

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with
JOHN L. BACH
United States Coast Guard Seaman in WWII
1994

OH

OH
40

Bach, John L., (1920-2003). Oral history interview, 1994.

User Copy: 2 sound cassettes (c.a. 84 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (c.a. 84 min), analog, 1 7/8 ips. mono.

Abstract

Bach, a Madison, Wis. native, discusses his service in the United States Coast Guard as a sonarman during World War II. As a sonarman Bach relates information about sonar technology as well as imparts information relating to military life. He recounts training at Curtis Bay (Maryland) and sonar school (Key West, Florida) including the development of new training courses, creation of insignia, shipboard equipment shortages, and other difficulties incurred while expanding the military. Serving aboard the Thetis, a patrol boat that escorted convoys along the East Coast, he relates his shipboard role, coastal encounters with German submarines, and the basic nature of the sonar technology. Bach offers a unique perspective on the World War II home-front, since his home port was the Brooklyn Naval Yard, he discusses rationing and treatment of servicemen. Transferred to the Navy 107 base in Argentia (Newfoundland) he comments on convoy escort, race relations within the Navy and Coast Guard, USO shows, alcohol consumption on the base, and depression among servicemen. Bach mentions behavior at exotic ports and gays in the military. Bach also discusses his discharge process, return to Madison, Wis. and civilian life, membership in the American Legion, and differences between World War I and II veterans.

Biographical Sketch

Bach (b. August 20, 1920), entered the United States Coast Guard April 7, 1942 and was discharged from service January 14, 1946. He served as a Sonarman First Class and returned to Madison, Wis. after service.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1997.

Transcription edited by David S. DeHorse and Abigail Miller, 2001-2002.

Interview Transcript

Mark: Today's date is December 20, 1994. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum, doing an oral history interview with Mr. John L. Bach, a veteran of World War II, United States Coast Guard. Good morning. How are you doing?

Bach: Fine. Thank you.

Mark: Perhaps you could tell me a little bit about where you were born and where you were raised and your upbringing.

Bach: I was born right here in Madison, Wisconsin and up until the time I went into the Coast Guard, I had hardly left the State of Wisconsin. I went to high school in Madison, West High School and graduated from there. I didn't go to the University and I was working, my parents had a grocery store and I was working in the grocery store at the time of World War II. Pearl Harbor was in December and the following April, two other fellows and myself enlisted.

Mark: Where was this grocery store?

Bach: Monroe St., Bach's Grocery on Monroe Street.

Mark: Is it still there? I used to live on Monroe St. Just out of curiosity where is it on Monroe St?

Bach: The 2600 blocks. Ken Copps is about 1400 so its farther west.

Mark: Is the building still there?

Bach: Yes. Butler Plumbing has the building now.

Mark: This was during the Depression. You must have graduated High School during the Depression.

Bach: 1939. The Depression was just getting over.

Mark: Were you and your family effected severely by this?

Bach: By the Depression? No. We didn't have any money but nobody had any money and we had a grocery store so we always ate. My father made enough money to pay our bills and the Depression to me was just part of a happy childhood, I guess. It was no big strain at all.

Mark: Before this, did you pay much attention to the news? The Nazi's in Europe and all.

Bach: No. That German business I sort of followed that because my family was German. German origin and German background, so we sort of followed that European thing, but Japan was--

Mark: How far back do your German ancestors go? Does anyone speak German in the family?

Bach: Oh, yes. My grandmother spoke German. She died in '33 but she spoke all German and my father spoke it, but he wouldn't speak it, he spoke English.

Mark: During World War I, some Germans in this country had a bit of trouble.

Bach: Oh, yes. Right here in Madison, the German American Bank, had to change their name to American Exchange because people were so down on the Germans and my father came--my mother was Norwegian. My father came from Sauk City and out there they talked German in high school up until 1923 I think it was. So that was really a German community. There was very strong feelings about going to war against Germany. In World War I. In World War II it wasn't as bad.

Mark: I'm interested in World War II and what perhaps, you and your family did discuss about the Nazi's and that sort of thing. There was some activity but that was a very small minority of people.

Bach: My father was very American. He was pro-American and he said when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, I remember he said "Well, this won't last six months. They'll blow that island out of the ocean." He had great faith in the strength of America. We all did at that time. We had the illusion that we were strong, but it took a little while to get our strength up.

Mark: So, do you recall the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

Bach: Yes, very well. Three of us were down at Lake Wingra and we were walking up and we heard there was a garage on the corner that was open on Sundays and they had the radio on and everybody was standing around listening to the radio that Pearl Harbor had been bombed and it really didn't make a big impression. I knew it was a bad thing, but I didn't really even know what Pearl Harbor was. I wasn't that conscious of geography to know where it was.

Mark: So, I assume you had kind of geography lesson afterwards.

Bach: Oh, yes. From then on, no matter where you went they were talking about the war.

Mark: As a 21-year-old guy this kind of thing effects you very much. I'm interested in the reason that you volunteered in the Reserves and why you chose the Coast Guard.

Bach: I had this friend of mine, Ned Usher, Ned had done a lot of research on this and he said that the best place to go was the Coast Guard because it was smaller, there would be more chance for advancement, more chance to do what you wanted to do and so I listened to him. He and I enlisted another guy, Eugene Lemon and the three of us enlisted together.

Mark: Did you have much trouble getting in?

Bach: Yes. It was very competitive. I had to lose, I think it was 15 pounds. By April I got so I passed the physical exam in Milwaukee.

Mark: I'm interested in the induction process. I spoke to a lot of Army guys, and even a couple of Navy guys, but never the Coast Guard. You get sworn in and you have to go to training somewhere.

Bach: Yeah. Well, I think the swearing in was pretty basic. I mean they always have some dignitary or supposedly a dignitary there and you were sworn in as a group, took the Pledge of Allegiance and all that sort of thing.

Mark: In Milwaukee?

Bach: No, this was in Chicago. I enlisted in Milwaukee and then we went back to Milwaukee and we went down as a group. I couldn't tell you how many, but at least 50 of us in that induction group and we were sworn in Chicago and then to Curtis Bay, Maryland and that was the boot camp.

Mark: What's Coast Guard boot camp like?

Bach: It's just exactly like the Navy boot camp, except in our case everything was brand new. I don't think it had been there before, the boot camp. The buildings were brand new and everything and we did all the usual military drills and that sort of thing and then we worked about four hours a day clearing drill fields and stuff like that. Actual physical labor and then there was a Navy yard--we were right near Baltimore and there was a big Navy yard. One detail for a week in our four hours we unloaded 55 gallons empty oil drums that I think were making depth charges, but that was just in my head--they might have been just for fuel. That's the sort of thing we did. We helped the Navy. Two-thirds of the day was training and one-third of the day as actual physical labor, getting the boot camp in better shape or working the ship yards.

Mark: What sort of training did you do?

Bach: It was mostly learning your left foot from your right foot and that sort of thing. Getting to be competent to drill as a unit, etc. Then we had rifle drill and lifeboat drills and some things that were nautical, but most of it was just basic military stuff.

Mark: This lasted how long?

Bach: I think we were there 45 days, I believe it was.

Mark: Then you got into Sonar School? How did that come about?

Bach: I went to Florida. I went to 'Peanut' Island and over to receiving station in West Palm Beach, which was a converted Yacht Club and there I applied for Sonar School in Key West, Florida. I met another young man from Texas, Jack Lumphfer and he was going and we were good friends so I applied for it too. We went to Sonar School in Key West, Florida. We had to wait until they had an opening. It was pretty crowded then.

Mark: At the time I'm sure this was the cutting edge of technology.

Bach: That's right. When we went to school down there, half of the ships didn't have anti-submarine devices aboard them and a lot of the ones that had them nobody knew how to operate them. They told you that when you went in Sonar School. When you come out of Sonar School you're going to go right aboard a ship and you had better know what to do because nobody on the ship would know how to operate it.

Mark: Is that, in fact, what happened?

Bach: That is, in fact, what happened. When I went to school, I was not a good student in school and when I finally got into this thing, there was a class of 40 and Jack Lumphfer was number 39 and I was number 37 in the class. I never studied so hard in my life. I kept a notebook, I was so worried about going someplace and being in charge of something that I couldn't handle that, I really--and that Sonar School was very intense--we got up at 5:00 in the morning, we had calisthenics, we went to breakfast and then we went to school all day and they had ships and we worked with actual live submarines that went out in the Caribbean or whatever it was, off Key West, and we worked with ships so you really knew how to operate this stuff by the time you left there. At that time, if you said you didn't understand rating badges, the Navy did not have a rating badge for sonar because it was so new and they took radiomen's, above deck, the radiomen's rate was always worn on the right arm. So they said we should wear it on our left arm and that would be a sonar badge, until they got one. Well, you'd be out somewhere and say, "Hey! Didn't you even know what arm to sew it on?" It led to a lot of conversation, but

they finally got the rating badge with a pair of earphones and an arrow through it and that was the sonar badge. At first they didn't even have a badge.

Mark: This brings up the subject of relationships between the Navy and the Coast Guard. Sometimes there's rivalry between services.

Bach: Oh yeah. There is strong rivalry between the Navy and the Coast Guard. They referred to us as Shallow Water Sailors and we used to say that any damn fool can sail in deep water. But anyway there was a real strong rivalry, but in school, nobody knew who anybody was or where you were from or anything else. We just all wore the same kind of uniform. I left there I went aboard a coast guard ship, the USCG Thetis. It was a 175 foot patrol and we were doing convoy duty. That's what we were originally doing.

Mark: So that was your first real duty station. You were based in New York City.

Bach: Right, that was our home port. Either we'd pull into the Brooklyn Navy Yard or into Tomkinsville, Staten Island, wherever there was room to get in, we'd go into one of those places for repairs or whatever we had done before we went out the next time.

Mark: This brings up a number of different interesting topics. I suppose we can start with what your duties were on the ship and the duties of your ship was doing convoys.

Bach: I was a sonar man and when I came out of school I became a Third Class Petty Officer and the billet called for a third class but I was the First Class Petty Officer but I was only a Third Class. When you left port everybody, radar, sonar, everybody stood a four and eight. If you start at 4:00 in the afternoon, you went till 8:00 at night then you got to be there at 4:00 in the morning and you went through--that was your station for the whole trip. The gunnery crews, everybody did the same thing and so we were four on and eight off seven days a week right straight through. This sonar business was--there's a thing called the stack and that contained all the equipment and the chemical recorder next to that. As an operator your job was to transmit "*ping*", train and then listen. If you got an echo back then you'd made contact with something and then you would try and track that. Then you'd alert the bridge that you'd contacted, turn on the chemical recorder and that would give you the relative speed and the direction it was going. You could tell if it was coming toward you or going away and the Doppler told you also if it was coming or going, up Doppler was coming toward, down Doppler was going away. It was a pretty routine thing and if I'd known what I knew a little later on, I would have never done it because it got awfully monotonous. I was on almost three years aboard ship and it really got--I mean it's not an exciting thing. Being a lookout gave you something to look at out there, here you just look at the same little thing, you had a little wave going out

there and a catheter ray tube and it was pretty damn boring is what it was (laughs).

Mark: Now you did how many convoys on the Thetis?

Bach: What number it was?

Mark: Yeah.

Bach: I couldn't tell you that. We would leave New York and go down as far as Key West, Florida and then we would go over toward Galveston, Texas and then we'd come back and we'd rendezvous at these various places with convoys and then we'd go down toward Trinidad and down that way and then we'd bring ships back up and then we'd pull into Norfolk and drop ships off. We'd be out for--we were restricted because we didn't have a--we couldn't make fresh water. We had to carry all our water--so you get a pint of water a day to wash and whatever you wanted to do with it, and we very restricted and so we couldn't make--like on the second ship we could go on longer trips, but this trip we'd make--maybe we'd be gone a month and we'd come back and we'd stay in, if nothing was wrong we'd just turn around and go out again. We'd get two liberties on each side and we'd go out and go again with the convoy.

Mark: So on the Thetis then you were mostly along the North American coast.

Bach: Right.

Mark: Did you come across any subs or wolf packs or anything like that.

Bach: The Thetis is officially credited for one sub. In the Naval record we got credit for one sub. We made a lot of contacts, we fired a lot of depth charges - there'd be a lot of dead fish after the thing - you never really knew - sometimes it would be oil and debris, but it was hard to really get a confirmation unless somebody popped up to the surface. When you go down off Cape Hatteras there is a thing called Baltimore Canyon and its a shelf that drops off very abruptly and when you send out a sonar beam, sonar will not bend it just goes straight out so the submarines could lay down in that canyon, now this is 1942 and 1943, when they were really hitting our shipping heavy--they'd lay down in there and we would go by them and screen over them and then they'd come up and the convoy would go as fast as the slowest ship so if the slowest ship was going 5 knots, the convoy went 5 knots. Well, these submarines would come up, half the convoy had passed, they'd come up behind the thing and maybe there would be three of them they called them wolf packs. They could just raise havoc 'cause there was nothing that we could do. When you have a lot of disturbance like a convoy, you can't ever hear anything in the convoy 'cause it's too much disturbance, you have to have everything fanning out from the convoy because the disturbance in there you couldn't distinguish one echo from another and you wouldn't know what you are

doing. They did a lot of damage by coming up behind and getting into the middle of the convoy.

Mark: This happened frequently?

Bach: No, in '42 it was terrible and '43 was still bad but not as bad.

Mark: Why was that?

Bach: Well, apparently, they didn't have the resources to send the damn subs over here. If you read any of those books, when you're in the service you don't know anything that's going on, but I've read books on it afterwards. The amount of shipping we lost and the number of people we lost was absolutely terrible and right off our shoes. When I was at a receiving station in Florida you could see those ships burning out there at night, big glows in the sky where there were ships burning.

Mark: So there's this incredibly boring period followed by, I suppose, exhilaration. I wonder if you could describe the process of what happened. You're sitting there staring at the screen and something pops up.

Bach: You get a contact and there a catheter ray tube up there and you could see the line going up and then you get a bright blip where it makes the contact and then at the same time you also get the return--the echo of the transmission comes back--so you got a contact at bearing 350 so you alert the bridge that you have a contact 350 and they call General Quarters and man the depth charge crews, the gun crews and all that sort of thing and then another sonar man comes down and operates the chemical recorder. Then you *ping* off the thing to get it down. When you don't get an echo that means you're off the target. So you say right contact is 340 and then you *ping* across this way again till you don't get an echo and then you say the left contact is 360 so you know you have a ten degree contact and then you keep following that to see which way it's going and you report it, if it's moving away from you the Doppler is down, if it's moving to the right or the left and the person on the chemical recorder has that turned on and that's a sheet that keeps on moving and the graph paper there and makes a mark and then down here is a thing to adjust and it will give you the relative speed. If you are doing 8 knots and your relative speed is 15 knots, you know he's coming toward you at 7 knots. You're at 8 knots and the relative speed is 4, you know he's going away from you at 12 knots and that's about it and just keep contact with this thing and you set the pattern and on the bridge they set the pattern for the depth charges. You try and estimate the depth and that's really guess work at that time and you know which direction he's going and how fast he's going and you lay a charge in our case, we had four K guns, two on each side and the depth charge that rolled off the back, so we'd lay a pattern of six depth charges and then we'd keep on going and lay another pattern of six different settings on the depth charges. It was really and

truly a guessing game. I wished I could see the sonar equipment today. I was out in California and I wanted to go to the naval yard and see but I never got around to it. I'm sure its much more sophisticated then when we were basic--you knew there was something out there--you didn't know what it was, it might be a school of fish, it might be a submarine--you get some false echoes. The water conditions--where the water drops off abruptly you've got real cold water and then you've got warm water and for some reason, the cold water is coming down--that wall of cold water--that'll give you a mushy echo. Generally, you could tell, even fish are a mushy echo, but sometimes you get real sharp echoes--you really didn't know what it was so it was very much of a guessing game.

Mark: So you guys are credited with one submarine. Where did this happen?

Bach: It was off the coast of Florida before I got on there. In 1942 before I got on.

Mark: So you were on the Thetis for two years?

Bach: Yeah. Pretty close to two years.

Mark: Then what happened after that?

Bach: I went off the Thetis and I was transferred down to New Orleans to board a brand new ship, the USS Alexandria and that was a patrol frigate and that was 325 feet. It was twice as big as the Thetis. They had much later equipment on there. All kinds of equipment--sonar equipment, radar was later and they Loran gear and all this new navigational stuff on there. We took that ship on--we went down to Guantanamo Bay on a shake down cruise and we got out of that and we went back to Norfolk and had some modifications on our radar and then we went out and did convoy duty for a while and then we were stationed to Navy 107 in Argentia, Newfoundland. We ran convoys out of there as far as Norway and then we'd rendezvous and bring the empty ships back down as far as Boston and then we'd go back to Newfoundland and stay there until the war was over--when the war was just about over they put us on a air sea rescue thing and we had a 300 square mile square that we'd cover and keep radio contact--planes are going over we also gave out weather information. That was really boring.

Mark: As I was telling Bill before, it's Christmas time and everyone is on vacation so we have a skeleton crew around here. This convoy duty in the North Atlantic, was that different?

Bach: Well, severe weather, really bad weather, you'd see a lot of icing on our ship and they'd have to go out with steam hoses and we were never in danger of capsizing, but you could if you got a lot of ice on, with heavy seas and the thing was rolling, you could capsize. Not sonar men, we were above that sort of thing, but ordinary

people went out there with steam hoses and axes and got the ice off the superstructure and the railing and stuff like that.

Mark: Was there more or less of a threat from the subs?

Bach: At that time, there was much less. If you had been there in 1942, that was when they were shipping all the stuff to Murmansk and that was the worst. We were talking about seamen before. The seamen were paid tremendous bonuses for going on this Murmansk run because the German submarines were coming out of Germany and they were right there. Their own back yard. So it was much worse, but the time that I was there, '44 it was pretty well over. They just weren't the treat they had once been.

Mark: Were these larger convoys going across the Atlantic? Or about the same size as the ones

Bach: Generally, they would be in excess of 100 ships, that would be a large convoy, but a lot of those convoys we took around down by Trinidad. They were 100-125 foot convoys.

Mark: What sort of things were being transported across the Atlantic?

Bach: I have no idea. I imagine it was mostly military supplies. A lot of oil. There were tankers in the convoy, but the freighters you couldn't tell what they were carrying.

Mark: I'm also interested in your homeports. New York City sounds like an exciting place for a young Coast Guardsman to be stationed. What sort of social activities did you have? Did you have much spare time in between?

Bach: It was. Sometimes we'd be there a couple of weeks. New York, to me, the greatest place in the world to be because there was a lot of servicemen there but they still liked them. They were very friendly toward servicemen. There were a lot of things to do in New York City. I'm not going to put myself in a good light but there was so much to do there you could go to the Stage Door USO and you could get tickets for any play that was playing on Broadway. They'd give you matinee, you wouldn't get evening performances, but if you wanted to see plays you could see any play you wanted to and there were a million other things to do. Rockerfeller Center and when you're young and you haven't seen that sort of thing it was pretty exciting. Then we had one tavern, Riley Brothers Bar and Grill at 53rd and 3rd and that's where the crew all went to first or came back to before you went back at night, you met your friends there. It was a very nice situation.

Mark: You were stationed in the Brooklyn Naval Yard, which if I'm not mistaken is right across the river or bay so you didn't have any trouble getting into town.

Bach: No, no. There was a ferry that goes back and forth. The ferries went to Brooklyn, Staten Island, and all those places. I'm not positive but I think if you were in uniform it was free. I only got taken once in New York and that was when they had a tremendous snow storm and they put out a call that anybody that would work, they'd pay them \$3 an hour. So, I went out and I shoveled snow all night. About ten hours. The guy took our names and our addresses and said that they would mail the checks to us. I never got it. I think the guy that had the crews got all that money.

Mark: So, I get the impression that when you were in New York you didn't spend much time on the base.

Bach: No. In the Brooklyn Naval Yard there were nice lounges, had shows and all that stuff. In Tompkinsville it was strictly piers. I think there was one little canteen there. There was nothing to do if you stayed there, you stayed aboard your ship and read or wrote letters or whatever.

Mark: This is the first time you'd been in New York. But perhaps you still got a handle on some of the rationing that was going on and some of the war time price controls or whatever. I'm wondering if you could comment on this.

Bach: You needed stamps for anything you wanted to buy. Food, a pair of shoes, anything. In the service it didn't matter because you had everything you needed. But when you came home, that's all you heard. We can only get five gallons of gas and I haven't had any red meat for--and they were out of sugar stamps and-- People were bitching about it but not in a viscous way. It was an irritation and they wanted to let you know that it wasn't all roses back here either.

Mark: As a service man, what did you think of that? Did you have any particular--?

Bach: No, my brother and I came home one time, we were both home together and we went down to the--he had to go down and get a special stamp when you are on leave to get gasoline and we both went in and the guy said whatever it was--5 gallons of gas a week or whatever, so he gave us our ration, the number of gallons we were allowed and he said, you know, you're the first two guys who have been in here who haven't bitched. I'm going to give you an extra ration. So he gave us a double ration of gasoline. I don't think it would cost him his job now, but anyway. People did bitch about this and that.

Mark: Especially if they can't get their stuff. Did the rationing effect your lifestyle or anything? I mean if you wanted to get steak could you get steak?

Bach: We didn't buy any food. The food we bought we bought in restaurants. I never thought about it. When I was in New York I used to eat seafood, because I liked it anyway and there was a beautiful little seafood place. My folks had the grocery

store then, they were always having problems with the sugar stamps and the meat stamps and all this sort of thing. No, it didn't effect me personally at all.

Mark: Did you get back to Madison at all during the war?

Bach: Oh, yeah. I was probably back in four years, I was probably back I'd say eight times.

Mark: So then you were based on Newfoundland for a while.

Bach: In Argentia, Newfoundland. I think it was Navy 107. That was a big Naval base, Marine base, and there was a large airport there and these planes would stop there coming back from Europe. It was a very busy place, but we were not allowed off the base in Newfoundland. You couldn't go into the nearest town.

Mark: Why was that?

Bach: I suppose an agreement with the government or something. They didn't want to turn 20,000 sailors loose on Saturday night in their little town. **[End of Tape one side one]**

Mark: This must have been a much different life style than you had been acquainted with in New York City.

Bach: All together different. When we were in Newfoundland, and before we went to Iceland, this was in '43 I think, they came and took all the--we had officers stewards they were called and they were mostly Black or Filipino that did that kind of work and that was their only job. They took care of the officers. They cooked for the officers. They took care of their clothing and this kind of stuff. The officers paid for their own food. But anyway, before we went they took all the officers stewards off our ship and replaced them with White officers stewards, which I had never seen in my time in the service. Well, the reason was we had an agreement with Iceland or Greenland, that we would not bring any colored troops into Iceland.

Mark: This must be something that they requested.

Bach: Oh, yeah. But they had this agreement with the government in exchange for having a base there that we wouldn't have any colored troops. I think back now, I hear civil rights and all this sort of thing, the things that the government was doing at that time. It was 1944 before a Black person could be rated in the Navy. They could be cooks and they could be officers stewards but they couldn't have a rating. That was changed in 1944 when they had the first Black person, he became a signal man or something. There was a lot of prejudice in the service that was sponsored and upheld by the government.

Mark: Much different than the military I was in.

Bach: Well, you were later but the Army was still, at that time, I think they were integrated but those people who were serving in the south they couldn't go in even as servicemen. They wouldn't allow them to eat, they wouldn't allow them to stay in hotels and so on. Just a little aside there.

Mark: Did you have much contact with these Blacks and Filipinos? Was there much contact between them and the Whites?

Bach: Oh, yeah. They were part of the crew as far as the crew was concerned. They used to come down to the Mess Hall and play cards. There were some prejudice among the guys who wouldn't sit at the same table with them, but that wasn't a general thing. We had a lot of guys from Texas on that first ship and a lot of them were very, very prejudice. They thought they wouldn't eat at the same table with them, but they

Mark: This brings up a topic I want to discuss anyway and we'll just go with it and that involves some of the other guys in the Coast Guard. I was wondering if you could comment on where these people came from, that sort of educational background they had, that sort of thing.

Bach: You can't scope it. This one friend I had from Texas, Jack Lumphfer, was a graduate of the University of Texas already. Another friend I had there is Roy Flowers and I still see Roy and he had no education at all. He'd been through 5th or 6th grade in school and that was the end of his education. They were two perfect shipmates. They were just perfect guys. On the first ship we had a lot of people from Texas and we had a lot of people from the Midwest. That was the best crew that I ever served with. You could put money in your locker and not have your locker locked and they wouldn't touch it. The second, the bigger ship, the 325 footer, we had big a consignment from Pennsylvania and the guys all came from a place called Red Lion and they were all weight lifters. Apparently, that's a big thing around that part of the country. The rest of the crew, there was a few from the Midwest and there were some from Connecticut and some from around Maine, but most of them were from New York. That was the worst crew I ever served with.

Mark: Why?

Bach: They were terribly dishonest. They'd steal your clothes, they'd steal your money, and everything else. You had to keep everything locked up. They were very aggressive. You're waiting to get into the bathroom, they'd shove right in. They were aggressive and they were willing to back it up. They were much more aggressive than the people, like from Texas and so on. They were not as easy to get along with. I had some good friends in those guys too, but I had other people

I couldn't stand. Rather than the first ship, the Thetis, they were all good guys. I didn't love everybody, but I got along with them.

Mark: There was chemistry there.

Bach: That's exactly it.

Mark: I'm wondering what you did in your spare time there.

Bach: In Newfoundland?

Mark: Yeah.

Bach: They had a thing called the Blue Jackets Club and it was a monstrous building that was 300 feet long and 100 feet wide and inside were like picnic tables all over. Then there was a cafeteria and you could go down this thing and you could pick up beer and sandwiches and canned shrimp and stuff like canned sardines and stuff like that and that 3.2 beer and that was it. Then they'd have a movie at night and once in a while they'd have a USO show, but it was generally pretty way down the ladder--we didn't get Bob Hope or anything like that. I think Jackie Gleason was there one time when I was there. Anyway, that was it. We were not allowed to leave the base. So that's what you could do. After 8 months, they put a thing in the bulletin board one day that we were going to start sending people to rest camp. Take one trip and go to rest camp. God, that was just--back to Boston, back into the States--my name was on the first list. They said, "don't pack any dress uniforms, just pack your dungarees and your undress uniform." That seemed kind of funny. We got out on the dock and they got us into a truck and they drove us back into the hills of Newfoundland and they had a camp back there with a great big lake and sailboats and canoes and then they had these different cabins, about 8 guys to a cabin and a big mess hall and a lounge. You could go in there at 10:00 in the morning and say, "I would like breakfast" and they'd fix your breakfast for you. You could go in at 2:00 in the afternoon and tell them you'd like your lunch and they'd fix lunch for you. You didn't have any restrictions. You could do whatever you wanted to do but there was nothing to do.

Mark: Sounds pretty remote out there.

Bach: Pretty remote, yeah. We used the sailboats and that was kind of nice. Nice sailboat and a great big lake--much bigger than Mendota and we sailed and basically played cards and stuff like that. But, it wasn't what we thought it was going to be.

Mark: I was going to ask about some of the more stereotypical vices of military life--drinking and--was there a lot of drinking?

Bach: Oh, yeah. Every place you went, drinking was--I look at it today and it was horrible. I look at that today and I think it's horrible. I mean, I was drinking too and turned into an alcoholic I think. I'm a recovering alcoholic now, I haven't had a drink in over 12 years, but I think that's where it started. I shouldn't say "What else you going to do?" but it's an easy thing to do. It doesn't require any effort. Reading a book, that requires effort. Well, this you can do--stand there and talk smart and drink. That's sort of what everybody did.

Mark: Where did the alcohol come from?

Bach: This is kind of interesting because in Newfoundland, there was no alcohol. You could just get that 3.2 beer and you had to drink an awful lot of that stuff to get buzzed up. But on the end of this building was the Marine Corps office and you could go up to the Marine Corps office and for \$10 you can get a bottle of anything you want and they were buying at that time, I'd say \$2 to \$2.50 a bottle for the finest Scotch and they were charging \$10 so I imagine those guys all retired after the free enterprise. Entrepreneurs? What we used to do every now and then we'd buy a bottle and then one time, aboard the Alexandria, we were in the North Atlantic, this guys name was Glanski and he built a little still. He was distilling the denatured alcohol, and making it into alcohol. It was very effective. Another guy there was saving all the peach juice and the cherry juice from those big 35-gallons they made the pies out of. He'd save all the excess juice and he'd throw yeast in there and raisins and stuff and he'd get that fermenting and then he'd put that in with the alcohol from the still and it was very, very powerful stuff. They couldn't make enough to be really effective. Another time we went to, after our shakedown cruise we went to a place called Port of Gunive, Haiti. We had some Loran gear delivered to a station there and we had to pull into this harbor and we didn't stay there any length of time at all, but all these bum boats came out and they were selling bananas, chess boards and all kinds of stuff. You could buy a hand of bananas for \$5 and they'd hand you the hand of bananas and there was a bottle of rum underneath it. Everybody knew it so they were all down there buying bananas and chess boards and stuff. We were going back to Norfolk when we left there and half the crew was drunk. They were coming on duty, they were drunk and one guy passed out. We didn't have a doctor, we had a Pharmacist Mate. The Executive Officer came down with the Pharmacist's Mate and the Pharmacist's Mate was drunk and he said, "I think he's exhausted." That was an exception though. That was not a normal thing. There was very little drinking on the ship when you're out at sea.

Mark: This brings up the issue of alcohol effecting operational capabilities.

Bach: No, I don't think so. Some fellows, when we'd leave port, would be so hung over after they left that they weren't really any good for two days. But, I think basically, the nerve center of the crew or whatever you want to call them, they were always functioning well.

Mark: Two things come to mind here. The first involves the term that some veterans in the South Pacific used and that's "rock happy." If they were stationed at a remote island and there is nothing to do basically, some guys kind of flip out. Are you familiar with that term?

Bach: Yeah. It wasn't "rock happy," but I'm familiar with the conditions and some guys just couldn't take it. They just could not stand what--some guys couldn't stand being out on the ship--it was a very confined area and I know two guys on the Thetis and that was really a small ship--175 feet and I think in peace time they carried a crew of 35 but in war time, we had a crew of 125 men. Man, you are packed in there. There was absolutely no privacy. Four bunks high and that sort of thing. Some people emotionally, just couldn't handle it.

Mark: How did this manifest itself?

Bach: There were different ways. One man from New Hampshire and they couldn't keep him aboard the ship. They brought him back, he had a couple of summary courts and then they brought him back the third time, he missed the ship when we sailed and that's general court martial. They brought him back for a general court martial, you don't have it on the ship, you have it--you take him off the thing and they have it on the dock. They have it away and then they come back and they read his sentence, whatever it's going to be. They have a formal thing on the dock and all this malarkey. So they brought him back to the ship, they took him some place, he was handcuffed to his bunk and all that sort of stuff. They took him to some place in New York and had his trial and then they came back and said they were going to have the hearing or the verdict would be read the next day and everybody would be in full uniform--it was summertime so it was whites and then he would be led down. So, they brought him out and they handcuffed him to the railing right next to the Quartermaster's Desk, where they had the ID cards, liberty,--they hooked him there and everybody is running around and when the officers came up they had swords on and this was a big formal occasion. They got all ready to start the thing and they sent the boat to pick him up and he said, "Where is So and So?" The guy that was standing gangway ward said, "He was right here. Maybe they took him down below." So, he went down below and he couldn't find him down below and he got over to the desk and there was the keys to his handcuffs. He unlocked his handcuffs and he walked right off the damn ship. Walked away. He didn't show up for his own court martial. But the guy just could not stand the military. I never heard what happened to him but I'm--they shot him or something. He just couldn't stand being there. I'd say, from my experience, 99.9% of the guys adjusted. Some homosexuals had quite severe problems. They couldn't--hey weren't practicing, but they just couldn't--they just got totally depressed.

Mark: This is something that people have trouble talking about today. Back then it must have been an even bigger issue to deal with. Did they know?

Bach: Oh, yeah. A couple of them were taken off because they were admitted homosexuals. I don't know what happened to them when they took them off the ship.

Mark: Which ship was this?

Bach: The Alexandria.

Mark: The other topic I thought of while we were talking involves exotic ports. You mentioned going to Haiti and all these kinds of things. You've been around the Caribbean a little bit.

Bach: The problem we had when we pulled into a place, we wouldn't get liberty. When we were in Haiti we didn't have--we were just there--we delivered the stuff. Maybe we were there a night and a day. But, there was no liberty on the ship. When we get into like Key West, FL we were given liberty there and that was a nice place at that time. It wasn't too crowded then. We had liberty in Charleston, SC and that was a nice place. We had liberty in Norfolk and went over once and we never went over again. That was so packed with servicemen. You couldn't hardly get in any place. You had to belong to a club to drink unless you got beer and wine in taverns. If you wanted alcohol you had to belong to a special club. It was a pain. It wasn't worth the trouble of going over. New York was a fantastic place.

Mark: But like Trinidad, you didn't really get off the ship?

Bach: No, we never got off there. We never got off in Bizerte and we never got off there either.

Mark: Where is that?

Bach: I really don't know. South of--in the Mediterranean I think it is. But anyway, we were supposed to rendezvous with people and we waited around and it was like the real temperature was 115 degrees.

Mark: I think it is in North Africa.

Bach: OK. We were so many days with our ready ammunition on the deck and it got to such and such a temperature, that we had to expend all our ready - not the ammunition in the hold but the ammunition we had on the decks. It became so overheated for so many days that we expended it. I remember that place.

Mark: So, you got to travel around the world and not see a damn thing.

Bach: Well, you saw quite a bit. We didn't see an awful lot.

Mark: So, the war ends then in Europe in May of 1945. Do you recall when that happened?

Bach: Very well. I can recall that extremely well because we were out and they broke radio silence for the first time and they were announcing what's going on. Sailor's got two girls, two bottles of Champaign, Times Square, everybody was kissing everybody else and there we sat, out in the middle of the ocean. We were a million miles from everything. But, I can remember very, very well the reaction from the crews and that sort of thing.

Mark: Celebrating and all that?

Bach: Everybody was pretty happy about going home. I'd say 90% of them were very excited about the thought of going home. A few of them had thoughts about after the war, what was it going to be like? But, not many of them. Quite a few guys thought about what they are going to do and some guys had gotten divorced during the war and they didn't have a family to go back to.

Mark: I was going to ask, in anxious terms? Or, hopeful terms? Or, how did they--

Bach: I'd say that most of them was hopeful. They are going to go to school or going to do something. Most of them were not going back to what they were doing before.

Mark: Did you think you were going to end up in the Pacific?

Bach: Oh yeah! When we first went aboard that Alexandria they sent us to Casco Bay, Maine and that was a big antisubmarine warfare training base. They sent us to Casco Bay, Maine and up there they have an extreme thermo-grading condition where the water appears as warm and the water down there is extremely cold and so when you send a transmission out, it's like some guys walking on concrete and some guys walking in mud. You'll eventually get pulled over this way because the guys walking on mud slowed down. Well, that slows the transmission down. It bends the thing and they have maybe 250 yards they can put that thing out there and it almost doesn't do any good at all and so they gave us all these maps on the Yellow Sea and all these things we had to study along with this training and then when we left there they sent us to Newfoundland. We were looking at the Pacific and the Yellow Sea and I forget all the different places we were studying as a sonar group and so we was all ready to go. We thought we were going to the Pacific and we went to Newfoundland instead.

Mark: When VJ Day came around, you were in Newfoundland.

Bach: Yeah, we were in Newfoundland.

Mark: I'm interested in your discharge from the service itself and your return back home to Madison. Where and when did you finally get your free and clear discharge?

Bach: Well, I went to, we were in Boston and I was a 1st Class Petty Officer, they offered me, if I'd extend for six months, I'd become a Chief and my clothing allowance is \$250 and all I had to do was buy one set of blues and a cap. I could wear my other dungarees and so on, but I didn't want to stay, I wanted to get out. Then they came around and said the ship was going down to Alexandria, VA and they were going to have a big ceremony down there and that meant they were going to have it all cleaned up and painted up for the ceremony and they, once again, said that if I go along on this trip and extend for six months, we'll make you Chief and once again I turned it down. When I went to get discharged, they sent me to Detroit to a naval center in Detroit and I got into Detroit on Thursday and we had our physical and then that afternoon I got called into the office and they said that they wanted to do my x-rays again on my lungs and I should wait till the next day. So, the next day I went in and had them x-rayed and they said they found a spot on my lung and we won't be able to do anything until Monday. So, I had Saturday and Sunday in this naval training station in Detroit and there wasn't another soul. Everybody else had been discharged and I was all alone in this monstrous barrack by myself. I did not have a penny. I did not have--my pay records were not there, I couldn't get paid, I went to the ship's service and I wanted to get \$20 and I couldn't get any money there. I went to some relief organization and they said, "Well, as long as you're being discharged, we can't give you any money." So, then I called home to my father to have him telegraph me some money. Well, there was a telephone strike on so I could not get through to my father. So, I spent that whole weekend, I didn't have enough money for a bus ride. I spent that whole weekend thinking that maybe I had TB and maybe I was going to die.

Mark: Was this a fingerprint or something?

Bach: No, it was an x-ray.

Mark: What was the spot?

Bach: Oh, I don't know. Monday I was fine. They cleared me. They never said what it was. That was one of the most miserable weekends of my life. I spent two days there and I couldn't do anything and I just--and it was hanging over my head, maybe I had TB. That was my discharge.

Mark: You came back to Madison then on January 14, 1946.

Bach: Right.

Mark: I got some questions about the post war. This is my own personal research area, so I'm interested in it. [Tape 1, Side 2, ends. Note: the text following in italics, is

NOT on either tape] *The process of how you went about winding out, your eligibility, the steps you took, did you utilize these programs.*

Bach: At that time, there was so much information in the papers about the various programs, anybody missed any of them, it was their own fault or they didn't read the papers. That stuff was in there all the time. I went down, when I wanted to build this house and I went down and talked to John Hobbins at the bank and he explained how I could do it and then got me their lawyer, I can't remember his name, Sooner I think it was, and he showed me how I could get 100% loan by using 15% FHA and 85% GI. It's like anything else. All you have is hindsight, but I should have built a hotel right then. Instead, I build a little two-bedroom home is what I built.

Mark: After the Vietnam war, the problems veterans sometimes had of readjusting to civilian life were in the news media and became known in the popular culture and I'm wondering looking back at your own experience, did you have any problems readjusting to civilian life?

Bach: Not really. I had trouble like sleeping all night, not because of any terror in my mind, but because you just weren't used to it. You're used to being either out running around until 2:00 in the morning or you're on that four and eight shift. I had trouble for a while sleeping, but I didn't have any big emotional problems and I don't think there were as many emotional problems after World War II as there were after Vietnam because I think the kind of warfare was entirely-- the things they used and the kind of warfare was entirely different. I'm surprised that more of people who fought in the Pacific during World War II didn't have tremendous problems and maybe they did and I just don't know, but you didn't hear much about it. I think that was really horrible warfare at that time.

Mark: Some veterans don't think that the civilian population appreciated their sacrifices, or deemed the veteran as a sucker or something like that. During World War II almost all men your age went into the military. How did you feel about those who stayed at home and the civilian

Bach: I never thought about it. I was doing what I was doing. You were doing whatever you're doing. That's your problem. But, I had a friend, a good friend, and he was a good athlete and we played football together and he was a very good basketball player and he tried to get into the service and he had a bad knee and a hernia. He tried everything and he couldn't get in. After the war, I used to feel sorry for him, all the young guys would get together and we'd go out to Club Hollywood or some place and no matter how it started out, it always got back to war stories and this sort of thing, and poor Bob would sit there and he couldn't say anything. He worked in a submarine plant up in Oconomowoc, WI. He couldn't say anything. I really felt sorry for him. Eventually, he just drifted away from all those people. He didn't see them because it was--you think most of the guys my age, three or

four years, some of them five years--the guys that went in 1940--it was like four years in college or four years in high school, whatever, it was a big portion of their life and it's natural that they talk about it. Most of them lied, they'd embellish things.

Mark: Which I'm sure none have ever done to me when I've had the microphone--

Bach: [Laughter.] I wouldn't know how to explain it, but it was a big part of your life. So, you just didn't slam the door and walk away from it. To me, it's still part of my life. I very seldom every talk about it but I think about it once in a while and when I go down to Texas and see this old friend, Roy Flowers, I hadn't seen him in 43 years, and he called me up one day and my wife was going to a conference in San Antonio so I went along and he and I spent a week together and it was marvelous. Now, we talk on the phone every now and then. When he and I are together we still talk about things that happened on the ship.

Mark: I'll come back to that in a sec. I'm interested in the period right after the war, your social circles and the experience of being in the service. Did you mostly associate with other veterans or childhood friends or how did the military experience--

Bach: My social life after the war was with the friends I had before the war who came back. We just sort of moved right into the same thing. It was the Log Cabin, Cuba Club and Saturday night everybody got drunk and all this sort of thing and then I eventually got married in 1947 and it was pretty much the same thing. Most of us were married by then and we'd get together once a week at somebody's house and have a pot luck and drink and talk and it just sort of went on the way it was before. There wasn't a big change. There was some change, but it was sort of the same thing.

Mark: Of the friends you had before the war and then after, how many were in the service and how many weren't. I'm interested in how

Bach: All of them.

Mark: I'm interested in how deeply military experience cut through people of your generation. I mean, virtually all of the people you were friends with before the war all entered the service and--

Bach: My close friends all were in the service.

Mark: I just have one last area I want to cover and it involves--

Bach: I'll tell you one brief thing about when this D-Day, Normandy Beach business was going on. That man from Madison, he went to school here wrote that book, Ambrose, and I was watching one night and they had the Battle of the Bulge

business. A close friend of mine was in the Battle of the Bulge, he got the Silver Star and the Bronze Star and he just about wouldn't ever talk about it, but he went through that whole thing and so I--he lives in Houston, Texas now and so I got on the phone and I called him up. I said, "Paige, what are you doing? Are you watching that show?" He said that he had watched a little of it. I asked him why he didn't watch it all. He said, "That's history." He said he had a rum drink and was laying in the hammock and that he didn't have to watch that kind of stuff. Now I thought that was a funny reaction. He was in it and he was very close to the people he was with. He lived here for a few years afterwards and he used to have guys that came from other parts of the country, they'd get together four or five of them on a weekend and so on. But he said, "No. That's history."

Mark: Do you think he was telling the truth?

Bach: I don't know. Maybe he was just being cynical, I don't know.

Mark: I just have one last area I want to cover and that involves veterans' organizations and reunions. Did you join any groups right after you got out of the service like the Legion or anything?

Bach: I joined the Legion out in Middleton. They had a Legion post. I think I went to two meetings. I absolutely couldn't stand it.

Mark: What was the problem?

Bach: It seemed to me it was a bunch of guys looking for something for nothing. A lot of these guys were, I was certainly no war hero, but I don't think anybody owed me anything. But these guys here, some of them were stationed in Washington, D.C. for four years and here they were pushing this veterans benefits. I thought it was really crappy.

Mark: You thought it was self-serving?

Bach: Yes. It was lousy. That's all those meetings were. Between drinking and trying to get what they were going to get for the veterans, that's all you heard. So, I dropped it.

Mark: This is right after the war?

Bach: Right afterwards. '46.

Mark: One of the other complaints of some of the other World War II guys is they would be associating with their fathers, World War I.

Bach: No, I didn't. The people from World War I were the ones that were really gung-ho veterans. This was a way of life for them. I remember two or three of them--I

couldn't believe they were that militant about getting benefits and getting money and getting pensions and getting a bonus. Oh God, they were going to push for a big bonus and that sort of thing. That didn't seem right to me.

Mark: Did this change over the years? Did you ever join the legion or--

Bach: No.

Mark: You've hinted that you have been to some reunions and that sort of thing. Haven't you?

Bach: I've been in contact on an informal basis. We have never had a reunion. The thing with the Navy, like an Army unit, it's a unit and they stay together, well the Navy you'd be transferred off or people were transferred off, it wasn't-- I've never been involved in any kind of a reunion. I'd like to go to a reunion if we'd have a good one--one of the early ones.

Mark: But every now and then you get a call?

Bach: Oh yeah, I've traced some people that I was--like this Jack Lumphfer. Didn't hear from him for--I never heard from him. My son was going with a girl who was a professor at the University of Texas and she's a law professor, teaching law down there. My son was going down to see her. I said, "When you're there, just ask her if she would look up in the alumni and see if Jack Lumphfer is listed there any place. Well, he came back from Texas and Jack Lumphfer lived in St. Louis and had his phone number, his address and the whole thing so I called him up and talked to him.

Mark: When did these sort of activities start up.

Bach: Late. Later. Now you get more curious about what happened to So and So? What is So and So doing? I got a couple of programs at home and I go through them--I can't even remember what they looked like, some of the guys. Especially that second ship where we had so many men on it. Probably close to 300 and the ones that I was associated with on the bridge, I can remember most of those but I can't remember a lot of the other ones.

Mark: That covers all the topics that I had. Is there anything you'd like to add?

Bach: No. Nothing that I can think of that would be pertinent. I hope this has been of some value.

Mark: It was really interesting. Thank you.

[End of Interview]