

U.S. NAVY MEDICAL DEPARTMENT ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

ORAL HISTORY WITH MR. PEARCE GROVE

CONDUCTED BY
JAN K. HERMAN, HISTORIAN, BUMED

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OFFICE OF MEDICAL HISTORY
BUREAU OF MEDICINE AND SURGERY
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Telephone interview with Pearce S. Grove, machinist's mate aboard the USS *Consolation* (AH-15) during the Korean War.

You were on the *Consolation*?

Right. I was on three ships and the third one was the *Consolation*.

What was your rate?

I was a machinist's mate. I was not in medical, but I helped out bringing patients aboard, and visited with many on the decks as they recovered. My job was in the engine room making fresh water.

When did you actually report to the *Consolation*?

The *Consolation* called for volunteers and I was in Norfolk aboard another ship, the *Pawcatuck* (AO-108). I was a young kid looking for action aboard, and that's why I went aboard the *Pawcatuck*. It didn't get any action remaining in the port area. So, when this came along I volunteered.

This was in 1950?

Yes. I went aboard shortly before the *Consolation* sailed through the Panama Canal and around to California, then off to Japan, and on to Korea.

Where did you report aboard? In Norfolk?

Yes.

What was your impression of the ship when you first saw it?

Just amazed! It was a huge white vessel with beautiful paintings on it. It was just awesome. It was extremely impressive to me. I never dreamed of such a huge hospital floating in the water. We took on medical personnel in Norfolk and then more in California. The medical staff was being built up along the way.

So you had some staff when you left and you filled it out when you got to California?

Right, the medical staff, that is.

You knew where you were going. It wasn't a big secret?

Absolutely no secret at all. That's why I volunteered! The "quicker the better" was the idea of getting there.

How was the cruise from Norfolk around through the Canal?

There was no problem with weather or anything. We were there for 4 days liberty in Panama and went right on through. There were

no difficulties whatsoever associated with it. The Panamanians were very friendly with ladies freely available! For me, it was the first time through the Panama Canal so I was excited to see all the waterways and the canals and the lakes we went through. It was a learning experience for me to go all the way through. The canals themselves were imposing, great engineering feats though obviously of an earlier era.

Your duties at that point were in the engine room?

That's right.

The ship, of course, had been built at the tail end of World War II, so in a sense it didn't have that many miles on the hull. It was a fairly modern ship.

It was pretty efficient. While there were others I knew about, at this point the *Consolation* was the only hospital ship in service and therefore thought to be desperately needed in Korea..

So it was the first one that was really called up?

Yes. And the others I vaguely knew about, but I honestly didn't know much about hospital ships at that stage because I was really looking for adventure. And later, much later on, I became more aware of all the various hospital ships. It amazed me that there had been German, Japanese, Russian, and Italian hospital ships. So as I got more into it I became fascinated with the broad range of hospital ships, many in the U.S. being run by the Army.

When we arrived in the Orient something surprised us. There was a hospital ship already there in Korea--the *Jutlandia*.

Right, the Danish ship.

Right

Did you go aboard that one?

I saw it many times but never went aboard.

Was there any other refitting that had to be done by the time you got to California or. . . ?

No. It was just taking on more provisions and medical personnel.

And you went across and I would imagine you had an uneventful crossing of the Pacific?

It was. Of course we had ceremonies for crossing the line and so forth, but it was relatively uneventful. There were no great storms or problems with the ship. When we got to Japan we didn't

stay there very long, a couple of days at most. It was the same thing, to bring more people and supplies aboard.

Where did you put in there?

At Yokosuka, and then we directly went around to Pusan, Korea.

When did you get to Pusan?

It was early August. The [Pusan] Perimeter had been pushed back so close to Pusan that you could see and hear all the gunfire. It was a real question of whether they could hold the place at all.

Were you offshore or did you come into a pier?

We came immediately to a pier, a huge pier. When we came to the dock there was a whole row of Korean women sweeping the large pier below us. One of the women dropped down to her knees and another lady nearby left her place in line, came over and delivered a baby. The woman then wrapped the infant, tied it on the mother's back, and the two women went right back in their place and continued sweeping! Of course, a teenager, I was mortified but soon learned that many things in Korea had continued for centuries with little change.

She delivered a child and then went on sweeping?

She delivered the child, wrapped it, and put the child on the mother's back. This was no more than maybe 2 or 3 minutes; it was very quick. She put the baby on her back right on the pier in front of the *Consolation*. And the lady who had the baby went back to her place in line and went right on sweeping.

That must have been quite an eye-opener.

It certainly was. And here you had this ultra-modern hospital ship and a baby being delivered on the dock without any care.

And then to go back to work right away.

Right back to work. It was unbelievable.

When you got to Pusan, you mentioned that the fighting was close by.

The real question when we got there was holding that little piece of land. We stayed and, of course, treated people immediately when they came or were delivered to the dock.

Whom did you treat, just Marines?

They were mostly military, but we treated military including Koreans. We all pitched in carrying them aboard. We carried hundreds aboard the first day. I think I saw the first wounded Korean

military man die aboard ship. That was quite a shock for a young sailor.

You were how old?

I was 19. I also saw men on the operating tables with their entire stomachs hanging out.

You saw them with their insides. . .

I saw them with all the parts hanging out. I saw them put back together, sewn up, and they lived. I was assured that these men survived. It was incredible. We were just awed by the complexity of the medical facilities of the ship, and the ability to do what they did. Extensive medical facilities like the ones on the hospital ship just weren't close at hand. It was very impressive.

So this was really the first modern hospital facility to be there?

Oh yes. People were just amazed. And the ship looked so huge and well supplied with modern equipment, doctors, nurses, and many technicians compared to almost anything else.

What did Pusan look like? What kind of town was it at that time?

Overrun, dirty, wide streets. I was there many times but this first time I saw more of the traditional elderly men wearing ancient Korean hats.

Kind of like top hats?

They were made of a special bamboo or something. They were lovely and very intricate. You saw a lot of very traditional dress on both men and women. But everything was dirty. There was nothing to keep down all of the dust and dirt from the streets. There were soldiers and military machines coming and going all of the time. And so it was confusion with everyone rushing around. That was also where I first saw a lot of the Korean kids attaching themselves to army units. They would clean and wash soldiers' clothes. The soldiers would give them money and, occasionally, cigarettes and chocolates. They, especially the boys, became an informal part of the military service units.

So Pusan was not a very happy place in August of 1950. Was there a feeling of impending doom?

Right, it certainly was! When we first arrived it was very ominous. Then the tide began to turn and we began pushing the North Koreans back, not very long before the time of the Inchon invasion.

I should mention that well before we went to Inchon I was sent ashore on patrol duty. In interacting with the people ashore I

learned a lot of things for the first time. For example, as the trains were leaving Pusan and heading toward the front lines, soldiers would drop off the train all along the way and filter back into Pusan.

These were Koreans?

No. These were US soldiers. The MPs I worked with on shore patrol had lots of stories. Their primary job at Pusan was rounding up the stragglers, putting them back on the trains to go back up to the front lines. They'd put them back aboard and many would begin dropping off again all along the way. Then they would put them aboard again. I never heard that any were shot for desertion, even though lots of them were constantly jumping off the slow moving trains and coming back into town. For a 19-year-old kid like me, it was amazing to get these stories first hand.

So you were on the *Consolation* there at Pusan and you were seeing all kinds of patients, not only the native population but very grievously wounded military people.

Many that you thought would die were soon on the decks to get fresh air, sunshine, and exercise. I talked to hundreds while they were recovering..

That you thought would die but didn't.

Right. It appeared at that time that our hospital staff were miracle workers, putting people back together.

Your duties were to not only to work in the engine room but to.

. . .
I helped everywhere I could, not just the engine room services. We all helped where needed, night or day. The ship's crew and medical staff were just so oriented to making everything work. It was a great atmosphere.

Was there an air threat from the North Koreans at that time?

It was talked about a little, but not, in fact, a reality. Then, when we did have the air threat at Inchon it was only a couple of small planes, and they were destroyed.

How long were you there in Pusan?

A few months, that was until the surprise invasion at Inchon, well above the retreating North Koreans, which was thought to be one of General MacArthur's daring strategies.

So probably it was less than a month because September 15 was

the landing at Inchon.

Perhaps a month or two. And then we went directly around the west coast to Inchon.

What did you know about that operation?

Previously? Nothing except we all knew was that we were going somewhere on a military mission. Until we were underway, there was very little information. When en route, then we got more information about what it was and what our role would be. They tried to keep most of the operations as secret as possible.

So you are up on your way to Inchon. When did the action start?

We were right there for the actual invasion. Action everywhere. Soon small boats began bringing the wounded out to our ship. We also began utilizing the supplies that were on those boats. Those medical supplies were utilized by the *Consolation* because they did not need them on the landing craft.

So this occurred in Inchon?

Yes.

A lot of the LSTs were equipped with medical supplies which they didn't require and they thought it would best be used by you guys aboard the *Consolation*.

Because the *Consolation* needed the supplies and not the landing craft.

What do you remember about that whole Inchon operation? When were you aware that the Marines were going ashore?

The Marines and Army were out in front of us but you could see the whole grand operation. You could see the destruction of Inchon. It was devastating! Between the battleships and aircraft the city was being absolutely leveled. The destruction of it was horrible. Then when I went ashore I could see for myself that there was not a structure standing.

Were you receiving casualties on the ship?

Oh yes! We were receiving casualties as soon as we arrived.

How far offshore were you? Of course, they had those terrible tides there.

Right. As you know, we went in with landing craft and beached everything on the huge mud flats, then waited until the tide rose again and you had enough water to move. The great tides required constant awareness for any boat movement.

So you guys were way offshore then?

Right. We were in the harbor of Inchon but not close enough for the tide to directly affect the movement of the *Consolation*.

How soon after the bombardment did you start receiving casualties? Was it right away?

Right away, with the first landings.

And how did they come aboard?

They came out to us in a variety of landing craft and small boats.

Aboard LSTs?

Right, and anything else that was available to get them out. We went through this horribly long process of receiving the casualties. As our multinational forces pushed further in, casualties had to go through the front lines to the rear lines, to the gathering point, and from the gathering point to Inchon, and then from Inchon they had to be loaded into boats and finally taken out to our ship. Many died en route. All of the agony involved in getting the patients from where they were wounded to the ship was a great problem. That's when the idea emerged for the helicopter landing deck on board ship. The "direct to the ship" on a helicopter would combine the helicopter, a rather new innovation, and a floating hospital ship to provide almost instant care of the wounded, saving many lives.

That innovation comes out of the Inchon experience?

Right, but it was several months before the idea became a reality.

Earlier I remember seeing pictures of the *Haven* at Inchon with these pontoon arrangements, rafts tied port and starboard with red crosses. Helicopters would land on those rafts. Do you remember seeing any of that?

I did not see that happen. When things were stabilized at Inchon, a large number of ships left Inchon, came around by Pusan, and then up the east coast of Korea for another surprise landing to cut off retreating North Korean troops.

At Wonsan.

At Wonsan. I'm sure you know the problem we had at Wonsan.

The mines.

Yes, but also by the time we got there the advancing South Korean soldiers had already overrun the place and moved on beyond. So it

wasn't called an invasion; they just called it a landing.

I want to go back to Inchon again for a moment. Before you started thinking about the helicopters you said you went through all these stages to get these people back to the ships--all the rough handling and everything else. Once they got aboard LSTs, LCVPs, or whatever, and heading toward the *Consolation*, how did you get the patients from down in the landing craft up to the hospital ship? Did you use hoists or what?

Yes, hoists and ladders, depending on the weather and the patient. If the patients were mobile enough and could manage going up a ladder, it was, of course, quicker and easier. Otherwise, it was necessary to use hoists. At times, when the weather was foul, it was a very tricky operation, difficult for all concerned, especially the wounded.

So that's when you guys started to think about the helicopter and getting from a battalion aid station right to the ship without all the middlemen.

That's right.

How did that idea develop?

I do not know exactly. However, there was talk of that as we left Inchon en route around the peninsula to Wonsan. When we left Wonsan and returned to the states, the purpose was to install the helicopter pad. The *Consolation* was the first to have it done.

Right. Were you a witness to that?

Oh yes.

Tell me about that.

The whole construction of it on the fantail was fantastic. It was quite large and we were all amazed how they could get it on there. It was a superstructure built up so that nothing interfered with the landing and takeoff of the helicopters. We were in the Long Beach ship yard where it took just about 2 months. The goal was, of course, to get back to Korea as quickly as possible. I was on leave on the East Coast and was notified to return to the ship. So I had to return to the ship early. There were some trials for the helicopter landings out in the ocean just outside of Long Beach but they were very short, and we were on our way back to Korea.

How was the landing deck constructed? Did you see it being constructed at all?

Yes. All the superstructure was built from metal and all welded

right onto the ship.

And the deck itself was wood?

No. The deck of the ship was metal and the deck of the helicopter pad was metal. The *Jutlandia* had wooden decks. We had some wood on upper superstructure decks where patients would rest and lounge. The main deck was all metal. The helo pad had a non-skid finish on it.

So was this finished in record time? Then again who knows what record time would be if it had never been done before?

As quickly as they could possibly get it done.

You were on the East Coast at home and you got called and told that you had to go back to your ship. When you got back to Long Beach did you witness the helicopter trials?

Yes. There didn't seem to be any problems whatsoever. It worked just fine. The idea was to get back to Korea as quickly as possible. After we returned to Pusan the Chinese invasion began and the ship rushed to Hungnam to evacuate troops.

But it already had its flight deck then?

Yes. And we did make use of it just before the Hungnam evacuation.

So you saw the first use?

Right.

Do you remember any type of feeling that this was the first time this was being done?

It was very impressive. The early ones that I recall occurred in not very rough seas. It was really something to see the helicopters come in and land and the patients taken right off and taken directly to hospital operating rooms. We knew we were seeing something new and you thought "Oh, my gosh, this is marvelous!" They were coming virtually from the battlefield to the operating room. I remember talking to many patients who thought that this was heaven on earth.

They went from hell to heaven almost immediately.

That's right. They were so grateful. I should point out that these first helicopter landings took place before the Hungnam evacuation.

Do you remember that first landing?

Yes, it was very historic and everyone aboard ship tried to observe it because it was so historic. This was why we went all the way back to the states in the middle of a war to get this put on the ship. The idea that I remember was you could bring a person directly from combat, right after he was hit, directly aboard the ship. The percentage for saving life went skyrocketing. It was such a life saving concept. Then to see it actually put into operation was very exhilarating for anyone aboard the ship. There were many times when the seas were rough that it was difficult landing the helicopters. You also had to be careful taking them off. The landing pad would be going up and down, but it worked. It worked! They secured them in the worst storms but the commitment was that you didn't stop that flow from the helicopter to that ship; a lifeline had been established between the front lines and the hospital. You did everything you possibly could. Of course you did everything possibly could to make it as smooth as possible but whatever you did it was to keep the helicopters coming on and off quick as they could. And it was amazing. They'd unload and go right back to the front lines, turn around and come right back to the ship. It was just in and out constantly.

Did you ever witness any problems with helicopters not getting their engines started?

No. There must have been some, surely there was some but I didn't see it happen. It worked so well and, of course, everyone was so thrilled because the idea of putting a pad on the ship had been put into operation. Everyone was just thrilled with it.

You said that the first helicopter landing took place before the Hungnam evacuation.

Maybe a couple of weeks or so. And then the breakthrough at the Yalu River and the Chosin Reservoir and from that point we were in the harbor at Hungnam receiving thousands of wounded and frostbitten soldiers.

The weather was frightfully cold wasn't it?

Oh God, yes. With both the wind and the cold temperatures. Of course, you did not think about yourself in those circumstances because you knew what was happening up at Chosin and you thought of the Marines and the corpsmen and the Army trying to make their way back south. So you never complained about yourself being cold aboard the ship. The Hungnam evacuation was an ordeal that one can never forget. The hospital ship sat there right in the harbor taking casualties from every source and direction.

At anchor?

At anchor. We sat in the harbor at anchor. It was this huge white hospital sitting out in the water. Enormous numbers of patients were going in one side of the ship and coming out the other. It was unbelievable.

"Out the other" in the sense that they were. . .

Transferred off as fast as they could to make room for others.

Transferred how?

We had about 800 on the ship at one time and they were constantly coming aboard and going off, mostly by boats of all kinds.

When you said the other side, do you mean to other ships?

Yes, onto other ships. Because we took thousands of wounded aboard.

These were the casualties of the Chosin campaign?

The vast majority.

They would come aboard the ship and be stabilized and then sent to. . .

The worst cases were kept, but any that could be moved on were moved after treatment. I saw them come aboard because I was helping load and unload. There were 17-, 18-, 19-year-old kids who looked like they were 60 or 70 years of age. The condition was unbelievable! Everything that could be done was done immediately, and then they were moved onto any type of vessel with more streaming on. Thousands were treated although we could handle only about 800 at one time.

Your typical patient was still dressed in his winter parka?

That's right. You could look into the parka and see what almost looked like a dead man. They were like ghosts. It was horrible for a kid like myself to see. A lot of these people were kids my age!

Seventeen, 18, 19 year olds.

Yes. And I did have the chance to talk to many of them.

What did they have to say? Do you remember?

Well, I did have a chance to talk to most after their initial treatment. There was practically no conversation when they first came aboard--when they were in those frozen conditions with frostbite on their toes, their hands and feet--there was practically no conversation. We rushed these people quickly to the medical services with very little conversation. Oh God, they were so

grateful, so appreciative. Many times I heard them talk about the sight of the white ship with the red cross and what it meant to them.

So you had helicopters landing every few minutes practically? Were there enough helicopters to do that?

No, they came by boat as well as by helicopter. Never could they have gotten enough helicopters on. So it was any way they could get them onto the ship or any other vessel they could get them onto after they were treated.

And this again was in the freezing cold?

Absolutely. But as I said, from our point of view, I never recall any of us thinking of being cold. You really turned your attention to all of the soldiers. God, they were suffering so greatly.

Later on, when things stagnated and they were holding the lines, kids who came aboard ship would talk about every type of event. And I remember them telling me that they could look across the fox holes and see toes sticking up, hands sticking up, and if they didn't get shot by the enemy so that they could get out of there they got their buddies to do it.

To shoot them?

Absolutely. Hands and feet. Oh God, yes. They would have their buddies shoot them in the appendages--hands or feet--just to get out of there. There was a lot of that. And they did get to the point, apparently, medical personnel could tell pretty easily what had happened.

You could tell if it was a self-inflicted wound or not?

Yes. The medical people could.

You said that when you were in Hungnam harbor the patients were kind of moving through a pipeline. You were getting them at one end, treating them the best you could, and then you were getting them out so that they could get new people in. How long did all of that go on?

I am sure the worst cases stayed, but they went through there 24 hours a day, and that went on for approximately a week. We stayed there until the harbors were blown up. Of course, that was the very last thing that was being done; they blew everything up. Everyone had been evacuated, including civilians, all who needed medical attention coming aboard the *Consolation*.

Did you see that?

Oh, yes. But before that it was an unbelievable show. I could see the rocket ships firing hundreds of rockets, which were close to you. You could see the *Missouri* firing salvos in. And then you could see where, up on the hills, they were calling in the shots. The Army and our Marines were calling in the fire. It was possible to watch shots being fired, rockets launched, salvos hurled, and the impact of these made in and around Hungnam.

Forward observers.

Yes. We had spotters. I will never forget the use of napalm bombs. You could see the planes come in and spread flaming napalm before them. You could see it just cover over the advancing North Korean and Chinese communist soldiers and all parts of the landscape. And it was repeated time and time and time again, hundreds upon hundreds of napalm bombs being dropped until the woods were alive with burning soldiers.

So the Chinese were moving pretty close to the city by this time. They were encircling Hungnam and they were getting closer and closer and driving everyone back.

From our ship in the harbor, it was like a grand stage where you could see the whole thing happening. The napalm bombing was the thing that I remember most vividly and how destructive it was.

These actions held off the invaders to the point where every single military person and every single civilian got out. The civilians were taken out by a merchant ship. The careful way the whole evacuation was conducted was remarkable. There had been a lot of mines in the harbor. But we had marked all of the safe channels and paths and, to my knowledge, no ships were blown up.

Not in the withdrawal part anyway.

Right. But while all this was going on, we stayed there because of the need for hospital services. We stayed put until they blew up the harbor.

That must have been quite a sight.

Oh, my God! Everything blown up, every building, every pier.

You could feel the concussion?

Right, and the explosions were just amazing. And that was it. We then sailed back to Pusan. We did a lot of running between Pusan and Yokohama transporting wounded.

Between Yokohama and. . .

And Pusan. We delivered many patients to the Army hospital in

Yokohama.

So your understanding was that the patients were going out to Yokohama and not to Yokosuka?

The typical movement of the patients was to Yokohama. There we, no doubt, had exceptions, but the typical run was to Yokohama. On one trip to Pusan, I was talking to an ambulatory patient on the upper deck. He was a young man who had been in the band in Japan. He was immediately commandeered to go to Korea, to Pusan and he learned to fire his weapon from the fantail of a ship on the short trip from Japan to Pusan, Korea.

Wow, that's not a lot of preparation.

He was a musician and they were desperate for front line soldiers. He happened to be close at hand.

They had mobilized cooks and everyone else.

That's right and I'm sure it probably lead to extra casualties.

Sure, these guys were totally untrained in combat so they learned on the job and it was often fatal.

True. Other things I remember. You know some of these things almost embarrass me to bring up. I remember that in low periods of action we played all kinds of sports. In Pusan, I organized a whole division of football players including the Medical Corps and we had touch football on the docks. I still have an elaborate set of plays with names of people who played the specific positions. That was when the fighting was far up north and in our favor. We got so involved in it that the Army came by and challenged us. I was the captain who got the whole group of Navy people together and we went over to an Army base and played them in a major event. It was 11-person football and the whole works and we beat them badly. So the Navy was ensconced at the champions of Korea.

At the beginning anyway. So this was your second trip to Pusan after Hungnam?

We were in and out of Pusan at least eight or ten times.

So you were in and out of there aboard the ship?

Yes. Some of the times it was just going from Pusan to Yokohama or Yokosuka. A lot of the time it was Pusan to Inchon, Inchon to Pusan, and then Pusan to Wonsan and so forth around Korea.

How long were you aboard the ship then?

Two years, 1950 to '52.

The lines kept shifting after the Chinese entered the war, and they pushed us all the way south of the 38th parallel again.

Right. It was totally unknown what was going on at times. That was the time when there was so much agony between Truman and MacArthur. The troops almost to the person were supporting MacArthur for suggesting we use the atomic bomb on the Chinese. There was a strong feeling that our hands were being tied behind our backs in fighting the war. Truman got every little consideration from troops in action, many wounded or dying.

How have things changed over the years in terms of your reminiscences of all that? Do you still feel that way?

For many, many years I didn't go to a meeting, didn't join an organization, didn't do any of that. And then a friend of mine, who is the editor of the Marine Corps League, talked me into writing an article. I had three ships, the USS *Macon* (CA-132), USS *Pawcatuck*, and USS *Consolation*. I didn't go to any of the reunions. Now I am starting to do a little bit more of it.

After 50 years, do you have any thoughts about your service aboard the *Consolation*?

I certainly was proud of it at the time. When I completed the tour and got out of the service I was going to college. I went into the Coast Guard Reserve. Later on I obtained a commission in the Navy reserve and met weekly. I was certainly proud of that time and was delighted to serve in that capacity. We worked together well. It was marvelous. CAPT McElroy was a ship's captain aboard the *Consolation*. There were two captains during my tenure but CAPT McElroy was the first. He was just superb. Everyone liked him and got along with him. He was the captain of the ship while there was also a captain of the medical staff, so there were actually two captains aboard the ship at all times. To my knowledge, the captains always worked well together.

Yes, that was traditional. That's the way they ran those hospital ships.

I don't recall any cross persons or any significant problems whatsoever. Of course, socializing between the sexes, real or imaginary was always on the minds of the sailors and observation of anything was quickly communicated. Ladies sunning on decks, even in private areas, were often observed by the brave and foolhardy.