

Australians at War Film Archive

Patricia Thompson (Little Pattie) - Transcript of interview

Date of interview: 23rd May 2000

<http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/2582>

Tape 1

NB. This transcript is of an interview filmed for the television series, Australians at War in 1999-2000. It was incorporated into the Archive in 2008.

00:04 **Okay so talk about the era, talk about the time ...**

I was having, I guess, the

00:19 best time of my life when the Vietnam War began, or certainly when my family's interest was in the Vietnam War. In '66 I'd turned seventeen, in the March, and things were going really well career wise for me, I was having a terrific time. I thought that maybe I would be round for about a month, in 1963 and there I was, '66, still going strong. So I wasn't all that different though in my

00:49 feelings than, I guess half of Australia, it was a divided Australia. My family was on the side of Australia not being involved in Vietnam. So therefore my brother and I, we did eventually think for ourselves, but for quite a while we thought just how Mum and Dad did. But when we thought for ourselves we agreed that we shouldn't have been there. It was a big shock when I was invited to go to Vietnam. A shock to my family, because

01:19 only months before my Mum and Dad had, you know, breathed a huge sigh of relief, because my brother didn't get called up, he was nineteen and might have got called up. And then the phone rang just a few months later and it was a man from the government saying, "You can trust us." No, he said, "We'll look after your daughter if you allow her to go to Vietnam to entertain the troops."

01:49 And I can't remember her immediate reaction, but certainly that night at the table there was my Dad saying, "Oh she shouldn't go, we don't want to know about this war." And Mum could tell that I wanted to go because I wanted to be anywhere but home. I was seventeen, I wanted to travel, even more than the travelling - I'd certainly done lots of travelling within Australia, but not overseas, and I wanted to go away.

02:19 The seriousness of the question and what I might have been involved in was brought home to me by my father, who gave me, you know, his version of the history of the Vietnam War and all its wars. And I started thinking maybe I shouldn't be there either, but quite a large part of me still wanted to go. Eventually I convinced Dad that

02:49 it would be good for me to go because they were just like us, a lot of the people over there, they didn't want to be there either. So I was able to let him know - I don't know if it was too noble on my part, but - seriously noble on my part - but it was, what I was saying to Dad that I could be there to at least make some people happy who were

03:19 a long way from home. Very simplistic.

If you could give me another rendition about the request for you to go ... the turmoil ... that a seventeen year old that was still ...

03:49 **.... doing particularly well, I mean, you had your mind on other things, but you were still affected by it. So tell me about the phone call.**

Mum said, "Oh I've just had a really unusual phone call." And she was - not shaking, but she was a bit troubled by it. And I said, "Who was it?" And she said, "Oh, he seemed a really nice man." And for years I've been laughing at this, that when she said, "He's a

04:19 nice man, he must be, he's from the government." So for years that's been a funny thing in our family. But seriously, he was asking me to go to Vietnam, along with Col Joye [entertainer], to entertain the troops within a few months - within weeks actually, and a reply was needed fairly quickly. And of course, knowing how my family felt about Australia's involvement in the war,

- 04:49 I didn't let Mum know quite how excited I felt, but I was really excited about going. I didn't know what war really meant, how could you at seventeen? I didn't know what that meant. All I knew was that I could be going overseas, and that was the exciting part to me. But soon after, well for many dinners at our table, we discussed at length
- 05:19 the pros and cons of the Vietnam War. We had already done that, but this time it was about my - maybe - involvement. Eventually I - to be quite honest, I guess you could say that I twisted my father round my little finger when I said, that, "If I went to Vietnam, Dad, I would be entertaining many people, who just like us,
- 05:49 didn't really want to be there. And wouldn't that be a noble thing to do?" Which was, I think won him around in the end. And of course, even though I really did feel like that, I think the sincere wish on my part was just to go overseas. War - I didn't know about war.
- 06:19 **Set it up - I'm focusing as we see it on that battle, so we're particularly interested in you arriving, you can tell, you can express your feelings about how you felt**
- Our day in Long Tan began as every other day in Vietnam,
- 06:49 lots of briefing, lots of food, lots of waiting ... Our day in Nui Dat began as any other day in Vietnam, lots of briefing beforehand, lots of waiting around to get to places, to get to
- 07:19 the chopper that brought us into Nui Dat. And although I suppose it was a bit different in as much three shows were required in a fairly short space of time and we were told that there would probably be a curfew at the end of the day, like there normally was, but that wasn't a huge consideration then. When we got there I realised it was a huge base, you know. It was really quite
- 07:49 exciting and it was exciting because probably for the first time we'd have very big audiences, three times, and you know, as performers, the more people that are enjoying the performance obviously the better. We'd experienced before that quite a few Australian audiences in Vietnam, and they were just the best, they were terrific. So this was a good day, and it
- 08:19 promised to be a great day for us and for the fellas there as well. We had lunch after our first show, and pretty soon after that we did a second show. During the second show I could sense that things were different, things were changing. I could see that officers were sort of being whisked
- 08:49 away from the area. As you can understand, the atmosphere, when there are concerts on, is very relaxed, laid back, it's hard to believe you're in the middle of a country where there's a war taking place. It's really terrific. And suddenly things were changing, quite suddenly actually, during that second show and I could hear more artillery in the background, and in an increasing way.
- 09:19 The second show finished, and there was a gap, and between that and the third show, when people came to the third show, who had been out on patrol. And it was a rotating situation. So the third show began, and as it was beginning, the Joye Boys, the name of the band, were playing, and the officer in charge of
- 09:49 us said, "You've got to finish" - I can't remember the exact time - but, "Cut the show short, cut the show short. We're getting out earlier!" And it was a troubled voice that told me that. And I thought no, this isn't right. Something's going on that's bigger than we know. But the show went on, and the audience was terrific. Once again, people were whisked away from the audience, and once again, lots, even more noise now, from artillery.
- 10:19 For many years, Vietnam veterans who were there have told me that at one stage, I jumped, you know, so many feet off the ground. I'm sure that's exaggerated, but if I did would have known that the show must go on, so I kept singing, but I think the fear on my face obviously showed to some people. We did cut the
- 10:49 show short, we were told in very clear terms get off, get off, get off - we did and two helicopters were waiting for us to take us back to Vung Tau. And when we got on the plane, all sorts of things happened at once. Sirens were blaring really loudly, there was lots of artillery in the background and it started to pour rain
- 11:19 at the same time. So it was a cacophony of noise for me and I knew that things were dangerous, really bad by that stage. And the speed that we were being evacuated really, really quickly - and off we went. And I looked back, as we went over the mountains, and I looked down and I could see lots of orange and red fire, and
- 11:49 lots and lots of it, I knew that that was a big battle happening. And for the very first time then the penny dropped to me that you know, Australians are in the middle of a war, this is fair dinkum, this isn't just doing concerts and having a good time. This is really war - I could see it. And then we continued on to Vung Tau, and that
- 12:19 night was awful. I was on my own by this stage, because being the only female, the boys were in separate quarters a long way from me in Vung Tau. And I was staying with the doctors and nurses, American doctors and nurses actually. But I didn't see any of them I was really on my own. So I suppose

I was trying to be brave, but I didn't know where, what was going on. I just

- 12:49 knew that things were bad and I could tell by the guard, the American guard, who was receiving all sorts of information, that you know, several Australians had been killed, were being killed, right then. And it's awful, I don't think you ever get over that. Gee, I was only there for a little while and I haven't gotten over that. I don't know how any Vietnam veteran
- 13:19 could get over that, real soldiers I mean, not me, you know. So the next day, the information came through that indeed eighteen Australians had been killed and I can't remember if I was given that exact number, but I knew it was bad. But our job that
- 13:49 next morning was to go and visit the injured at the hospital, the 36th Evac. Hospital in Vung Tau, and it was pretty hard going, you know. I think performers are pretty used to putting on a smile and putting on a brave front but I thought that was pretty hard. And I remember standing outside - Col had his guitar and we were ready to go into a particular entrance of the hospital and
- 14:19 we were saying to each other, "How do you feel. I'm all right, how are you?" And I said, "Oh yeah, I'm all right." But we weren't. We were feeling pretty teary and sad and propping each other up. Eventually the door opened and we went inside and of course we didn't cry, but much later I did. And just seeing the many wounded and the young faces, you know. They all looked like my brother.
- 14:49 They all looked so young, they were nineteen some of them and they were just baby faced, brave, terrific Australians. Really something that day, for me. I suppose if there's a turning point - we all have turning points in our lives, you realise later on, where you grew up and I grew up that day. I really did. Big time.
- 15:19 Arriving back in Australia was really ... enlightening for me, because I mean I was the enlightened one I suppose, but I came
- 15:49 back with a whole set of principles and philosophies all, you know big seventeen year old girl speaking - but I came back with some pretty firm views about things. And I was not mixed up, but I had mixed emotions. I was very proud of the Australian
- 16:19 troops, I was very proud our people over there and I could feel for them as much as one could. And I understood their plight as much as I could. But I still disagreed profoundly with the involvement of Australians in Vietnam. So as one who'd been in amongst it all, and then coming home, I didn't suddenly think,
- 16:49 oh yes, we should be involved in Vietnam, even though that line was given to us quite a few times by Americans when we were there. In particular by Americans who said you know, thank you so much for helping us and I sort of didn't go along with that. That didn't fool me for one minute. So when I came back I protested too but I also
- 17:19 felt proud and spoke of the fellas there. So pretty mixed up, huh. I think Australia, as I said, Australia was really a divided country, it was, it caused arguments in families, in the suburbs, in all sorts of situations. I came from a working class suburb, so people were very passionate
- 17:49 one way or the other. Mostly on the side of not being involved and they weren't shy about letting everybody know how they felt. So yeah, it was passionate times.

Talk about the rise of the movement as you saw it go right through to

The - you could feel the movement, the protest movement growing.

- 18:19 It must have been awful to have been a politician then, to have been faced with that, what do we do? But the feeling was pretty strong in most communities and growing, bigger and bigger. I can remember that up to the seventies I still had my mixed feelings and I was one of many people who marched.
- 18:49 But I felt really good about that, and I still feel very good about marching. I - there's one side of it that is unforgivable of course, and totally inexcusable and that's the treatment that some of our veterans received when they got home. That would not have been the way that I'm sure every protestor I knew thought that was a dreadful thing to do. So that was
- 19:19 a minority of people who protested, felt violent towards Vietnam veterans and as I said, it's unforgivable, that's a dreadful, dreadful thing that happened. If I speak to people today who protested, they feel similarly to the way I feel. And that's that we're very proud of them, we think it's terrible that for
- 19:49 many veterans the years haven't been kind and for many veterans they're still being treated inappropriately, badly. I don't know what else to say.

INTERVIEW ENDS