Recently a unique donation was given to the Harlingen Arts and Heritage Museum. Joan Reiff of Rio Hondo presented the museum a painting with a WWII theme. The canvas, 35" long and 19" wide, has a representation of a hospital ship offshore to military action being taken in the background.

It turns out that the painting was given to her some years back by a Rio Hondo neighbor, Alberta Patty Nielsen. Mrs. Nielsen's husband, Alfred P. Nielsen, was either the ship's captain or that of a sister hospital ship, the *Larkspur*, when the painting was conceived. Upon retirement from his merchant marine service, the Nielsens had lived in Pass Christian, Mississippi but moved to Rio Hondo in the mid-1960s as it was less hurricane-prone than that gulf town. Nielsen was born 12/14/1897 and died at Rio Hondo July 1969.

Ms. Reiff relates that while Alfred was captaining a hospital ship, Alberta was serving on it as an army nurse with the rank of lieutenant. Although the rules were strictly against fraternization between the sexes, the wheels of true love couldn't be stopped. After all who was there to discipline the commanding officer? They subsequently were secretly wed.

A close inspection reveals the name of the ship on its bow. It reads the *U.S. Army Hospital Ship Chateau Thierry*. The painting is signed by its artist in the lower right corner. It is signed "T. H. Butler France 8/16/44". Ms. Rieff was told by the Nielsens that the paint for the work was not in artist's oils but that scrounged from the ship's paint locker. The vessel's name provided enough information to put together an interesting background story on this artwork.

Completed in Pennsylvania in 1921 to serve as a troop transport in WWI, this $2 million ship of 9,050 tons, 448' length, 58' beam and 28' draft had its keel laid down in January 1919 as the *Skanamania*. It wasn't completed in time to serve in this war however. It then had several lives and designations under both the US Army and the US Navy. The ship's first military name was the USAT *Chateau Thierry*. The AT stood for Army Transport. Its name derives from the site of the first major battle that American forces fought in France in WWI. This was also called the Second Battle of the Marne that resulted in an allied forces victory over the Germans.

When WWII began she was transferred to the Navy and on August 6, 1941 commissioned USS *Chateau Thierry* (AP-31). In 1943 she went back under the Army and became USAHS *Chateau Thierry*. The AHS was Army Hospital Ship. During WWII she had a storied career touching ports in North Ireland, Scotland, Newfoundland, Bermuda and East Africa. In returning from the latter she rescued the crews and Navy gunners of two merchant ships that had been sunk. First embarking to Oran, Morocco she then brought troops to the invasion of Sicily, Italy on July 10, 1943 and fought off German air attacks. Her 13 guns of different calibers saw considerable action.

After sailing to Boston with German prisoners of war from North Africa, she was decommissioned on September 9, 1943 and turned over to the Army as a hospital ship.
She would be one of 12 such ships that served in the invasion of southern France and when the war in Europe was over moved on to the Pacific Theater of War. The Allied invasion of southern France by the 7th Army took place several months after the more famous June 6, 1944 D-Day invasion of the beaches of Normandy, France. The battle operation plan was code-named ANVIL (later DRAGOON). The operation lasted from August 15 to September 1944, when its goals were achieved. The museum's painting likely portrays the Chateau Thierry off the beaches of St. Tropez, 30 miles east of Toulon, on the second day of the landing. The artist surely took some poetic license in portraying the ship with obvious explosions and military action in the background. The ensuing battle was nicknamed "the champagne campaign." It was a rousing success. Some 31,000 Germans were taken prisoner along the coast, 12,000 more surrendering on the drive to Lyon, and 20,000 cut off in the drive to Dijon. German combat casualties were put at 7,000 killed and three times that wounded. All told the Germans may have lost half their force of 250,000 in the region. American casualties ran to 4,500 with slightly over 2,000 killed, captured or missing. French losses ran slightly higher. The achievements of this campaign have been underestimated as it eliminated German threats to the southern flanks of the Allied forces in northern France. This grand old lady received one battle star for her services in WWII. She was scrapped in June 1957 in Portland, Oregon. She will now be remembered in Harlingen, Texas.