

Petersen, Stephen USCG

[00:00:13.96] MARC HENDERSON: When and where were you born?

[00:00:16.10] STEPHEN PETERSEN: 1942, Bronx, New York.

[00:00:19.48] MARC HENDERSON: And where do you consider your hometown?

[00:00:21.49] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Port Washington, Long Island, New York.

[00:00:28.49] My dad was-- he was from Denmark, from an island that is way into the Baltic. And a lot of the people there are seafaring people. And he left home. He was in a family of nine. He left home when he was 14 and sailed on square riggers. And then later on, he worked for a multimillionaire taking-- moving his yachts around into various places, you know.

[00:01:00.34] So I was raised on the water. My father was quite a sailor. I never thought that-- well, I guess I shouldn't say I never thought. Until my senior year in high school, I thought I was going to go into the Navy. And I went to the library and got a book on the Coast Guard, and then I got another book. And then when I was 18, I enlisted.

[00:01:33.73] The draft was on, I wasn't scared of it or anything. I wasn't worried about-- actually, I was in boot camp when my mother got my draft notice, so it didn't concern me. I had already made up my mind that I was going to serve.

[00:01:54.04] MARC HENDERSON: And what year was it that you went to boot camp?

[00:01:55.78] STEPHEN PETERSEN: 1960. September of 1960. Cape May, New Jersey.

[00:02:00.91] MARC HENDERSON: When you went to boot camp, what was your sense of the Vietnam War?

[00:02:06.46] STEPHEN PETERSEN: I don't think I knew anything about it. It was early. 1960. I knew there was things going on in Southeast Asia, but when you're 18 years old, you're not concerned. It wasn't until later on in life.

[00:02:26.64] Bootcamps, it was good. My father was a pretty tough guy to deal with, you know, so by the time I got to basic training and people yelling and shouting in my face and everything was-- I won't say it wasn't new. It didn't affect me like a lot of other people, even though I was only 18.

[00:02:47.58] I ran around with two other guys, and every Wednesday, we'd have to go down and row the boats. And while we were marching down there, we would peel off and go into somebody's smoking area in another company. And we would get out of rowing the boats, and when they came back marching, we'd fall back in.

[00:03:08.97] We were all smokers, so we'd just feed into somebody else's smoking area and then wait there until they come marching back and we'd come in there. But we got caught and then we were out with our sea bags at night and high portin' it and running around till 11, 12 o'clock. So, you know, they're teaching us a lesson, I guess.

[00:03:30.12] MARC HENDERSON: Did you consider hazing at the time, or--

[00:03:31.98] STEPHEN PETERSEN: No.

[00:03:32.40] MARC HENDERSON: Was it appropriate?

[00:03:33.93] STEPHEN PETERSEN: It was appropriate. Yeah.

[00:03:36.92] MARC HENDERSON: Yeah. Before you went to your first ship, did you attend any specific training?

[00:03:41.55] STEPHEN PETERSEN: No. I went directly to a 327-foot cutter in Staten Island, New York.

[00:03:52.06] MARC HENDERSON: Which cutter?

[00:03:52.89] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Cutter Campbell. I was an FA-- Fireman Apprentice. And then I spent a year on there, and I was a fireman. And then I decided it was a steam vessel. I didn't want to be a machinist's mate or a boiler attendant. I wanted to be an engineman. So I did a mutual with another fellow that was on a lighthouse, believe it or not. But before I could get to the lighthouse, we had to go through the group, and I got stopped at the group, so I never made it to the lighthouse. But that was OK. I liked riding the boats and being the engineer on the boat.

[00:04:33.36] MARC HENDERSON: So you were able to administratively change rates, or--

[00:04:37.17] STEPHEN PETERSEN: No, I was still the same rate after I'd been there a little while, then I made third-class engineman.

[00:04:43.71] MARC HENDERSON: Did you have a choice in which boat you went to, or was it the needs of the Coast Guard--

[00:04:47.16] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Well, these were all small boats, you know. They're 40 foot patrol boats. So they would just assign you a boat and then you had to take care of the engineering plant on that boat-- that particular boat. And then you stood what we call tower watches and communication watches, but if there was a boat call, then you went out as the boat engineer.

[00:05:16.02] The first month I worked in the engine room, and we were in port, and then we got underway. And the engineering department supplies the scullery person, and the deck department provides the mess cooks. Well, the scullery department, you're called the scullery maid. And

what you do is, you do dishes for the next 30 days out at sea. And sometimes that was kind of challenging because things were flying all over the place.

[00:05:53.89] MARC HENDERSON: How big was the crew?

[00:05:56.41] STEPHEN PETERSEN: 170, about.

[00:05:59.10] MARC HENDERSON: So, 30 days of doing dishes for 170 shipmates.

[00:06:03.54] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Well, I didn't have to do the officers, but I did all the enlisted. And make the coffee, and sometimes have to go up with the cook and peel potatoes. That was all part of it. But you were up at about 4:30 in the morning, making a big pot of coffee, and setting up. And then you get done. And you'd hardly get done, and now it's noontime, now another meal. And the same thing at night.

[00:06:35.52] After those 30 days that I worked in the engine room, you know, but everybody had to have a, like the turn in the barrel for the scullery. And then I went to the next assignment.

[00:06:50.52] MARC HENDERSON: What was your series of assignments that kind of led you from 1960 to the assignment that eventually took you to Vietnam?

[00:07:01.26] STEPHEN PETERSEN: After I did a year on the shore rescue station, I volunteered for a cutter that was going to be in the Hawaiian area. But that didn't work out for me. I wound up going to an isolated station in the Philippines for a year.

[00:07:18.30] MARC HENDERSON: And where was that?

[00:07:22.02] STEPHEN PETERSEN: The island of Catanduanes. It was very remote, no landing strip. A supply plane came in and landed on the water. Every three months, a ship came and gave us-- transported supplies.

[00:07:37.23] We were the only people that were on the island. It was a small island. We were actually not on Catanduanes, but nobody knows-- it was called Little Panay Island. And it was like a mile and a half wide, six miles long. And it was two different villages, and we were by them. Nobody had electricity. The only electricity that was produced was from the LORAN station.

[00:08:02.04] MARC HENDERSON: So you were there supporting a LORAN station?

[00:08:04.14] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Right. For a year. 15 people.

[00:08:08.49] MARC HENDERSON: What year was this?

[00:08:09.36] STEPHEN PETERSEN: 1962 to '63.

[00:08:12.03] MARC HENDERSON: And as an engineman, what was your role there?

[00:08:14.49] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Maintain the generators that provided the current for the station and, most importantly, the LORAN equipment that the navigators were using.

[00:08:26.55] MARC HENDERSON: What is LORAN?

[00:08:28.08] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Long range aids to navigation. We transmit a station to another station, and then they transmit it back. And the wavelength is measured. And the aircraft and ships can use that information and plot exactly where they're at.

[00:08:45.98] MARC HENDERSON: Kind of like triangulation.

[00:08:47.55] STEPHEN PETERSEN: That's right. It's way before GPS.

[00:08:51.03] MARC HENDERSON: Did you have a choice in the matter, or were you told--

[00:08:53.28] STEPHEN PETERSEN: No, I was told.

[00:08:54.88] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. Sure. And so you spent a year there.

[00:08:58.20] STEPHEN PETERSEN: I spent a year there and then got some what they call a compulsory leave. So you generated your normal 30 days of leave, and then they gave you an extra 30. And then from there, I went to another rescue station on Long Island, East Moriches.

[00:09:15.81] I did about the same thing. I rode the boats, but I fulfilled another role. We were short on boatswain's mates. I got qualified as a boat coxswain, so I was running the boat myself and the engineer. And when I went out, I took two seamen. Usually, it's a boatswain's mate, an engineman, and a seaman. I just took two seamen with me because I wore two hats.

[00:09:44.01] While I was there, my enlistment was up. I thought I was going to get out. I was working on going to school in Detroit. And that didn't work out, so I took a year extension. And after the year extension, I put in for deep sea diving school. I was accepted. I was one of four Coast Guard people that went to the Navy school.

[00:10:12.36] MARC HENDERSON: Where was that school at?

[00:10:13.65] STEPHEN PETERSEN: San Diego. Right in San Diego Harbor. And all four of us graduated. Qualified us in hard hat diving, shallow water diving, and scuba. But it meant that you were going to go to a polar icebreaker after that. That's what the training was for. Which I did.

[00:10:36.17] MARC HENDERSON: And what year was that, that you attended the training?

[00:10:38.39] STEPHEN PETERSEN: 1965.

[00:10:40.43] MARC HENDERSON: So 1965 you came out a deep-sea diver.

[00:10:42.17] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Yeah. Now I was a second-class engineman at the time. And though when you come out of it, then you're rated as what they call a second-class diver. The first-class divers, they went through a school with mixed gases and it was six months long. Ours was like two and 1/2 months long

[00:11:04.19] It was hard. I was never a good student, let me put it that way. And the first week was nothing but classroom work. And there were three times in the course that you could be washed out. One was the testing part, another was failing in some of the swimming, and another one was what they call, not hell week, but where you're swimming in a pool and they rip your gear off and you have to buddy breathe and everything. If you surface, you're gone.

[00:11:44.96] You never see the people again because they go to the administration. And then-- so somebody said, what happened to so-and-so? Well, he's gone, you know.

[00:12:01.13] MARC HENDERSON: So, then, which icebreaker did you go to?

[00:12:03.42] STEPHEN PETERSEN: I went to the Edisto in Boston for two years. I was actually still an engineman, and I worked in the engine room. But whenever a situation came that they needed a diver, then I was a diver. So we would swim under the hull and check the propellers, make sure that they weren't damaged from the ice. We'd checked pure facilities, we'd check underwater pipelines up in Greenland for the-- when they were resupplying the bases up there. It was Thule Air Force base. I left the polar icebreaker. I was assigned a buoy tender in Seward, Alaska for two years. And then I left there and I went to a buoy tender in Miami for two years. And in the meantime, I had put in to go to the 82 footers that were in Vietnam, and things were winding down and everything. And all of a sudden one day I got orders and it said explosive loading. So I said, OK, I'll take it.

[00:13:09.86] I was single. I needed to do my part. I was unhappy with what was going on with all the protesting. I tried to learn a little bit about it and everything, and it was-- I thought I can go over there and do a job, help out our government, I'll do my service. I was a single person. I was also a sport parachutist. So when I got orders to go to California to go to school, that was in Alameda, California, it was an indoctrination portion of it.

[00:13:49.64] I parachuted all the way across country, and when I got to Alameda, I went through the indoctrination training, then I went to San Diego for SERE school. Survival--

[00:14:05.99] MARC HENDERSON: Evasion.

[00:14:06.84] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Yeah. Resist and escape for one week, and then I went back to Alameda and got some more training in small arms, M-16 grenade launchers, and then I went to the Naval Weapons School in Concord for three weeks for actually hands on loading ammunition ships.

[00:14:34.79] The ELDs were explosive loading supervisors. The particular port that I was assigned which was Da Nang, all of the cargo that came in on commercial ships, which was about 90%, came in and anchored. And then was offloaded at anchorage and not at a pier facility.

We flew to Hawaii and then to Guam, the Philippines, then Vietnam. I was in Saigon a couple of days before they were able to figure it out where they wanted to send me and everything, and then I flew in a C-130 from Saigon to Da Nang. And the commanding officer, who was a lieutenant, picked me up at the airport there.

[00:15:28.75] MARC HENDERSON: Now, how big is the explosive loading detachment?

[00:15:32.32] STEPHEN PETERSEN: It's a lieutenant in charge. chief petty officer 2nd, and about-- fluctuates between six and eight E-6's, everybody's a career person.

[00:15:47.11] MARC HENDERSON: So relatively small?

[00:15:48.35] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Right. And it's also all mixed rates but everybody has been cross-trained. One might be a damage control man, one might be gunner's mate, boatswain's mate. A guy could be an electrician. But they all become now explosive loading supervisors.

[00:16:05.89] MARC HENDERSON: And how many ELDs were there in Vietnam?

[00:16:08.50] STEPHEN PETERSEN: There was five. There was one in Cat Lai, another one in Cam Ranh Bay, another one in Quy Nhon, another one up where I was in Da Nang, and then one farther down South in Vung Tau.

[00:16:27.43] MARC HENDERSON: And so what year is it now that you arrived?

[00:16:30.19] STEPHEN PETERSEN: I'm '72. I'm late in the war.

[00:16:32.95] MARC HENDERSON: What were your first impressions of Vietnam when you arrived?

[00:16:36.85] STEPHEN PETERSEN: It was an awful lot like the Philippines. A lot of people were poor. We lived in our own hooch, excuse me, that was near-- well, actually right next to an Air Force base that controlled a radar site that was up on a mountain. And they called it Monkey Mountain. And we had a building, which was a two-story building, but when I got there, was 1 and 1/2 story building.

[00:17:14.43] But it was-- a typhoon had come through and knocked down half the building. So instead of rebuilding one half, we had a big deck. And we shared that building with the 702nd military intelligence people. And these were all guys that were in civilian clothes. You had no idea what their rank was or anything. You could be talking to an E-5, or you can be talking to a colonel. You had no idea. They were pretty secretive.

[00:17:45.33] They were on the bottom floor. We were on the top floor. And then in-- when the Easter Offensive came in 1972, and there was-- some of the places were being attacked, the powers to be said that our base was so small that we couldn't properly guard it. And so the Navy captain at Tien Sha which was the support facility. Yeah. He wanted us to come over there because he basically thought it would be cool to have these explosive loading guys.

[00:18:28.11] We had a lieutenant that was a Mustang. We're friends today yet. Mustang is an enlisted person who becomes an officer. He was a boatswain's mate and became chief, made warrant, got an advancement to lieutenant. He had like 25, 26 years in at the time, and he just didn't want to be under the thumb of this captain. So being that we were so close to the Air Force base, we went over there and-- myself and him-- and we talked to the colonel that was in charge. And we said, if we can make a road from our base into your base and close off our road, will you take us in? He said, sure.

[00:19:13.38] So right below where we-- right below was a retrograde yard. That's all the various military equipment that's going to be shipped back to the United States for repair or reused or whatever. And so we went down there and we knew the guy that operated it. We got a road grader, and an articulating front-end loader, and we built three 300 feet of road into the Air Force base, fenced off everything, and so we transited-- when we had to leave, we had to go through the Air Force base. The ironic thing is, the Air Force people could not go anywhere after 10 o'clock at night. And here we come rolling down the hill to change watches at 2 o'clock in the morning, and they don't want to let us out of the gate. I said, you got to let us out because we got a ship out there that we're working. We normally didn't work at night. But when the ammo was in short supply, we did.

[00:20:15.78] MARC HENDERSON: Did that happen often?

[00:20:18.30] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Not often, but on and off. And you were a target because you're out there, you're all lit up. And you're the only thing in the harbor. So the underwater swimmers, the sappers, would come and try to stick a mine on the ship and everything. So therefore the Army security guards would be continuously walking around. Sometimes they would just shoot their M16s in the water, but most of the time concussion grenades. You would never see them if they were there, but a day or two later they would find them up on shore with their eardrums blown out, and they had drowned.

[00:21:07.08] They don't come with scuba gear. They're swimmers. And one of the times we were working a ship, it was called the-- it was an old victory cargo ship, and name of it was the *Jefferson City*. It was just about unloaded, and the sappers put a mine on there and blew a hole in it, but it was blown in a hull that had just been unloaded, so there was no ammo. So they got the ship underway real quick, ran it up on a sandbar, and then they had Navy EOD divers come out to see if there was any other explosives on it, and they did some temporary repairs.

[00:21:53.68] But there was-- a lot of these ships that were hauling ammunition were old ships. And actually this ship was slated to go to Geochang-gun, Korea, right after this load and being scrapped. But we were lucky that the explosion occurred inside of the hull that was completely empty.

[00:22:20.77] MARC HENDERSON: Did your living conditions change at all once you switched over to the Air Force?

[00:22:27.25] STEPHEN PETERSEN: No. We stayed in the same building. We were on subsistence in quarters. We kind of ate wherever we wanted to eat. One of the good things about

the ammo ships, we would get out there first light and get things set up, and then we'd go and have breakfast with the officers on the ship. Not the regular crew, but the officers.

[00:22:53.97] And the same thing for lunch. And it was three different selections of meals, so we ate good. At nighttime came, we would go to various bases and get something to eat, or we'd have a little hot plate we'd put stuff on in the hooch and cook it. Everybody kind of fended for themselves. And the Air Force had a little place to eat. And also a chow hall, so we would go there.

[00:23:31.51] The guys-- the guys in the unit were all career guys, so things went smoothly. They're all E6s, so they're probably at least, at a minimum, eight years in the service. Some are double that. The Navy harassed us a little because we were-- I don't know why, but they did. We were always called the shallow water sailors, the baby Navy. But we were used to that stuff. That's been going on since day one, so it's nothing new.

[00:24:15.88] MARC HENDERSON: And your impression of the Airmen on the base that you shared?

[00:24:20.23] STEPHEN PETERSEN: They were all-- we got along well, very well. They were interested in what we did, and we were interested in what they do. Every Wednesday night in the movie theater, they would have actual films taken off the aircraft and everything, to where they went in and-- a gunship would go in somewhere and just light up some area. Some of the footage was fantastic. And from where we were, too, we could see them also flying around the Hai Van Pass, where there was always a lot of nighttime activities.

[00:24:58.48] The NVA would like to come in as soon as it got dark, come in to the pass, and set up mortars that were timed, and get out of there before light. And then at 8 o'clock, 8:30, when things started getting busy on-- this is on the other side of the bay, but on Da Nang airfield, and then just lob the grenade-- lob the mortars in there. One time they hit the exchange, but it was too early in the morning, and at the time, they hit the fuel depot. We were far enough away that it didn't affect us.

[00:25:36.16] MARC HENDERSON: OK. How much time did you have to yourself?

[00:25:40.74] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Not a great deal. We worked almost all the time. Every once in a while, we'd get a break. We might be working one ship, we might be working five ships all at once. And you stayed there all day long, from sunup until sundown on each ship. And then if they needed the cargo, and the ship stayed in, then somebody would come and relieve you and run another 12-hour shift until the ship was unloaded.

[00:26:22.49] MARC HENDERSON: And what did you do for recreation, or off-duty activities?

[00:26:27.69] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Well, we were not far from China Beach. That was a military recreation area. It had a little place to eat, and you could just go to the beach, but it was a secure area. It was fenced off and everything. It was only strictly for the US military, not for any of the civilians.

[00:26:49.54] MARC HENDERSON: Can you describe your impressions of your leadership?

[00:26:53.00] STEPHEN PETERSEN: There was sometimes some problems with the Army. They didn't quite understand how-- we worked for the Army. That was who controlled us, and-- Army transportation. And sometime they would change the equipment around that they send out to the ships, like-- something like forklifts. Because you're moving cargo in the hull, and then the slings come down, put it around and move it, change it, so you got to keep continuously moving cargo with a forklift.

[00:27:33.65] These are electric, and they had to be electric. And sometimes, they were short on electric, they wanted to send gasoline stuff, and that wasn't permissible. And we would just shut the job down. And when we did, boy, oh boy, it didn't take any time at all before the Army was calling you up and say, what's going on. And I said, well, you've got stuff here that's unsafe. And they said, well, we need this, we need this ammo. And I said, yeah, but you don't need the ship to blow up or something.

[00:28:09.86] MARC HENDERSON: Could you explain why they had to be electric?

[00:28:15.02] STEPHEN PETERSEN: No gasoline, no running engine, and everything. That type of thing.

[00:28:19.47] MARC HENDERSON: Because the combustion engine and sparks?

[00:28:21.71] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Right, and then also they're operating down in the hull-- you know, carbon monoxide. But we shut down one time, and a general called out there, said, well, we want you to start back up again. And I said, that'd be fine, General. Just send me a waiver. Just sign your name on it, send it out. Well-- OK, OK.

[00:28:47.92] MARC HENDERSON: What about your specific leadership, your lieutenant?

[00:28:53.29] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Lieutenant was a great guy.

[00:28:54.61] MARC HENDERSON: What made him so great?

[00:28:56.65] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Pardon?

[00:28:57.04] MARC HENDERSON: What were some of the qualities that made him great?

[00:28:59.45] STEPHEN PETERSEN: He had been enlisted before. He knew what the guys were going through and everything else. He was very respectful, but he was-- he was very military. He wanted things to be done properly. I remember when I first reported. He said, I want you with me all the time for the next month. I want you to see how I do things, and this is how I want them done. And I did. And he was excellent. Like I said, we're friends to this day. I think he's 87 years old now, so--

[00:29:34.39] MARC HENDERSON: How often did a new person rotate in, and did he do that with everybody?

[00:29:42.25] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Usually when the person had a year, they left, and sometime there was an overlap where we could train somebody. Sometime there wasn't. Sometime they came from-- during that period of time, they were doing a lot of changes. You might get somebody from another explosive loading detachment, and come up and be with you for several months. And then they would leave, and somebody else would come in.

[00:30:06.67] MARC HENDERSON: Were there any other incidents that come to mind that--

[00:30:10.51] STEPHEN PETERSEN: We had just where-- because we were located in Da Nang, and also the-- we had 30 personnel up on the transmitting station up north, which had another 30 Air Force people that provided security for that base because it was pretty important. When people came from the section office, because Coast Guard people came from the section office, which is the controlling factor for all of the Coast Guard people that were in Vietnam and Thailand. We picked them up at the airport, and then most cases take them to a helicopter pad somewhere. And they would get in the helicopter, and they go up to Tan My.

[00:31:01.63] So we got to know the personnel up there a little bit. And one night we got a call, and it was from the CO up there. And he says there they're medevacing one of our guys down to the hospital in Da Nang, the field hospital there. And he had been wounded. What it was is when the Easter Offensive came, even the Air Force couldn't provide enough security for the base there. So the Army came in, and these were all field people. And they came in with their packs and everything, and they just slept wherever they could.

[00:31:38.68] And the story goes that there was a guy that had a Claymore-- one of the Army people had a Claymore mine, and he was picking the BBs out of it. And he was up against a living quarters, and it blew up. It killed him, but when it blew through, it wounded the Coast Guard storekeeper. So they flew him down, and we had to keep tabs on him and everything. He was about the only person that we knew that had been wounded.

[00:32:18.48] I had a tape recorder, but I didn't have-- and then I bought some of these tapes that were made by various artists. But I had a friend of mine that was in Saigon. He was the aids to navigation man there, and somebody had met-- somewhere-- up in Alaska, matter of fact. And he would make me tapes all day long, while he was doing the office work and then he would send them up. So I had a lot of music. After a while-- this old reel-to-reel tape recorder.

[00:32:59.56] We worked most of the time. And our routine is that these ships that came there, when they would anchor, they would come in at first light. Now these are all commercial, operated by merchant seamen. They'd come in at first light, we would leave our hooch-- or, our small base that we had-- drive maybe about three miles to the deep water pier, get on a tugboat, and they would take us out to the ship. And then it was our job to turn around and meet with the chief mate, who's the number-two guy on the ship. You probably never met with the captain because the chief mate handled everything.

[00:33:43.72] And you made sure that all of the equipment that was going to be used to handle the cargo-- which is owned by and maintained by the ship-- was in order. Enforce the smoking regulations. No smoking on deck, only certain smoking areas within the ship. And also that each ship had about five US Army security people that walked around all the time and were looking in the water or dropping concussion grenades to deter sappers. Because it was quite obvious to anybody that these ships that were anchored out were ammunition ships, because they weren't at the piers.

[00:34:30.34] The cargo was unloaded by Koreans, which was a private company called Keekung. And they unloaded ships by the ton, and that's how they were paid. So the faster they wanted to unload, the more money they made. Well, sometimes faster is not safe. And when you slow them down, they were very resentful. But after a while they got to know you. You work with the various supervisors, the crew guys that were operating the equipment-- because the equipment is part of the ship, but all the equipment is operated by the stevedores.

[00:35:13.48] And so the cargo comes up out of the hull, it swung over. It may go on a barge. It may go on a LSM. It may even go on an LST. But most of the time, it was on barges. And then when the barge was full of ammo, the tugboat would come by and take it away. So we always had to make sure that it had big, large fenders. There was never steel-to-steel contact, where it would create sparks. And that was a problem because we were doing this at anchorage, and if it got real snotty and blowing, and the monsoons came in, and it's wet, it could be a disastrous situation.

[00:35:59.56] We were responsible for the deep draft and loading, but we were also responsible for what they call ramp sites. And that's where, if the ammunition got loaded onto an LST, then the LST would come into-- just like a boat ramp, where it was all paved and everything, opened the front doors, the forklifts would go inside, remove the ammunition and everything. And we checked that operation. There in Da Nang, at another-- what they call a bridge site-- and then we also went up north to the area of Tan My, and they had another place.

[00:36:41.68] And the good part about that is, that's where one of our transmitting stations were. So we could just stay on this 30-man base with fellow Coast Guard people and then still be able to do our duties.

[00:36:55.36] MARC HENDERSON: What's a transmitting station?

[00:36:57.71] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Another LORAN. It was two LORAN stations actually located in Vietnam, one way up in the north, one in the south, and then three of them were in Thailand, and they're sending the wavelengths and everything. They were the backup navigation for the B-52s.

[00:37:20.14] After we were there a fashion, and it looked like possibly the war was going to end-- which didn't at that time-- they had shipped 40 slurry bombs into Vietnam. They were 16,000 pound bombs that were dropped out of the back of a C-130. They're detonated just above the ground, and they create an incident airfield. There was 40 of these bombs on a barge that had been-- just kind of been moved around and moved around because they weren't being used. Well

they were Air Force property, and the Air Force said, you know what, we'd like to have them in Thailand.

[00:38:06.36] And so nobody had been to the barges in a long time. And we had a 13-foot Boston Whaler that we just launched from the Navy base, and I went out to-- they was unsure of the count because the ship was coming in, and they didn't know if it was going to be enough room to get all these bombs on it.

[00:38:32.43] And while I was out there-- the boat hadn't been used in a long time, and the steering got hung up. And before I could get back there, I smashed into a buoy, and the whole bow of the boat folded back. I got thrown all the way to the back of the boat and knocked out just briefly. But when I woke up, I had one foot in the water, and I'm holding on to the motor. And when I came back, there was a lot of repair work that had to be done on the boat.

[00:39:09.42] MARC HENDERSON: Sure. Were there any repercussions?

[00:39:11.55] STEPHEN PETERSEN: None. I mean, it was-- stuff happens. That was it, you know? But we ultimately loaded all these bombs on a Lykes shipping line. And I had a lot of-- it just took, probably, five days. Every time a bomb goes down there, they have to block and brace it. There is no nailing. It's all done by cutting the lumber exactly the same size that's in there and brace it so it can't move, and then another bomb comes in, and likewise. So I had a lot of interaction with the chief mate.

[00:39:54.90] MARC HENDERSON: So did you cut-- were you the one cutting the wood?

[00:39:57.39] STEPHEN PETERSEN: No. No, no, the the stevedores did all that. Normally we were unloading ships. But in some cases, we were backloading, and backloading is difficult, very difficult. And on this particular ship-- I don't remember where they took the cargo, but it-- through letter writing-- my father worked for-- after he stopped working for the millionaire, years later, with the yachts, he went to the company that the millionaire owned, and it was a stevedoring service. And so he was working in the management section in New York, and he got to meet the-- he got to meet the chief mate, and they became friends.

[00:41:00.88] All the cargo that we handled was done on a pallet. So sometimes there was one pallet, and another pallet stacked on there, and then it was removed. On the deck of the ship were several containers. They were always-- back then they were called CONEX boxes. And in those would be hand grenades, fuses, detonators, all different stuff so that they're separated. And when you look at everything now, there is no palletized cargo. Everything comes in a container. It's already prepackaged. It would have been nice to have that way back then.

[00:41:48.26] That was when I smashed into the buoy. I could have lost my life, I could have-- you know, it was just-- I was a good boat handler, but when it got stuck, and I went back to fix it, and it hit that buoy, it was a big mooring-- large, I'm talking about a large mooring buoy, and we kind of smashed in there. And that was not a good day for me. But like I said earlier, I didn't get in any trouble for it or anything. It wasn't my fault. I just-- some equipment that we didn't use

very much-- because all our movements and everything were usually done by tugboats. It was more or less almost a recreational boat.

[00:42:43.38] I was one of three people to leave Vietnam when they closed-- when the war stopped. The last three months that I spent in Da Nang, I was by myself, the only Coast Guard person there. But the port had been turned over to the Vietnamese. And all you did is go out there and kind of monitor what they did. You had no authority at all. And--

[00:43:11.79] MARC HENDERSON: When was this?

[00:43:13.32] STEPHEN PETERSEN: It was 1973-- well, it's November of '72 to right when the war ended, at the end of January of '73. I was up there by myself, and I had a lot of latitude. I became friends with an Army transportation guy, made a trip with him up north for-- he was in charge of checking all the vehicles that were abandoned by the South Vietnamese when there was a big push up there. And so we went up to a Special Forces base, and then from there we went into Quang Tri city, which was then divided. The bad guys were on one side, we were on the other side.

[00:44:01.17] And we had to transit the Hai Van Pass. If I went to Tan My I'd just get on a helicopter somewhere. And they were, like, taxi stations. Helicopter here, helicopter there. Where are you going? OK. You just jump on. And this was all by Jeep, up through the Hai Van, which was fairly secure, but one day it's secure and next time it's not secure. So it was about a four-day jaunt up there. And it gave me a break from-- I had no authority with the deep draft vessels at that time.

[00:44:43.77] And I was-- oh, then we turned over our living quarters, our hooch that was tied into the Air Force base. We left that, and there was in the old hotel in Da Nang. We called it the New Hotel Da Nang, whatever, and I spent three months there. Living in a hotel was nice. But we had what we call hooch maids that turned around-- when we were at our other place-- and they kept the place clean, they pressed our uniforms, shined our shoes, made our bedding up. And it was basically the same in the hotel, except in the hotel they did have a recreation dance floor on the third floor.

[00:45:40.65] Probably had the most with the Koreans that unloaded our ships.

[00:45:47.52] MARC HENDERSON: They were contracted though?

[00:45:48.38] STEPHEN PETERSEN: They were contracted, but they all lived in a camp. And within this camp-- well, they all lived there. They worked on the ships. I remember one time thinking-- I don't think I've ever-- these stevedores that were working on board the ships were all just super physically fit. There wasn't a fat guy in the place. And muscular guys. And when I got to know one of the supervisors, I said, where did these guys come from. And he said, they're ROKs that have already fulfilled their mission in Vietnam, and we hired them. So they were all just about 90% soldiers.

[00:46:37.77] Well, we'd go over-- after we had established a rapport, and that we weren't really such bad guys and stopping them from moving a lot of cargo where they could make money, they would invite us over to their camp. And I can remember that if they popped-- they said, would you like a drink. And if they popped the cork or the cap on a bottle of scotch, you didn't leave until it was over, it was completely empty.

[00:47:16.64] I wound up having 17 counterparts that I trained. Da Nang, the city of Da Nang was never open to liberty from the time of the war started till the war ended. The only time you could go there, you could go into the city with your counterparts. And they would take you and maybe you go to find a restaurant, or go here, or something like that. So that was just about our only avenue. Unless we were traveling from point to point, even during curfew. Because we did some unloading at night too.

[00:47:59.33] MARC HENDERSON: Now when you say counterpart, are you talking about as part of Vietnamization, kind of preparing them?

[00:48:04.67] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Yes, training them. The group of people who had-- they weren't Coast Guard people. They were Army ordnance people. They didn't know anything about ships, but they knew about ordnance, so we had to train them so that they knew how to load, how to unload. Some of them probably had never been on a tugboat before, no less on a ship. And there was a lot of interaction there.

[00:48:35.54] MARC HENDERSON: They were South Vietnamese army?

[00:48:36.90] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Yes. Yeah.

[00:48:38.60] MARC HENDERSON: And what were your impressions of the local populations?

[00:48:42.20] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Very poor people. And while we were there, the Easter Offensive came. They poured out of the north part of the country, and they came into Da Nang because it was a city. I think there was an influx of maybe 350,000 people that just all of a sudden showed up. And they were living in cardboard boxes and makeshift houses alongside the roads. They had nowhere else to go, and they had no money. They had abandoned everything they had that was up north.

[00:49:22.25] Just letter writing. You know, my father was interested in how we handled the ships and everything, being he was in that whole line. And a lot of the things that I learned as a kid and everything helped me out, I think, quite a bit.

[00:49:42.14] MARC HENDERSON: How much news about the war you were fighting made its way to you?

[00:49:47.54] STEPHEN PETERSEN: We got television. We had a television in our hooch, and we had an armed forces station. And then there was some Vietnamese stations, but we didn't understand the language. But that was about it. But it kept-- and then we also received the Stars and Stripes newspaper.

[00:50:07.34] MARC HENDERSON: How much news about what was going on in the United States, whether it's politics or otherwise--

[00:50:12.86] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Quite a bit. Quite a bit. The protesting.

[00:50:16.76] MARC HENDERSON: Do you have any recollections of specific holidays while you were over there?

[00:50:24.47] STEPHEN PETERSEN: We just worked through them all. They were like any other day. It was a busy year. There was never a dull moment. The only breaks were like when I went with that Army guy up north, and then I did-- I did take a one-week break and went to Thailand for a week. And then you're entitled, also, to another week, in-country R&R. And I was actually in-country R&R down in Vung Tao, visiting my buddies down there that were explosive loading when they signed the Peace Accords.

[00:51:05.15] MARC HENDERSON: Oh, really?

[00:51:05.64] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Yeah.

[00:51:06.80] MARC HENDERSON: And what was the atmosphere like when the Peace Accords were signed?

[00:51:11.30] STEPHEN PETERSEN: It was good. Everybody wanted to go home. Although I had just been approved for a year extension. I didn't have a lot of ties. I was single. I was making good money. I was putting everything in that Chase program where they matched at 10%.

[00:51:38.75] The war ended and some type of military transportation boxed everything up and shipped it. And then I went-- I got transferred to Saigon, and I was in Saigon three days. And then they sent me back to Da Nang, and then we backloaded a ship-- and I was saying before, backloading is much different than unloading. It's very difficult. But we backloaded the ship, and then myself and the lieutenant and the lieutenant commander who was in charge of the complete-- all the ELD units and the LORANS, everything-- all flew to Thailand. They went through a debriefing. I didn't have to do that.

[00:52:35.84] Went and flew back to San Francisco. Because I was single, I drove my car all the way across country. I put my car in a storage place. And so I went to the Coast Guard base in Alameda, and I just signed myself into the chief's quarters there. And the next day was a holiday, so I couldn't get my car out to go up to Travis Air Force Base up the road. And anyway, the I went over to the bar there at Alameda. It was real quiet, Sunday night.

[00:53:21.77] And anyway, the other guys were-- nobody asked you anything or whatever. Here you just get off the plane, you just-- first time back in the States, you know, but war was over. There was no protesters, no nothing, you know? So I went to the base, and the ironic part is that I got talking to the barmaid, and she said, oh, you just coming back? And I said, yeah. And I said-- but I got my car up north, I got to get up there. And the next day she drove me up there.

[00:53:59.24] And I picked up my car. I didn't go-- my home was me, so I-- I still had all my parachuting equipment, so I parachuted my way back across country to Miami, just a total reverse of what I did coming. And I was on the ship, I don't know, maybe three months before I flew back up to New York and saw my folks.

[00:54:24.68] MARC HENDERSON: You had actually volunteered to extend for another year?

[00:54:27.73] STEPHEN PETERSEN: I already had it approved, and then the war ended. And the ironic part about that is that I came from a ship in Miami, and because I had already been approved for an extension, I didn't have anything on file, which is commonly called the dream sheet. That's where-- choices of three different assignments.

[00:54:53.09] And so when the war ended, just like that, abruptly, the detailer contacted me and said, I don't have much for you. And anyhow, it was like you're going to go to a major cutter or something. I basically said to them, I said, so this is my reward for serving in the combat zone. He says, well-- he says, I do have an opening. He says, I can send you back where you came from, and that was to Miami. But I'll send you back now as a chief instead of a first class. So I did.

[00:55:30.23] Then I did another two years on that ship. And then I went down to Key West to a drug ship, where we did drug interdictions for two years. And then following that, I felt that I'd wanted a little bit more cushy job, so I took a recruiting assignment in Tacoma, Washington. So I went from one corner of the United States to the other.

[00:55:59.83] I was 30 years old when I went there, had 11 years of service behind me already. I wasn't a young kid. I had already been exposed to the oriental culture for that year I spent in the Philippines. So it wasn't a huge adjustment for me. And I actually enjoyed the work that I did. It was dangerous, but I liked doing it.

[00:56:31.51] There was times that the pallets might have come apart, and the bombs dropped right down back in the hull. And when you saw it happening, you did this. But you weren't going to be there to do anything else. Fortunately, they never exploded. We handled anything from .45 ammunition all the way up to 16,000 pound bombs.

[00:57:02.38] And in between, a lot of Air Force stuff, armament that went on their aircraft. Cluster bomb units. And then all kinds of stuff for the Army. It was a good job, and it was good working with the ships. They were appreciative that they had Coast Guard personnel on there that were protecting their crew. They had come in with maybe 30, 40 guys, and they wanted to go home also.

[00:57:38.35] MARC HENDERSON: Did your combat experience affect your life afterward?

[00:57:43.12] STEPHEN PETERSEN: It's an experience in my life that-- I'm glad that I volunteered. I'm glad that I-- I don't know. I was kind of fortunate that after I got back and everything, I knew people in Miami, and I had friends. And then I had a whole bunch of people that I parachuted with down by Homestead Air Force base.

[00:58:14.09] And we all got together, and two of the guys that already done their tour in Thailand, Air Force guys, supporting the war and everything. So we got along well. We parachuted together. Three guys single, we raised hell, you know? Hit the bars at night. But when we parachuted, there was no alcohol. We-- pretty disciplined.

[00:58:40.10] MARC HENDERSON: And how did your combat experience affect the way you think about combat veterans returning from war today?

[00:58:46.49] STEPHEN PETERSEN: I'm very appreciative of it. I have 50 acres of land in Texas with pretty good hunting on. And so I put on a couple of warrior hunts.

[00:59:13.06] MARC HENDERSON: Kind of giving back? What do you think the war meant to you and your generation?

[00:59:23.63] STEPHEN PETERSEN: There's those that will always say it's a waste, then there's always the ones that said we did our duty, you know. Maybe we fell short on our objective, but we did what was right for our country. Their country and our country.

[00:59:48.45] This is a little hard. I had a piece of rental property up in Washington state-- because I lived up there for about 28 years before I moved to Texas-- so I was up there taking care of some business. And I used to also do a lot of motor homing. For about eight years, I used to drive from Seattle to Key West and back. And while I was up there, I got contacted by one of the members in our association.

[01:00:23.42] And he asked, he said, we're going to have the 25th anniversary of the Wall. Said, do you want to go? I said, well, I've always thought about it, but I said I don't know. Anyway, that night I thought about it. I called him up the next day, and I said, let me get back to-- he was a Texan, and he was also combat wounded. He had taken an AK-47 round in the hip. Coast Guard guy. And so I just said, yeah. When I get back to Texas, we'll set it up. It was still months in advance.

[01:01:18.10] So he and I drove from South Texas to D.C. We were there for five days, everything. Anyway, we had a hell of a good time. And just-- just a week ago he died.

[01:01:50.93] MARC HENDERSON: Sorry.

[01:01:55.60] STEPHEN PETERSEN: He was set to come to this reunion. After he had come back, he was able to just get around on crutches. But then when he played out on crutches, then he had his wheelchair as a backup. And then he wound up-- they had to take his leg off. And then I guess-- I don't know if it was the diabetes or something else. They wound up taking his other leg off. But he was-- had a specially equipped van and everything. He could still drive.

[01:02:30.46] And anyway, yeah. I talked to him.

[01:02:33.46] MARC HENDERSON: You want to share his name with us?

[01:02:35.26] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Yeah. Frenchie Benois. Cajun. Good guy.

[01:02:49.31] I think it's great to be recognized, so that we have a history of what we did, specifically. It should be documented before we're gone. So it's great that you guys are doing that. We appreciate that.

[01:03:12.26] MARC HENDERSON: And sir, we appreciate you coming in today.

[01:03:15.24] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Yeah.

[01:03:15.80] MARC HENDERSON: Master Chief, thank you very much.

[01:03:17.10] STEPHEN PETERSEN: Yeah.