over the beach rather than technical vehicles or whatever? You had no idea that this was going to happen.

Peterson: No. As I said, we had reconnoitered those beaches and the port facility three nights running and we knew where there were small enclaves of different clans, we even knew which clans they were. The Habr Gedir clan one place and another clan another place. We knew the numbers of guards in the port, we knew their gun positions. We'd had Seals in the water with night vision goggles two nights in a row watching them and filming them. I'd actually seen the films of what was going on. We knew there were a lot of international press in the city. The night before the landings, we had 50 some odd news from international press flown on board the ships and Colonel Newbold and I gave a news conference in which we delineated in great detail what our landing plan was going to be right down to "and they're going to land here and this number of people in this boat and it's going to happen at this time." But, we were told by the Department of Defense that we had to embargo those press. We could not allow them to disseminate that information off the ship until after the operation started. Given that information, I was fairly confident that although we knew there would be press covering the evolution, we certainly didn't expect the reception we got. In fact when it happened, my first reaction was there was a major fire fight going on because right at H-hour [hour when military operation commences] the time when we expected touch down we started seeing flashes all over the place on the beach. It turns out those were flashbulbs going off but we didn't know that at the time. I alerted my hospital to get ready for a mass casualty. And I wound up and immediately called the Chief of Naval Information, the head public affairs guy for the Navy and said what the hell was going on. This is an Admiral Pease. And he said, "Just a second." And I wound up talking to Pete Williams, who is the Deputy Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs and was almost immediately was on the phone with Secretary of Defense Cheney and asked a question and in about a ten second conversation, "Mr. Secretary, do you want me to pull my people off the beach? This is untenable." He said, "No. We will get the lights put out." In about six or eight minutes the lights went out and the media started to get away from there. I still think it's a miracle that we didn't kill a lot of press because those young

men were pumped up. A lot of them had been shot at on that same beach the previous night and as they come out of the water they see light flashes from the dunes surrounding them and it didn't happen, but had it happened I'd have gone to the hilt defending whoever did it. As it turned out, the actual position and time of that landing, and that was only one of three by the way. The other two weren't covered. That one was released to the press by the Department of Defense the night before without telling us that. So we didn't know it was coming. If you can sense an edge to my voice, Mark, I'm still bitter about that one. We could have dealt with it if I had known it was going to be that way. In some circles people were angry with us.

Van Ells: Why didn't you foresee that?

Peterson: I had every boat and every helicopter that went ashore in the initial waves in that landing had a press member in it. Bob Simon was on board the ship with us and went ashore in the first wave of helicopters. Some pretty reputable, well known people and I couldn't let them tell CBS or NBC or CNN what was going on. I had good reason to believe that that embargo also applied in Washington. Which it obviously did not. Obviously.

Van Ells: Much to your surprise.

Peterson: Yeah. Much to my surprise.

Van Ells: Those other two landings, how did those go?

Peterson: They went perfectly. They were all happening simultaneously but the port facility which was some three miles north of that beach that became famous in film, was a very, very difficult target for us. It was a jettied port, I mean big cement blocks piled up as jetties. No where could we drive an amphibious vehicle up a ramp or anything. Ringed with a telephone line and light poles, none of which worked, but they were all hanging there. So, no place to go in with a helicopter attack so the only avenue of approach for us was zodiac boats and we had 140 Marines in light zodiacs. We call them CRRCs **[End of Tape 1, Side A]** Combat Rubber Rigid Raiding Craft, but they're basically rubber boats with outboard motors on the back that are sound suppressed. 140 Marines, soft hats, small weapons, no heavy weapons, no armor. They didn't even have helmets on because you can't put them in that kind of a boat with a helmet because if they go over they'd go right to the bottom. They had to get in clandestinely into the port, climb up over those jetties and take the guards instantly which they did. There were a few shots fired, one Somali killed in that operation, no injuries. There were interestingly enough, three international press, two French and I think the other one might have been British that tried to cover that operation but they wound up flex cuffed and face down in the dirt and left for somebody else to take care of. The Marines just swept through. If that had been the one that the press had been told about,

we'd have been in trouble because the boats coming in from the seaward side, although they were quiet, are not silent and if the Somalis, we timed this thing to happen at 5:00 in the morning when they're classically still sound asleep and drugged out but if anybody had seen them they could have just ripped those Marines to shreds. We didn't have a chance. No defenses.

Van Ells: So after the shock of that one landing, the operation goes on for a couple of hours, how's it going from your perspective from the ship? What sort of information are you getting, et cetera?

Peterson: First of all, it went very well, better than we expected. We landed at, I think, 5:35 in the morning, I think, was H-hour and by 11:00 in the morning the airport was open for the first time in three months, to relieve flights and had airplays and they were stacked up 100 miles away waiting to come in as soon as we opened it up. Most of the initial airplanes, albeit were U.S. Air Force and U.S. Army personnel ready to set up other things once we had secured the airfield, but we had relief flights coming in that afternoon. The way that amphibious operations work, the Marine works for me. During the actual landing, CATF [Commander, Amphibious Task Force] is in charge so basically I call the shots and decide if we're going to get overrun on the one, we'd decide "Nope. We're pulling you out of there." If things don't go well, I'm the one that decides to change an attack on another venue up until the point where the colonel has established himself a sure headquarters and we have good two-way communication. When he's comfortable that he has established himself ashore and is secure, then we do a relief in place. That's the only time in the U.S. military I know that's happened and from him working for me we switch hats and I work for him. I mean, then supporting him and he can tell me, "Get your people here, get the boats here, I want food here now." I have to respond. That all went like clock work. We actually did that change-over officially at 2:00 in the afternoon and by 3:30 while I went in to do the change over with him, as a matter of fact, flew into the airport. He had already taken over one of the airport buildings as his headquarters. He had patrols out in the city, we had check points set up and we were delivering food to some of the nearby neighborhoods that hadn't really had any food to speak of for months. We had the advanced of with French Foreign Legionnaires on the ground to assist us. We had advanced elements of U.S. Marines that were going to be following our Marines flown in from Camp Pendleton on the ground and that afternoon the Joint Task Force Commander himself flew in and he monitored the initial landings from a command airplane as he was flying from California.

Van Ells: As the days turn out to be weeks then how long did you stay off shore there in Somalia?

Peterson: We left right around the middle of February. We got there near the end of November so we were there two and a half months. The plan, the overall plan

for us and for the U.S. as designed by General Johnston was to secure the airport, the port and the embassy, the old U.S. Embassy in Mogadishu as his headquarters. From there, once we had - you can't use the word secure because Mogadishu was never secured - but once we had quieted Mogadishu and felt that it was secure enough to operate out of, the plan was to set up what he called humanitarian resources sectors [HRSs] around some of the major cities in the interior of Somalia and we, as the amphibious group, would sort of leap frog and do the same thing over and over again. We would do an assault into Baydhabo, we'd do an assault into Baidoa, we'd do an assault, these were heliborn and surface assaults but based again, off the ship and we would take over that city and then follow on the Marines, and/or Army and/or coalition. Later on, of course, we had Italians and Germans and Bangladeshis and I think it's the only place in the world that Bangladesh has ever--we used a sort of sick humor--but I mean we'd say that if you want to know how bad Somalia is, the Bangladeshis are here to help. So we did that in the ensuing days. We dug and secured first the town of Bolidogo which was about 20 miles away from Mogadishu and from there to Baidoa which was the heart of the starvation triangle and really an awful place. In each place we'd spend our Marines supported by us we'd spend three to five days on their own and then they would follow on forces from other units that were now being flown into the country at an incredible rate. We'd go out and take their place and then we'd go from there to Bardera, another city in the interior and then on the 18th I was told by General Johnston that we had to do another amphibious assault down on Kismayo, the second largest city in Southern Somalia which was about 250 miles south. That was on the 19th of December so that was about ten days afterwards. The original plan was not supposed to happen until some time near the end January. Thinking of how fast we would be able to move. We were able to move faster. The State Department, to give them credit, did a wonderful job in setting up with the local warlords and sort of non-aggression treaties. We're going to come in here and you don't fight us. Now we got shot at in every case, but only sporadically. Nothing concerted, nothing organized. And, the biggest factor in going early to all these places was the international press. Hey, you're there and there are people 200 miles away starving, why aren't you down there fixing up that problem? There was a lot of pressure to do that so we were grossly overextended when we did this. In fact, it was sort of a landmark operation when the General called me ashore to his camp headquarters and said, "You need to go into Kismayo and take it. You need to do it in two days." I told him that I didn't know how we were going to do that. First of all, before you do any amphibious operation, you always survey the beaches clandestinely with Seals beforehand to see where the enemy's positions are with the approaches and, like there are no reefs that the amphibious vehicles can get hung up on, and the Seals are up here with me. They can't get there any sooner than I can 'cause I got to backload Marines onto the ships to go. We can't do it on the 19th and my Operations Officer who was sitting behind me in this meeting passed me a piece of paper that just said, "French?". We had a French frigate assigned to us. The French

frigate, Duplexe. Great guy—was the CO of the ship, and I just looked at that and I said to the general, “You know, I might be able to convince the French to take our Navy Seals on board and go down and land them right away while I backload the Marines.” He said to go do it and make it happen. We went back to the ship and I called the French commander up on the radio and said, “Jacques, I need you to come over for a minute.” He flew over and we laid this out in my broken French and his broken English and he said, “I think we can do this. You bring yours Seals to my ship.” So we, that afternoon, we put all the Seals over there and their equipment. They tested it to be sure they could lift it up and down off the ship. The Seals slept in the passageways of the Duplexe while it went ahead of us to Kismayo at about 30 knots, faster than we’d go anyways. It’s a good thing we did because the landing beach that we had selected off of our chart survey when the Seals went ashore there, they took heavy concentrated effective fire and had to return the fire and had to retreat off the beach back to the Duplexe, go to the second choice beach which turned out to be adequate. They surveyed that for us and then we landed there the morning after, after having followed them down. A really kind of neat operation.

Van Ells: As you’re expanding out into Somalia, you’re on the ship occasionally, you go aboard, and I’ll ask some questions about that, but you’re on the ship, for the most part?

Peterson: Most of the time. I am and my Navy staff. The Marines are ashore most of the time.

Van Ells: And what sort of reports are you getting back from the guys who are inland and witnessing the famine? What sort of reports did they send back? As you mentioned already, your intelligence was pretty good. I was wondering if you could elaborate on that. What were they reporting back to you?

Peterson: Terrible, terrible conditions and terrible suffering due to the fact that the country basically didn’t exist. I mean there basically was no country there. There was no “there” there. First of all, the reportage, we have some fairly sophisticated communications equipment in today’s amphibious forces and we have an SHF platform that I fought to get put on my ship before we left.

Van Ells: SHF?

Peterson: Super High Frequency which allows you to do broad band and in one carrier wave you can send like 50 or 60 radio communications at the same time. At any rate, we had very good communications. Wherever Colonel Newbold and the Marines were, on the bridge of my ship I could pick up one hand held set and say that I want to talk to Colonel Newbold and he’d be on the phone if he was not out in the field, or I’d talk to his operations officer or his XO and we were getting hourly detailed reports of what they were--I was involved in the

planning with the Colonel for all of our operations. What they were seeing, I think maybe the best example is in the city of Baidoa there was an orphanage that we wound up as a group sort of adopting. In fact, all of our wives back in California gathered untold amounts of children's clothes in less than a day and they got added on to a special flight that was leaving. They bumped in some military equipment, and they flew all these clothes over and we distributed them at the orphanage. This orphanage around 4,000 kids in this orphanage, in a complex that in the States, 150 would have been a crowd. They were just packed in there and there's no real right way of knowing what the numbers are but we were quoted by different health organizations, the Red Cross and Care International that were over there that anywhere between 300 to 800 a day were dying. We got it down to where they were losing maybe 15 to 20 a day at most. Which sounds horrible by our standards but it was a dramatic improvement. Every place we went we saw thousands of armed men. It quickly became obvious to our staff that we could not disarm the population. That will never happen in Somalia. In Somalia a man carrying a gun is as basic to his being as it is for you and I to have a watch on. If somebody said, "No American male can wear a watch." We'd have a little trouble with that and they'd feel the same way about their weapon. So we quickly sort of devised a system--our rules said that anybody that was manning a crew-served weapon, which is like a .50 caliber machine gun or larger, something that takes more than one person to handle, if they had it we could shoot it. That was the rules of engagement. And, if they aimed any weapon at us we could shoot them. We didn't want to do that. Clearly, I have some videotapes that show it, but when you walked down the street, these kids were like young thugs, the Somalis, they'd love to pick their weapon up and look tough at ya and point it at ya. It just isn't going to do for us to go shooting every Somali male we can find so what we wound up doing is anytime we moved en masse on the ground, we'd cover ourselves with covert gun ships and that's a very impressive and lethal looking machine and then get right down on top and make eye contact with these bands of thugs that were everywhere you went. If they didn't put their weapons down immediately and wave, we shot them. We did that I think three times in the first three days and never had to do it again. We'd show up and they'd lay their weapons down. But as soon as we left they'd pick them up again and basically what they were is roving bands of thugs that were terrorizing their own people. Sometimes we'd distribute food, leave and come back again just to see what was going on and the thugs would be there, pulling all the food away from the people we just distributed it to. It was just a terrible situation!

Van Ells: As I recall, in that period between the initial landing and February, there weren't many if any American casualties.

Peterson: We had one Marine killed by a sniper. We had a couple killed in operational type accidents, for example, a truck tipped over one night when we were driving down to a range but the situation was fairly well under control by

Somalian standards, by Mogadishu standards. It's like nothing that we have ever experienced in this country. It's like the wild west magnified times ten, but it was under control.

Van Ells: I'm interested in the attitude of the Americans in doing this operation. It's been controversial. Going under foreign flags and that sort of thing. On the other hand, the human imperative and this sort of thing. I would imagine that there would be different points of view, some mixed feelings. I know you can only speak for yourself.

Peterson: I can speak, I think, for a period of our involvement in Somalia because we were there a long time and there were definite phases of our involvement. I was there in the beginning, visited for a brief time in the middle and was there at the end of our involvement. That's when we pulled the last U.S. forces out. That was not our true last involvement because we went back again to assist pulling out of the Pakistani forces a couple of weeks ago, but in the beginning, in the first two and a half to three months, I think it's almost universal that everybody was happy and proud to be there. Because we could see the fruits of the labor. You could see the people were so happy to have us there because they were basically being terrorized by, I always compare it and it compares very favorably to the early Mel Gibson movies about Mad Max--

Van Ells: And *The Road Warrior*?

Peterson: Somebody who listens to this tape probably will have but basically they are sort of surrealistic movies that deal with Australia after a nuclear holocaust. When there's just roving bands of cutthroats and barbarians. That's what Somalia was like. Very little if any, concern for human property or human life and shootings and killings all the time and no medical facilities to take care of them. We got a handle on that. We didn't stop it but we got a handle on that by being very firm with them. There was a lot of good feeling about that. The young sailors and Marines--we were there over Christmas and of course, we had every big time newscaster in the world there. I got interviewed by Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw and all these guys and that's a common question and I think the answer that I gave at the time still applies. Was pride, the kids were proud to be there. They wanted to be home with their families but they were proud to be there and thinking they were doing for one of the less pompous phrases, thinking they were doing God's work. And I think they were.

Van Ells: Did you get ashore much? Did you get out into the towns or out into the countryside?

Peterson: Oh ya. I traveled pretty much all over the country while I was there. Those were like day trips or even half day trips when the Marines that I was responsible for were someplace and Colonel Newbold and I needed to get

together to plan the next day's operations. Most often I would fly to him. Occasionally, he would come back to the ship, but trying to get a Marine to come back out of the mud is real hard. They just don't want to do it. I spent a lot of time in the land driving through different sections of Mogadishu and some time in Kismayo. I did the initial negotiations with the warlord Omar Jes in Kismayo when we landed there. I visited Badera, visited Balidogo, visited Baidoa a couple of times each, I think, maybe three times to Badera. So I saw a good portion of the countryside.

Van Ells: And you got to witness some of this starvation.

Peterson: Oh, yes. We had a very unfortunate thing happen the second or third day there. We had a check point set up at a place we called the K2 circle manned by Marines and French Foreign Legionnaires, as a coalition force. I think this was the third day. Any vehicle approaching had to stop. Well, a vehicle came barreling down, there were stop signs and crosses out and the vehicle just kept on coming. There were some warning shots fired, the vehicle veered left and went through one of the barricades and so both the Marines and the French Foreign Legionnaires just basically shot it up. Images of Beirut are in everybody's mind. When the smoke cleared and it didn't clear for quite a while, it became evident that what had happened was we had shot up a group of civilians who were just basically scared and didn't know what they were doing. We got them on our ship. Two of them were killed and the rest we saved. We had five Somali civilians on the ship for almost five weeks. The purpose behind all that story is that one of them was a woman, Nika her name was and our initial assessment when we were sending initial situation reports out about this was that she was a 9-12 year old female. Turns out she was 32 and the mother of three. She looked like a 9 year old. She was that emaciated and small. It's hard to imagine how ugly it can get. Just a terrible situation.

Van Ells: So you left in February? I'm confused as to the command sort of thing. By this time the UN hadn't taken over this operation in Somalia.

Peterson: It was still a unit to us operation. A U.S. led operation. General Johnston was still the Joint Task Force Commander. In our joint system, you have a JTF commander and then you will have a ComAF4 [Commander, Air Force] that's assigned to him, it would be ComAF4 Somalia, ComMar4, ComAR4, and ComNav4. I was, by then once General Johnston took over, I was Commander Naval Forces Somalia.

Van Ells: But there were quite a few foreign, meaning not American, forces. I guess that's the right word. How did all these different nations get together and how did they gel or not gel whatever the case may be to conduct these operations?

Peterson: They all agreed initially to have General Johnston, that's the UNITAS, it was not a UN organization but it was the United International Task Force and

there were agreements worked out politically that those countries would, General Johnston as the US Joint Task Force Commander would be in charge. He laid out these HRSs [Humanitarian Relief Sectors] and assigned them to a country. Italians were at Gialalassi, the Belgians were at Kismayo and he met with all their commanders. They were all sort of, like, on his staff. Except for a couple of exceptions to be expected, the Pakistanis and the Indians didn't get along real well together, and so you had to be politically careful about where you put them. If you put them in a sector, they divided Mogadishu up into sectors and that sector belongs to this country - it's your responsibility to keep it quiet, to keep the roads open and you report back through the UNITAS commander, Lieutenant General Johnston. At the same token, we had ships from eleven different nations, combat ships off the coast. I was the unofficial sort of de facto coalition commander. What I would do is every week I would have all the commanders of foreign ships come to my ship and we'd have a little meeting and have lunch and sort of press the flesh and we'd train together. We did a lot of help for each other. We refueled a Turkish Navy and refueled the Australian Navy and the Italians refueled us a couple of times. We landed helios [helicopters] on each other's decks. There was really excellent cooperation, but at least on the Naval side of it, it was not codified. It was just sort of, "Would you like to cooperate?" "Well, yeah." People sort of deferred to me as the US Naval Commander as the guy in charge. Although in fact, there were many of the foreign officers that were senior to me. There was a couple of Admirals that were there but they deferred to me to be the coalition naval forces commander. There were no coalition naval operations, though. Each country supported its own troops on its own schedule. I arranged blocks of areas in the ocean that the Turks can stay here and the Paks can stay here and the Indians can stay here and the U.S. will stay here. That was about the limit of our cooperation. Stay out of each other's way and occasionally assist each other logistically.

Van Ells: It all seemed to go quite well.

Peterson: It worked very well.

Van Ells: So you left Somalia for the first time in February '93. That must have been, then.

Peterson: Yes, in February '93 and then we went up to the Persian Gulf.

Van Ells: As you left, how did you feel about what had happened there? Did you expect to have to go back?

Peterson: At the time, I was asked that question. How long will we need to be here and what's going to be the overall result? With the wisdom of 20/20 hindsight it appears that way now, anyways. I was quoted a couple of times as saying if we want to have a real effect on Somalia we'll have to spend ten years here

and we'll have to have a national will to build a government because there isn't one here. We were negotiating with the wrong people. The most powerful people there but they're just criminals, they're crooks. Mohammed Adi had been in jail for prostitution and drug running. They all ran drugs. They were gun runners, I mean, you can't build a government around that. So from that perspective we felt frustrated by them. All this time, all this effort and all this suffering, it's going to go to hell in a hand basket when we leave. But the other sign of the coin was, I am convinced right now that there are 3-5,000 people alive in Mogadishu today that wouldn't be today had we not gone there. And, probably that's a very conservative number. Probably it's a lot more that would have died. Will they live long, fruitful lives? I don't know. I don't think so.

Van Ells: When did you go back?

Peterson: Well, I got back in the States in April of '93 and wound up doing various exercises and then I went back in December of '93 to go back over now with the UN Commander. Actually, I was now with the Commander U.S. Forces, Somalia who was an Army two star General. They had taken over from the-- if you recall it was, I think, April or maybe May of '93 the UN took over. The U.S. relinquished--

Van Ells: I couldn't remember exactly when it was. By the time you went back the UN had taken over.

Peterson: Oh, it had taken over. Oh yes. The worse periods that we had over there were in June of '93 until October of '93. October of '93 was the shoot down. That was when the Rangers got in trouble. The trouble really started almost coincidentally with the takeover of the UN. This again, is my opinion and not official DOD history, but I will tell you as somebody who has spent a lot of time over there, the reason that we did is because the UN went into the garrison mentality. They did not get out and about the city. They would not go out and get in their faces and say, "You got to knock this stuff off. This is a check point, you can't carry a weapon in here." They started issuing passes for Somalis to take weapons to carry weapons. They started hiring Somalis to be bodyguards for them and what they didn't understand was that Somalia is divided into this incredibly complex clan arrangement. We're talking Hatfields and McCoys here. They understand it, but the UN didn't and we would hire this person to do a body guard thereby insulting this person who would now shoot at both of us and it just became untenable.

Van Ells: Even before you went back, you were sitting back in the States watching this operation you helped to launch, I get the impression you think having gone away. What's going through your mind and what's the attitude in the military at this point.

Peterson: The attitude, largely, is right or wrong, if you want it to work right let us do it. If you don't want it to work right let us get the hell out of there. But this continuing to be a part of the UN operation, which was this is probably not politically correct thing to say--grossly mismanaged by the UN, tremendous political infighting and not a lot of good decision making. The U.S. was frustrated in its efforts and we made some serious mistakes during that time, in my opinion. You have to, in dealing with Somalia, with people like that involved in a civil war and who live in that kind of violent environment, you have to be consistently tough, if you will. You can't back down and be their friend and then all of a sudden out of nowhere issue an arrest warrant for the guy you were negotiating with and then back down and say "No, we don't want that arrest warrant." We just became fools in their eyes. When I say "we" in that context, I mean the U.S. We vacillated, we never had a firm policy. Had we decided that we were going to stick it out for the long run, and had we accepted the fact that you're not going to negotiate a reasonable solution with somebody whose only desire is to have ultimate power there and is not particularly interested in the well being of his country. If he is, or if he had any, he wouldn't have started this thing in the beginning. If we'd understood that and just gone in from the very beginning like we did for the first about four weeks we were there and said, "We're the toughest people on the block. We're going to give you food, we're going to give you medical care, we're going build houses for you, take care of your surroundings and if you fight with us we're going to kill you. And it's just simple. That's what we're gonna do." I think we could have eventually had a long-term positive effect. That effort was doomed once the UN took over and probably to be honest about it, doomed before that because it's too tough a policy, I mean, it really is, and it doesn't sell well in the press. We have, I think, anyways, and I'm editorializing now, I think in today's world, when John Q. Public in Des Moines, Iowa can see exactly what's going on in the streets of Mogadishu, he gets desensitized real quickly and it becomes not a big issue. And then pretty soon he's going, "Why we're still there, why we haven't solved that problem yet?" It all seems so simple when you're looking at a 30-second sound bite and it's not that simple. It's very, very, very complex.

Van Ells: So as you're going back on the plane or boat, I don't know how you--

Peterson: Went back both ways--once by plane and once by boat.

Van Ells: What were your orders and what was your mission and what were you thinking?

Peterson: Well, the first time I went back was simply for planning evolution. It was the plan, well, actually we had done a lot of the planning back in the States, to go back and present to the Commander of U.S. Forces--Somalia who was Major General Montgomery, an Army general. Here's how the Navy-Marine team is going to support the withdrawal of the last U.S. forces sometime probably

March of '94 is what the target date was and that's when it actually did happen. So we went over, I led a team of about eight officers over there and we went over to brief the General on what we would do and spend five days with him and he toured us around the city and we saw what his thought processes of how he's going to shrink the perimeter and eventually get all the Army that was left on the beach and then we'd retract them onto the Navy ships. I tell you the thing that struck me the most was it was bizarre. The Embassy which we had secured in a virtual combat operation and in which we set up as a rock hard perimeter. "There's a fence around here - you don't cross that fence. This is U.S. property and nobody comes in and nobody goes out and if you shoot a bullet over the edge, we're going to blow a hole in the ground where that bullet came from" is now like the Casbah in Morocco. There are Somalis selling fruit and vegetables and clothing and trinkets everywhere. There were little tent cities all over the place. It was just absolutely out of control and it was a UN compound now and every single building had mortar traps over the top of it and every night there was an attack of some sort. They'd lob some mortars in or they'd climb up on the walls and spray the inside with machine gun fire. It just appeared to me to be kind of stupid. These people were shooting at us and yet with no security at all and no checking, we were allowing them to come in and out of the compound all the time. It's sort of like eating your cake and having it too. You can't do that. You just can't. It just seemed to be a headless horseman to me. It seemed to be chaos and I was real discouraged. I felt that now my job, I was going to be the Chief of Staff, the number two in command to an admiral in charge of two groups of ships and two groups of Marines who were going to oversee the withdrawal of the U.S. Army and I said, "Let's get to it. We can't get out of here fast enough."

Van Ells: Now, how had morale changed? You've hinted at this. From your tone there's a lot of frustration. I know you were involved in both ends, so I don't want to read more into that--

Peterson: There was an awful lot of frustration. By now you read in my tone the split that basically existed over there. There was a group of U.S. officers and U.S. personnel who believed it was time to just say let bygones be bygones and let's get out of here and there's nothing we can do about it. There was a more militant group that said "We ought to go and punch them in the nose. This isn't lost yet. We can still make a difference here but we got to go out and get in that city and start kicking butt." Nobody wanted to repeat the episode when the Rangers were shot down. I really can't comment on that operation 'cause I wasn't there and I only know what anybody else would know in the paper, but I do know there were a lot of difficulties due to lack of coordination between the U.S. and the UN and lack of support that caused that to happen. There were a lot of people in the U.S. military who said, "Hey, we can go back to where we were in December of '92 and January of '93, we'll take over and we'll go out and we'll give help to anybody that wants it and we'll shoot

anybody that tries to get in our way.” That was never going to work. It was a politically untenable position. I got into a lot of arguments with fairly senior American military that said, “This is wrong. We shouldn’t pull out of here. My God! We came in here, we ought to finish the job.” Different time, different presidency, different feeling among the people, it was time to go. But, still professionally frustrating.

Van Ells: The second time you stayed there how long? I don’t think it was terribly long—was it?

Peterson: A month and a half maybe.

Van Ells: After this is when you met the President.

Peterson: No, no. I met the President back in December of ’92. He spent New Year’s Eve with us aboard the ship. That was President Bush, not President Clinton.

Van Ells: Oh, President Bush! I thought Kevin had told me that you had met President Clinton.

Peterson: No. Never met Clinton. I met President Bush and his National Security Advisor, I forgot his name.

Van Ells: Oh, I misunderstood.

Peterson: Just a really neat guy. A retired general. I’ll think of it in a second.

Van Ells: I’m usually up on those things myself.

Peterson: They were on the ship for two nights and we had dinner with them and lots of nice conversations. President Bush likes to hunt and so do I so we talked about dove hunting in Texas. No, I never met President Clinton.

Van Ells: But President Bush you liked?

Peterson: Oh, very much. He was a wonderful individual, very genuine guy, very down to earth, not pompous at all.

Van Ells: Of course, you started under his presidency. It was initially his thing.

Peterson: It was his decision.

Van Ells: As President Bush is going through Somalia, looking at what the U.S. forces did, if you would, describe your reading of the President’s demeanor and what would you call it--

Peterson: He was excited and heartened by it and thought it was going wonderful and in fact it was at that time. He got there on the 29th of December, less than three weeks after we initially landed. And this was a country that had been in chaos and now was one of the busiest airports in the world, the harbor is stuffed with ships, there is food every place, we got convoys going out to all these different cities, we had stopped the starvation, we stopped the mass murder, we haven't stopped the suffering. We obviously had a long way to go but as he told the troops when he met with them on the ship, "You're doing God's work here. You're doing a great job." He was extremely buoyed by the whole thing. But, 20 days after that it was inauguration and Bush went to go to Houston and never had to deal with the aftermath. I think even at that point there were a lot of us that realized once you get there and you spend some time there and see the scope of the problem, you begin understand the amount of time it's going to take to correct that problem. Holy Mackerel!

Van Ells: And that's a whole other story!

Peterson: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah!

Van Ells: This second trip to Somalia was the last.

Peterson: No, I went back in March. No, in March was the last time. I went there for a week in December for planning and then back to the States and then I went back over on the ship in March of '94 for the final withdrawal.

Van Ells: Describe for me, if you would, how that went.

Peterson: It went like clockwork. Just from a U.S. military point of view, we had a tactic that we planned to entrain called an amphibious withdrawal. It was jointly planned with the Marines, Navy, Army and Air Force. Covered by all. We had Air Force assets overhead. We were withdrawing the Army of course, but we would take over their positions and set up Marine perimeters and we had timed it out so that the last Marine would leave the beach at, I forget the exact time, it was about 2:00 o'clock in the afternoon. We started the thing in daylight and we were within about a minute of that time. Everything went just like clockwork. We withdrew and we lined all the ships up and headed east to get out of there.

Van Ells: No resistance?

Peterson: Sporadic fire. We had a couple of rocket-propelled grenades that were at one time launched out into the harbor toward one of our ships and sporadic, nothing real. What really was a problem was trying to delay the crowds that were coming in to loot the headquarters when we left. They came in and tore every building down the U.S. had ever built. Ripped all the metal out of

everything. Anything that was burnable or made of metal was instantly pillaged.

Van Ells: So you are there at the beginning and you were there at the end.

Peterson: Sure was.

Van Ells: As you're on the boat going in the other direction from Somalia, for the last time, do you recall your thoughts and/or feelings at the time?

Peterson: Ya. I was happy to get out of it 'cause it's a hell hole, but again, and I've given talks and speeches in fact I gave the last one last week back at the Armed Forces staff college about this, that question or one like it always comes up and I think frustration. Out of my career, that was my thing, that was my Andy Warhol's 15 minutes of fame. What I was responsible for, I think, went very well, but the overall effect was at the very best zero. Somalia in my opinion, today, is right where it was in November of 1992. True flights are getting in, ships are coming in, food is coming in and it's somewhat getting distributed, but I think it's going to go back to where it was. In June of 1992, that's where it was. By November, all flights had stopped because one clan would say, "Well, we're going to charge a tax for every flight that lands." And the other clan would say, "No, you can't charge them because we're going to charge them." Then they'd start shooting at each other. Meanwhile, a relief flight would come up and they'd both shoot at the flight. "Go away until we decide this among ourselves." It was just chaos. That's what they're going to get back to I think.

Van Ells: So I suppose to make this a good interview for the Wisconsin Veterans' Museum, describe for me if you would, the process from March 1994 to how you got the position here at the University.

Peterson: Well I'll tell you what I made that decision two miles off the coast of Mogadishu, Somalia.

Van Ells: What were the options presented to you?

Peterson: I had the option to go back to the Pentagon and be what's called an EA to an under-secretary of the Navy, [executive assistant]. I had another option to go back and serve in the OPNAV [Office of the Chief of Naval Operations] staff in the amphibious planning staff, but they were both in the Pentagon and I could have been Chief of Staff to Commander 3rd Fleet, that's the number two to an admiral who's in charge of the 3rd Fleet. But at the time I had an 8 year old daughter and a 9 year old son and a second marriage. My 9 year old son was living in his sixth house in 9 years. I'd only been to two of his birthdays and hadn't made Christmas with him at all ever. I decided I'd done enough here. I had 28 years and I'm going to do something else. So I wanted

to come back and teach. I wanted to do one of these ROTC jobs and he told me that Wisconsin was open and my criteria to him was that it has to be above the Mason-Dixon line. It's got to have a change of seasons and so it's been kind of an interesting marriage and I've loved it so far. I love it up here. My wife, she's a Florida girl so she's getting used to it, and adapting slowly. But I really enjoy it.

Van Ells: I'd like to go back to some topics.

Peterson: Can we take a quick break?

Van Ells: We'll finish up a couple of things real briefly here, going back to some topics we discussed. Operational changes in your military career since 1967, I was a medical technician in the Air Force so I'm not exactly a tactician necessarily, so perhaps you could dumb it down a bit. But I get the impression that you have thought about some of the operational changes, tactics and strategies and those sorts of things since the Vietnam War. I was wondering if you could summarize them a little bit.

Peterson: First of all, on a sort of intelligent plane, it's not a good choice of words but I can't think of a better one and it's not important, we think more now about tactics and we plan ahead better than we did when I first came in. When I first came into the Navy in the mid-60's it was sort of a white scarf, kick the tire, light the fire, and "let's go do it, guys" type of organization. Now that's a little unkind but we weren't, in my opinion, anywheres near as professional about the way we go about our business as we are now. Probably the best indication of that that I can think of is accident rates--peacetime accident rates. They were almost asymptotic when I first came in. Like I told you I lost three roommates that used to live with me. **[End of Tape 1, Side B]** There used to be an adage that you never ever went on an aircraft carrier deployment without losing at least two pilots and not it's common to go on three consecutive aircraft deployments and not lose one. We are better with our assets, we maintain them better, we are now studying the art of war as an officer corps that we didn't used to do before and we do a lot of war gaming that we didn't used to do before. Now a lot of that is because of the advent of technology, but a lot of it is also just because, I think, lessons learned from the Vietnam War. We better get better at what we're doing. Vietnam to some extent, I think, we tried to fight World War II all over again. It was against a guerilla opponent and we never really did comprehend that until near the end and it was kind of silly. I think Desert Storm is probably a perfect example of that. The fact that it was a conflict that we sat down and thought about beforehand and decided what was, honest to God, the most efficient way to prosecute it and then convinced or at least argued for with the civilian decision makers to decide that was, in fact, what we were going to do. I'm referring there to the fact that we absolutely pulverized their defense systems before we tried to conduct a land campaign and there have been a lot of

people better thinkers than me over the last fifteen years, that said, “You got to do that.” That’s something we never did in North Vietnam. We never, ever, ever said, “We are going to reduce their capability to shoot at us and then we’re going to go in and take out those pieces of real estate targets that we want.” We’d do it a little bit at a time and then we’d stop and send signals and you don’t send signals with warfare. Our hardware is light years ahead of where it was in, in the ’60s.

Van Ells: Which brings me to the topic we can conclude with and the topic there’s a lot of enthusiasm about and that involves the types of airplanes, how did they change, which did you like to fly, which did you not like to fly and what’s it like to try to land and take off on a carrier?

Peterson: I’ll answer the last question first. How’s that? In the daytime, I don’t know how old you are, you probably don’t understand the phrase then, we used to say it’s the E-ticket ride at Disneyland. In the early days of Disneyworld and Disneyland you got A, B, C, D, and E tickets and it wasn’t pay once and go in and you could do whatever you want. The E ticket was the big rides. So we said it was the E-ticket ride. That’s in daytime. Everybody lines up--once you figure it out and it is a hard learning curve, quite frankly in the daytime it’s not all that difficult. It’s pretty demanding and you don’t do it yawning and you have to pay attention, but it’s fun, it really is. In the night time it’s terrifying. You don’t have any spatial orientation, it’s pitch black night. You can see four or five lights down there that you can convince yourself that they are above you, below you, being you, you get disoriented. They did a study during the Vietnam War, anyways. They put leads, perspiration and respiration rates and heart rates and some stuff, on some pilots to see what the stress was like in night combat over in Vietnam when they saw these SA-2s and SA-3s coming up at ’em. What they discovered was that although it was pretty high it was no where near as high as it was during the last 20 seconds of a night carrier landing. That was the highest stress that they were going through was trying to get that thing back on board. A very scary business. Very rewarding when you walk away from it every time, but a scary business and it takes some years off your life. The airplanes themselves, I enjoyed them all. I never flew an airplane I didn’t like, but in capabilities, the last airplane I flew was the F-18 and that was an easy, easy airplane to fly. Technological marvel, very easy to fly from point A to point B. Very responsive, very redundant, but, I think, the best way that I could describe that, I flew three generations of light attack airplanes, the A-4, the A-7 and the F-18 and they all had radars in ’em and they’re all designed, in part at least, to map out targets on the ground so you could find those targets. In the A-4, and I flew it for about 5 years, it was an event when you came back to the ready room and said, “Hey, my radar worked today. I actually saw some ships out on the ocean on it, albeit only for ten minutes and then it quit.” That’s the truth, it was very unusual for it to work more than--you’d turn it on, it would make two sweeps and go bang into. It just didn’t work. It was not well

designed. In the A-7 which I flew for the majority of my career, it was an event to fly a radar that wasn't degraded in some way. They generally powered up, they generally worked to some degree, but it was supposed to be good out to 80 miles and it might only be good out to 50 or you might have fuzz around the edges or it might delude one of its modes. Now the F-18 which admittedly I only flew for about three years, but I flew it fairly constantly and consistently for three years. In the three years I flew the F-18, I never once had a discrepancy with the radar. It never once did anything but work exactly right as it was supposed to right out of the box, as did everything else on the airplane. That's where we've come and what we've paid for. That's the redundancy--the cost, the technology and the reason that we're going to be able to get by with fewer airplanes NOW than we did in World War II or in Vietnam because they are so incredibly capable and reliable. I mean they just go and go and go. We built that redundancy and reliability into them.

Van Ells: Is there a point where the technology can get so great that one man in the cockpit can't handle it?

Peterson: Oh, yes. Absolutely! Although--

Van Ells; You can go that fast that the person inside can't handle--

Peterson: I think, at least guys in my time, I didn't grow up playing computer games. My son is and I think my son will be able to handle things in an airplane should he decide to do that, that I never had a chance to handle because it just means something to him.

Van Ells: In terms of buttons to push or whatever.

Peterson: They're so well engineered that you can, you see you're talking to a single seat pilot. Every airplane I ever flown was one cockpit and one pilot. So I'm not a crew member concept type of guy. I think that when you put two people in an airplane in a combat environment, and they're meant to assist each other, and they do, they help at times and it's another set of eye balls, it also complicates the issue because now you always have to decide priorities and you have to negotiate with each other. So I'm an advocate of a single airplane. So, when you get to that whatever it is, theoretical, technological limit then you build another airplane and then, have two of them at that level. You don't build a more complex single airplane.

Van Ells: That's physically demanding too.

Peterson: Very physically demanding. We had to work out we had weight rooms in the squadrons. People say when you have AGs [anti-gravitational forces] you weigh eight times as much as you do now and that's sort of like, okay, fine.

Well, think about your head weighing 160 pounds and you trying to keep it off your chest. Your chin gets down on your chest, your eyes are drooped down and you can't breathe. You have to learn, you do breathing exercises, and forcefully breathing and you can't talk into the radio when you're pulling those kinds of G forces [gravitational forces] and when you finish a 30 or 40 second air combat maneuvering flight or evolution where you've had 8 G forces on your body, you are just weak-kneed.

Van Ells: So I suppose there would be a point where you can't go any faster.

Peterson: Fast is not the problem, but you can't turn any faster. To get G forces on you, there is a physiological limit and we've probably reached it with today's generations of airplanes.

Van Ells: I was curious how much longer it's going to--

Peterson: Well, we're going in a different direction now. We're building stealth airplanes that don't necessarily have to be incredibly maneuverable because the maneuverability is what develops the G force. High speed and a sharp rate of turn means Gs on your body. But, now you have airplanes like the B-2 or the F-17 that aren't as maneuverable they just can't be seen so you can trade off those types of technologies. I suppose if you want to be Star Wars about it, if you looked at Luke Skywalker in the old Star Wars trilogy and he's out there in airplanes that if they were making the turns that those X-Wing fighters were supposedly making, he'd be pulling 25 Gs and his head would explode. But, maybe they will discover a technology that maintains 1 G inside the cockpit. I don't know.

Van Ells: Well, thanks for coming in.

Peterson: I enjoyed it. It was a lot of fun.

Van Ells: Fantastic!

**[End of Interview]**