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Oral History of Dan Peters, Cobra Pilot in Vietnam war

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Student Interviewer's Name: Jennifer Wheeler

Interviewee name: Dan Peters

Time and Location of Interview: The interview was conducted in one session on October 9 and lasted approximately 45 minutes. It was conducted over the phone. The interviewer, interviewer's mother, and interviewee were present.

About Dan Peters:

Dan Peters was born in California in 1948. He attended Glendale Adventist Academy and had two years of college before joining the military.

Interviewer: Jennifer Wheeler (JW)

Interviewee: Dan Peters (DP)

JW: Hi, Dan.

DP: Hi Jennifer.

JW: How are you doing today?

DP: I'm doin' good.

JW: Good.

DP: I'm doin' good. Thank you.

JW: I want to thank you so much for doing this.

DP: You what?

JW: Thank you for, for volunteering to, um, be interviewed.

DP: Well, I'll do my best, honey.

JW: (Chuckles) Just answer freely if you feel like you want to um talk more about a certain subject, or say something I haven't even asked a question to, go right ahead.

DP: Okay.

JW: Ok, all right, just to get started we are going to go by chronologically. So, we're going to start with before you were drafted.

DP: First of all, I wasn't drafted.

JW: Ok.

DP: I volunteered.

JW: Ok.

DP: I was attending Loma Linda University La Sierra campus. And, um, I was going to kept changing my majors. And there was a lot of unrest in the county at that time and I imagine everyone was being affected by it one way or another. Anyway, in 1970, I went down to Glendale, California. And I went into the recruiters' office and they promised me they would get me into flight school in the Army for helicopters and after that, it was up to me to pass that and go on. So the Vietnam War was in full swing at that time, so, um, I just did it. So, in August of 1970 I went down to Los Angeles with my parents, my brother, and everybody went with me. We went down there to the induction center in Los Angeles. I believe it was Wilshire area. And, um, I was stuck then and I got on a bus and ended up in Fort Polk, Louisiana, for my basic training.

JW: Ok... All right... So you went to learn how to fly the helicopters.

DP: Right, well, before flight school, everyone had to go to basic training.

JW: Ok.

DP: No matter what you do. So, Fort Polk, Louisiana, was for basic training. It was quite different from California weather, this was muggy, humid, a lot of mosquitos.

JW: Mhm.

DP: Lots of snobbery down there. A whole different culture there if you will. And, uh, so it was different.

JW: Ok, so was part of the culture, part of the culture of the camps or just the culture of the-

DP: Culture of the country. Um. California has a different lifestyle there than even where you are there in Tennessee. Um. Like when you go down to the deep south that has the culture of long ago that doesn't match with anything else in the country except the language. Even that is fractured.

JW: So how long were you at those camps?

DP: I was at Fort Polk for two months and then Fort Polk I went to Fort Walters, Texas. That was where, um, I learned how to fly basic flight training.

JW: Ok.

DP: And I was there for three months or so. Maybe two months. Then from Fort Walters, Texas, I went to Fort Rucker, Alabama. And that was for advanced flight training and then at graduation time I learned I was second in my class -

JW: Wow.

DP: - in all of flight school so I got to pick what kind of helicopter to specialize in.

JW: Which helicopter was that?

DP: I chose the AH1G. H for hotel and G for gold. And it was a new attack gun ship. And there I went to Fort Hunter. Anyway I went to Savannah, Georgia for training, then from Savannah Georgia to Vietnam.

JW: So lets talk about- Sorry what was the last part?

DP: From Savannah I got some time off then I had to report to Travis Air Force Base in San Francisco, That's where most of the flights departed out of Vietnam, out of California, yeah.

JW: What year was it when you went to Vietnam or when?

DP: 1970 and at that time everybody was young and they were very gung ho, as they said. Everybody in my group was very patriotic. Um. And the reason for our high patriotism was because the country had started to split into a great moral decline. Lack of patriotism. Especially with the lesbian and gay movement started. You had James Bond you had the Kent State Shootings. You had the controversy over Johnson and the involvement in the Kennedy shooting. You had Nixon coming into power and it was during that time that San Francisco had just lit up the west coast with its free love, free drug, it's antidistabishment, hate authority type attitude. And this is, and that grew, the patriotism of the groups grew for a while because we believed, at that time, that we were doing the right thing. Later on we found out differently.

JW: Ok so your group was really patriotic,

DP: I'm sorry?

JW: Your group was really patriotic?

DP: Yeah.

JW: And what was the first thing you guys did in Vietnam when you landed.

DP: Ok, They had a process in Vietnam where noobies, or people new into the country, um they had through in country orientation and training. You couldn't just go get your assignments and go there. There was, uh, what was called fapper tax, f-a-p-p-e-r. Um. At all the military basins. This is where the North Vietnamese, ah, would, would come through the concertina wires, and the barbed wire that stretches out with razor blades built into them.

JW: Hmm.

DP: And they had learned to go through that wire with just to get with specials and bombs and carried them into the bases and just wreak havoc. And just, basically, like the terrorist attack. And they would do that in the American bases. You couldn't just go there, you had to learn what was going on before they would send you out to your unit.

JW: Ok. So. What was the biggest difference between Vietnam and what you were expecting?

DP: Um, wow, well, Vietnam is a beautiful place, and I had been there before the war, um, when we were traveling in Asia we stopped in Saigon, um back in the 59, 60. Anyway, so I knew the area was beautiful. I thought there would be much more battle and fighting going on, but you didn't see any of that when you got there. That was all taking place out of sight, in the jungles, in the cities. And, um, so that's was a difference I saw. Another difference I realized was that the American bases were not safe. You had to sleep with a loaded weapon with you for any insurgents' attacks. People would wake up and there would be North Vietnamese soldiers in their huts, what they call that's where they slept, they were basically small Quonset huts and uh, you could fit 4 or 6 pilots in a Quonset hut. And, um, so that was different. And, so you were alert, more than you would be, uh, you know. You had to constantly be aware of your surroundings. Uh, they had maids from the village that the army had hired to come in and clean the barracks and these things for the pilots. And you had to watch them because they, too, could be enemy insurgents. And more than once the girls that were cleaning the huts, the huts where we stayed, more than once they, the guards, would shoot them in the head and dragged them off and so it was quite different. The screening process, you couldn't tell who was who and moral started to drop because we started getting these really ignorant, and I say ignorant, orders from the commanders. We had first thought that the commanders, like General Westmoreland and them, were really great men, but it turned out that they were sending us into harms way and here's an example: We're told in all of our briefings that we were facing in country, which means, in Vietnam, that the enemies strength size were at most maybe 250, 000, when In reality there was close to a million. So we were going out there young, happy, cocky, you know. We had more firepower on one

helicopter than a B-52 bomber in World War Two. We would go out and we would hunt and kill all day 8 hours and we would come back and so we were really cocky about that. We thought we had the advantages, when in fact, were so outnumbered it wasn't believable. So the generals lied to us and as a result it cost tremendous American lives. No one could ever tell us why were in Vietnam. And then, years afterwards, I started piecing things together because it started to take a toll. They started having demonstrations on the States. This was the first conflict in the United States where the population of the United States was absolutely against the soldiers. In fact, when soldiers would come back to the States, they would go directly into the restroom, because you had to fly in your uniform, and they go directly into the restroom and they would throw their uniform in the trash or they would put it in a bag so they wouldn't get beat up going through the airport. Um. It was really horrible. The real enemy was actually the American people as well as the communists. We thought we were fighting communism. But, if you look in your history books there was a monk, 1963, I believe, that a world famous picture was taken of him. And he was sitting crossed legged in the streets of Saigon. And he had poured petrol all over himself and lit himself on fire and burned himself to death and it was a world famous picture. In fact, the person who took the picture got a big award for it, whatever that is. And, anyway, this was in protest. And know this: Following that journey of that monk, several other monks did the same thing, and this started to highlight the unrest inside the South Vietnamese, the governmental regiment, where president Diem D-I-E-M, Where president Diem was the president and we could never figure out why these monks were burned and then that was like in June of that year and then in November he was assassinated. Well, it turns out what the big ruckus was, that caused most of the fighting in Vietnam, was from the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican had tremendous holdings in Vietnam. The highest-ranking bishop in Vietnam was president Diem's brother was a staunch Catholic, but Vietnam was staunch Buddhist. So the Buddhist monks were protesting the take over of their country, of their resources, of their money of their people of their land by the Vatican. That's when the Vietnamese government, your president Diem, made a tour of Europe, and United States. And he also went to the Vatican and the Vatican petitioned the United States to increase their troops and that's why we were there. At that time Henry Kissinger, very famous man in history, no one knows him now though, was the Secretary of State. And following Vietnam on a late night talk show they asked him one time, and I never heard it repeated or saw a replay and I think it was squashed. What was said was, "Mr. Kissinger, why were we in Vietnam? Is it because of the oil as people say?" They thought we were fighting for Texaco or something like that.

JW: Hm.

DP: And in fact the people who were marching against the war had slogans like, "Hell no we won't go we won't fight for Texaco." that was the predominant

understanding that we were there protecting oil interests. Well, you know, Vietnam isn't known for the oil reserves.

JW: Right.

DP: Um I'm sure they have whatever we sell them. And Kissinger said "no its not oil. Do you remember that monk?" He named him. I can't pronounce the guy's name, but he named him. He says, "He was protesting the Vatican taking over of South Vietnamese, South Vietnam. And he said we went into Vietnam, full force, we tripled our troops thee or two times as a result from a direct request from the Vatican, from the Pope.

JW: Wow.

DP: And we shouldn't be surprised because if you look back, A.T. Jones from the 1888 era and he was the one who almost single handedly stopped the United Nations from Senator Blaire or stopped congress that stopped a national Sunday law, because and Ellen White says that Jesus would've come by 1890 if they had accepted the message but he said by 1890 the Roman Catholic church had effectively worked its way in and had taken over it's proper place in every government of the world. And so anyway, well I've kinda gone on a little bit, well, that's why we were there.

JW: That's Ok, I think that really reflects your view of the war and the government, and politics.

DP: Well actually it did change you know, I did change my view. And it changed my view in this way: Right now, as you go to school, and as you go back to your duties and other students you're all being told what to you should believe by the government. And you're already being given the things that the government wants you to see and hear etcetera, etcetera. This is far from being a free country. Right now there's freedom, on the outside, but and what happens when I went to Vietnam, was I found that this group, the military, that people were willing to come and die for this country because of the constitution, because of the history, because of patriotism. They were giving their lives for other people to be free. And because of that, the government uses that and recruited thousands of young men and women and just sent them off. All they needed was a warm body to get killed to tell another person to come in and get killed. Because they were fulfilling their duty to the generals were lying to us. The president were doing all kinds of cockamamie things like Nixon and Johnson was just about as dirty a president as the one we have now. How it changed my view on government and authority , sweetheart was this, it opened my eyes and I saw what was really going on. And, never again. Never again

JW: Never again, wow.

DP: And it's still going. It's still going on.

JW: Yeah.

DP: The last thing in the world you would trust is, if my words that ever meant anything, would be anybody from the government saying anything to you. And that would be the last thing you would want to believe. It's the same as Satan telling you something.

JW: Uh, So that you couldn't see that until you went into the war?

DDP: I couldn't see that until my patriotism and my pride and my country, um, and the constitution and that I was able to take part in this until later by later it was stripped away by the lies, unnecessary deaths. Let me tell you what it was what started getting my eyes to be opened: We would go out, we were at war, ok? We would go out and the gun ship had rockets machine guns. This was a deadly piece of equipment and we knew how to use it well. And it would carry a lot of weapons well we would go out and if we were getting shot at, when I first got there, we would just return fire. And were would be in a firefight. If someone was shooting you and you shot back.

JW: Right.

DP: It was the old western thing, it would be proper, but then, this was, also, I believe, when the seed of political correctness crept into our country and not wanting to offend anybody. We were being shot at and now the new rules come down from the White House, through the Pentagon, through Westmoreland, to us was: before you could shoot back you had to call back to your base, then they had to find out who the Vietnamese person is who is riding on the back of a water buffalo out there plowing his rice fields, hopefully somebody could run and find him and bring him to a radio that you have to crank. Then you have to ask him if its friendly people shooting at you or if it's the enemy shooting at you and once you get his response that it's the enemy, Then you have to call back to the base and find out if its ok for you to shoot. And by that time two or three helicopters have already gone down.

JW: Yeah.

DP: And so this is where the civil or military disobedience came in. Every one of us, when we went out there, would not abide by that. As soon as we took off we had radio problems quote unquote. We couldn't hear anybody. When somebody would shoot, we would take them out.

JW: Hmm.

DP: The other thing was what a pompous place. In order to get money to fund the war, they had to be able to show an expenditure of resources, that means if you spent like 30,000 dollars every September, then Congress would know, now every September you're going to need 30,000 dollars. If you don't spend 30,000 dollars they would give you 20.

JW: Mhm.

DP: So, we would be coming back in from a day of hunting and whatever ammunition we had left on the helicopter in rockets, which was literally thousands and thousands of dollars on each ship, they would have us fly out into the bay. We had to empty into the ocean just so they could say all the ammo was spent up, we need more money.

JW: Wow.

DP: What my attitude would remain constant patriotic the whole time they hadn't brought politics into this, but once they brought politics into this, then that opened my eyes.

JW: Wow, that's stuff I never heard of before. Well, while you were in Vietnam, and doing all these things were you able to write home about the things you were learning?

DP: Yes, I wrote home but I never wrote about those things, and there was some censorship and that's government censorship, you know. They say we have free speech but that's only unless you say something they don't like.

JW: Mhm. (chuckles) Who did you write to?

DP: I wrote to my then wife. And then my mom and my dad.

JW: Would they write back to you?

DP: Yeah, they could, and the mail was pretty frequent wasn't that it didn't take that long. You could even make phone calls at certain times for brief periods of time. It isn't like today, when you see today where you see on the TV where they were able to get video chats. You didn't have that they didn't have no technology like that, at least available to us. Um. They had it. We were just grunts as they called it.

JW: Ok, well, how long were you in Vietnam?

DP: I wasn't there for a full tour and a full tour was a year. I came back early due to a divorce, and at that time it was really messing me up. She had taken

up with one of my instructors in Fort Rucker, Alabama, and they were having a wild sexual time.

JW: So you weren't there for a full year. While you were in Vietnam Were you a part of any major battles?

DP: Um, we, I wouldn't say any major battles but we went in, I mean, they were mainly skirmishes. You had major battles like the battle from the A Shau Valley and I had just got there after that and the people who had seen that it was just north of where I was stationed De Nang which was just below the militarized zone, the no mans zone. And we would fly up to that and sometimes into that we would cover missions up in the A Shau Valley and it just looks like the jungle but the A Shau Valley was kinda like a circle with a huge valley in middle. And, literally, there were probably and there were a million or so back up troops in the A Shau Valley. Uh. When they did that their intelligence was so bad going in there that they lost 11,000 helicopters in the first thirty minutes the sky was just black with helicopters, they came in wave after wave after wave and the A Shau Valley just lit up. It was like they pulled the trees back and there was nothing but artillery and the aircraft guns, surface air, missiles. It was just, it was a death trap and the Intel was so bad. Anyway, the missions that I flew were called hunter killer teams and you would fly with two cobras which would circle 180 degrees out from each other at an altitude like maybe 2000 feet, just out of small arms rang, then you would have a little bird. Which is like a Hughes 500, if you look on the Internet you could see what a Hughes 500 is. And that would be the hunting dog; they would go and sniff around the trees. They would shoot into areas that would look like if you were down that that's where you would hide. And they would just send some blasting rounds into that and we would systematically work the grid on the map one after another and a grid was one click by one click, which was 100 kilometers, or 1 kilometer, 1000 meters. Um, and we would do that for 8 hours a day. And what would happen is as the little bird would fly into the trees there was so many people down there and hidden once in a while there was someone on the ground and would think they were seen, and they would shoot back and the Cobras would roll in and just kill everything in that whole grid. There wouldn't be anything, animals, women, children, dogs, cats. Anything they could eat would be blown up, all the gardens were destroyed the animals they use, anything they could eat was blown up everything was killed. When you left the area there wasn't anything living except the stray bird that you happened to miss. The other thing that we did was what the call BDAs, bomb damage assessment, and the Air Force used the B52 bombers from 5 miles up and they would do what they call an ARC Light and they would drop a string of bombs in triple canopy jungle and you would have a path a half a mile wide and over a mile long of just dirt it wasn't even the resemblance tree of a and our job was to go right behind, and look for footprints because people would survive that and they would run and leave foot prints and we would follow the footprints and we would go and kill them.

JW: Ok, So what was it like when you came back to the United States?

DP: Well, (Chuckles) You couldn't kill anybody anymore, legally. it was quite, I mean, if you have been listening carefully, which I think you have. If you compare that to what's going on in your area today. That would be the difference. And now you hear a lot about PTSD, post-traumatic stress disorder. And it became very big in the Vietnam veterans and the thing is this, is that when I came back to the states, at 10 o clock in the morning I was shooting up a what looked like an empty village. By noon I was on an airliner flying to San Francisco, ok?

JW: Mhmm.

DP: And then I was back home. Now that took, like, 8 hours. How do you decompress from shooting up a village (getting choked up) to landing in San Francisco in 8 hours?

JW: Mhm.

DP: Of course there would be post-traumatic stress disorder.

JW: Yeah.

DP: They were taken off out of the jungles out of Vietnam and dropped in the United States within minute's just hours of their combat. No debriefings no nothing. Um. Where as in world war two the difference was that men were put on ships and it took them three days by the time they get back. And they had time to talk and they had time to relax among people who had been through the same thing, and so they were more acclimated, if you will. They had talked out some of the terror, and the trauma, but we didn't have that. It was every man for themself.

JW: Did you join any of those support groups when you came back where you could talk to people about it?

DP: No, but later on when I was in rehab at um in Loma Linda at um Jerry Pettis Veterans Hospital they they had groups and I participated in some of those groups until I no longer needed it.

JW: Ok, awesome you found an out.

DP: Yeah. And the other thing, Jennifer, I don't know, you're probably done here, but, um. Just to finish up on this when men came back from Sycamore war, then Korean war, they had victory parades they shut down New York City. They had all of these, um, you know, the whole nation was bowing and

scraping to their soldiers. Not that people wanted that, that's just how Americans are. And when we came back, no one talked to us what we been through. They wouldn't ask questions, they weren't interested. In fact, it was safer if you never say a word; everything you've been through, that time, those experiences, those emotions, you had to just freeze them because them you were not allowed to speak about it in the sense that nobody wanted to hear. It just wasn't appropriate, so you just went on. You went along your day and when someone broke and started firing something up it was his fault, you know, it wasn't the fault of the government. They stepped out. So, basically, Vietnam was a religious war. Um, a religious war in the sense that the Vatican was primarily in the politics, and this is where the beast of power comes in. The United States will making an image to the beast, telling people to do that, and the same tactics used in every conflict they ever had will be used to enforce their policies. That's just around the corner, I mean, that's in your age. And I'm sorry for that.

JW: Well, Jesus is coming back soon.

DP: Yeah.

JW: For sure. That's all the questions that I had for you. Did you want to add anything else? Anything, anything that you feel like you like to tell me?

DP: I think that's good enough. I think that if I was to revisit that release of information form I would have put that the information could be released for 30 minutes because in reality, honey, nobody wants to hear about this.

JW: Hm. That's so sad-

DP: It is sad and 53,000 American lives were lost. Over 60 hundred Americans still mission in action. That means they are presumed dead but were never able to verify that they were dead, so they don't know where they are. Families torn apart in the States, husbands gone, fathers gone. Um. Families were just decimated. For what? So that the church could have its property.

JW: Wow.

DP: And you know what, I'm gonna tell you something, honey, If I could tell you anything, I'd tell you: become very angry about that, don't just put it aside and just say wow.

JW: Absolutely.

DP: I mean, become angry, because that's what we are facing. And um, it's that's the way it is. It's and it's never changed. It's gotten worse actually.

JW: I don't think it's going to get better.

DP: I'm sorry?

JW: I don't think it's going to get better.

DP: No, no it can't It can't or else the Bible would be wrong

JW: Hm.

DP: Well, honey, you go on and put all your energy into your studies, and you make your own decisions and lay it out before the Lord. Let him guide you.

JW: Amen.

DP: You know, take your counsel from your heavenly Father, and not any human being.

JW: Amen, Thank you.

DP: Right? Even family. Ok? All right. I don't have anything else.

JW: ok. Thank you so much for doing this.

DP: You're welcome talk to you later. Let me know what kind of grade you get.

JW: Sure will.

DP: I hope to hear something positive come out of this.

JW: (Laughs) I hope so. Bye Dan.

DP: Bye.