

Wisconsin Veterans Museum
Research Center

Transcript of an
Oral History Interview with

VICTOR FALK

Flight Surgeon, U.S. Navy, Pacific Theater, WWII

1994

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Falk, Victor S., (1915-1996). Oral History Interview, 1994.

User Copy: 1 sound cassette (67 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

Master Copy: 1 sound cassette (67 min.), analog, 1 7/8 ips, mono.

ABSTRACT

Falk, a Stoughton, Wis. native, discusses his World War II service as a flight surgeon with the Navy, attached to the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Marines, and his later work with Volunteer Physicians for Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Falk relates information about his training such as his initial assignments, reaction to Pearl Harbor, lack of proper equipment, and necessary training to become a flight surgeon. He discusses his duty at Guadalcanal including his role of as a flight surgeon, psychological state of pilots, interaction with natives, common diseases, and interaction between servicemen and nurses. He provides a sketch of military life discussing alcohol, recreation, drug use, and prostitution. He touches upon his service with the court martial board and use of the GI Bill. Falk describes his service during the Vietnam War as a volunteer civilian surgeon including a comparison of the Vietnam War to World War II, civilian casualties, relationship between officers and enlisted men, and soldier readjustment problems. Falk briefly mentions his reactions during post-war trips to the South Pacific and his membership in the American Legion and VFW.

Biographical Sketch

Falk (September 10, 1915-1996) served as a flight surgeon attached to the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Marine Air Wings during World War II. After the war, he worked as a doctor, and during the Vietnam War served as a volunteer surgeon.

Interviewed by Mark Van Ells.

Transcribed by Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs staff, 1997.

Transcription checked and corrected by David S. DeHorse, 2002.

Interview Transcript

Today's date is October 11, 1994. This is Mark Van Ells, Archivist, Wisconsin Veterans Museum doing an oral history interview with Dr. Victor Falk, a veteran of World War II, U.S. Navy, a doctor attached to the Marine Corps in the South Pacific.

Mark: Perhaps you could tell me where you were born and a little bit about your upbringing, e.g., the Depression was going on at the time.

Falk: I was born in 1915 in Stoughton. I was raised there and stayed in Stoughton until I finished high school. Meantime, my family had moved to Milwaukee. Then I came to the University of Wisconsin for the next seven years.

Mark: For medical school.

Falk: That's right.

Mark: Did you do your undergrad work here, too?

Falk: Yes.

Mark: When did you come to Madison to start school?

Falk: 1932.

Mark: So, that was in the middle of the Depression. Did you have trouble financing your education?

Falk: Well, my father was a physician so it was a great struggle. Nobody had any money, it was great time to be in school. I'd been here less than a year when President Roosevelt declared the bank moratorium and every bank in the country was closed and it was kind of a tight squeeze there for a while. But, everything was inexpensive.

Mark: What was campus life like in the 30's?

Falk: First of all, being during the Depression, a month's room and board and fraternity dues including a formal party was about \$65 with a discount if you paid by the 10th of the month. Everybody was equally broke, tuition was something like \$26 per semester. The enrollment at the University was between 8,000 and 9,000.

Mark: You were in a fraternity? Which one?

Falk: Kappa Sigma. They are still here. During my school years, I was also editor of the Badger, the Wisconsin year book. My first year in medical school, which was

quite a combination of activities. I finished up just the day before the second year started.

Mark: In the 30's there was a lot of sentiment toward neutrality and pacifism and those kinds of things.

Falk: Somebody started something called Veterans of Future Wars. They wanted to collect their bonus before they were started. Then of course there was always the scare of Communism, Thornton Chapel from up in Ashland, WI. He was quite an agitator. He was finding reds under every cabbage leaf, actually. There was no great threat, but they were concerned about Communism at that time and they were sure that the Daily Cardinal was influenced by the local Communist Party. We did have a local chapter of Communists, which was infiltrated by some of the boys of ROTC that were boring from within, so to say.

Mark: Were these kind of things widespread or

Falk: No. Pretty limited.

Mark: And so you got accepted to Medical School. I was going to ask why you went into medicine?

Falk: Party because I had the background. My father was a physician. He didn't urge me at all and I'm sure but I'm sure he was pleased when I finally graduated. But, he would not have pushed me into it at all. I was interested in it for, you know.

Mark: What did you specialize in?

Falk: General surgery.

Mark: When did you get your MD?

Falk: 1939. This goes to your next question, where was I in 1939?

Mark: It does. Do you recall when the German's invaded Poland and World War II started?

Falk: I was interning in St. Paul at the time. The thing I remember about that, my contract, the last line had no dollars per month and I wrote to the Army Headquarters up in St. Paul, inquiring about a commission and it took them months to respond, which I was not impressed with and secondly, included in the papers was a request for immediate active duty, which I didn't want to have right at that--that was a little early. So the following year, I was in Champaign Urbana, IL, registered for the draft and immediately applied for a commission in the Navy. I didn't want to go to an Army camp so I ended up at a Marine camp instead.

Mark: Was it because of the outbreak of World War II that you considered joining the military in the first place? Or, would you have done that had there been no war?

Falk: No. I'm sure I would not have. But, when the draft came along, that was quite a stimulant.

Mark: Even for an MD?

Falk: Yes. Especially. Because all the way along they've had special drafts for MDs.

Mark: So you then entered the service.

Falk: I was commissioned in the Naval Reserve in January 1941. I was notified that I would probably be called to active duty July 1. I got my orders late June and reported to active duty in San Diego on June 30, 1941.

Mark: This was your first real military experience?

Falk: That's right.

Mark: The stories of boot camp are legendary; the Sergeant yells at you, you get your head shaved. It's much different for a doctor. Perhaps you could describe your initial entry into service. Your training and those kinds of things.

Falk: I was initially assigned to a medical company, for a medical battalion with the 2nd Marine Division. At that time, the 2nd Marine Division was forming and a lot of it was on paper except for the medical battalion. Medically, we were loaded. We had about 46 very junior medical officers, so we had the duty one night a month, one weekend a month. There wasn't that much medically, so it was quite a waste of time. Not much training involved. I was then assigned to an artillery battalion, which medically had practically nothing. A lot of 14 mile hikes, conditioning personnel, no medical training involved at all. So after I had been in active duty for just a short time, the exams came along for the regular Navy, so being in the habit of taking exams, as I had for years, I applied for the regular Navy. This was a weeklong procedure of exams; half the people taking the exams did not pass, although we were all on active duty with the Reserves at the time. Either they didn't pass the physical or the medical exam, they were kept on active duty, half of us passed the exam and accepted commissions in the regular Navy, which some of us thought was the thing to do at that time. Perhaps a little sense of security, I had nothing to go back to. Also, it seemed to be what, especially with the Marines, I felt more belonging since I was a regular of what something we called the feather merchants. Those are the reserves. It was a rather derogatory term.

Mark: And so the time of Pearl Harbor then, where were you, in the Navy?

Falk: I was with the Marines with the Artillery Battalion. I remember so well, our commanding officer got us together on December 8 and said, "I don't know the entire story, but my story is that the entire Pacific Fleet has been destroyed. Our mission is to resist invasion along the coast" so for a couple of weeks we sat on trucks between Coronado and San Diego looking out to sea. Things were so uncertain then. Realistically, the Japanese could not have extended themselves that far, but we had no way of knowing that so we sat there waiting for this possible invasion, because at San Diego, I think there was as much confusion there as there was in Pearl Harbor. Not the damage but the confusion was at least equal.

Mark: Confusion about what?

Falk: For instance, they told people to have a tank full of gas and a first aide kit in your car. If there is any signs of anything, go to the other side of the mountain. About a week after Pearl Harbor, there was a gas main explosion near San Diego. People poured out of San Diego, and some of them never came back until after the war was over, which helped the housing situation some! But, we were not equipped. They gave us some machine guns from the aircraft plant in town there because we simply didn't have them. The artillery outfit had 75 millimeter Howitzers left over from World War I, so we weren't, even though we'd been on active duty for a while, we were not what you would call really prepared.

Mark: You were not very well equipped.

Falk: That's right.

Mark: So what happened to you in the Marines as a result of Pearl Harbor. How did things change for you?

Falk: Well, it's kind of a strange thing. We hadn't been doing much medically with our artillery battalion so the first school that came along was Aviation Medicine. On December 1 I applied for that, and my commander said you can sure forget about going flying. You're with us for the duration. January 1st I got my orders for Pensacola and that was the only time I was away from the Marines. I went to school of aviation medicine for four months.

Mark: And, became a Flight Surgeon.

Falk: That's right. And we did learn to fly, we got to solo the primary land planes and seaplanes. The old Yellow Perils. I was not meant to be a great aviator, I'll tell you that. I did get through the course all right and did solo. I haven't soloed since. I have an inborn sense of misdirection. If there are two ways to go, I will

automatically go the wrong way. I still do when I'm driving. Fortunately, my wife is a pretty good navigator.

Mark: I've got that same tendency.

Falk: I could look over and over, not just once. Anyway, after going through this course at Pensacola and the flying, this is the one time in the Navy they had a number of billets available and we could indicate where we wanted to go. The remarkable thing was that there were quite a few of us who had been with the Marines and every one of us asked to go back to the Marines. I was sent back to the 1st Marine Air Wing at San Diego and North Island.

Mark: Now why was that, why did you want to go back to the Marines?

Falk: Actually, I had no experience with the Navy and I had enjoyed my life with the Marines. They had a spirit that was unique.

Mark: In what way?

Falk: They were more Gung ho, and so was I at that point, and the camaraderie.

Marl: I see. A more spirited bunch. Perhaps you could explain the difference between a flight surgeon and a regular medical officer. What makes a flight surgeon different?

Falk: Well, naturally, you're assigned to an aviation unit and having gone through the skills necessary to fly you had a better feeling for what these fellows were going through and when it came time to ground them, or give them physicals or whatever. We were still basically, medical officers as far as medicine and surgery, this was unchanged except we were assigned to a flight outfit and had more to do with the pilots, deciding whether or not they were fit to fly or whether they should be grounded, whatever.

Mark: What sort of criteria did you use to decide whether a pilot was fit to fly? What sort of things could ground a pilot?

Falk: As an example, I grounded a whole squadron--what was left of them after Guadalcanal. This was a unique situation too. We lost half of our pilots in six weeks. The other half had become quite inefficient, not much sleep, practically no food, losing their peers each day. So, I finally went to our Air Group Commander and I explained the situation and he said that he could not ground them, but if I thought it necessary, I could. So, I grounded a whole squadron that day. All the pilots and gunners, then each day I would get two or three of them out with a casualties, fly them out to a safe haven.

Mark: And you grounded them for how long?

Falk: Well, actually they didn't start flying for several months. They went to New Caledonia, they went to Australia and then they were taken back to Samoa and began flying again there. But this was a couple of months at least.

Mark: So, when did you--you mentioned Guadalcanal. I suppose we can start the voyage to the South Pacific. When did you leave the United States to go?

Falk: 1st September 1942.

Mark: And you left from where?

Falk: San Diego.

Mark: And went to?

Falk: I should tell you about the Luralane but which was a nice way to travel, although we had a lanai suite, there were eight of us in there and it was meant for two people, but it had a deck out there and they had eight bunks in there. It still got awfully crowded. Tremendous food, three times a day they had a menu like the size of a tabloid newspaper. But, of the eight in that stateroom within a few weeks, there were only two of us left.

Mark: How come?

Falk: They were all killed or missing. Any way we were on the Luralane as far as Samoa, transferred there to the Monterey, which is the sister, ship of the Luralane, got to New Caledonia where it was expected we would go through a period of training because our pilots were, many of them had only six-eight hours of dive-bombers. They thought they'd have a training period. We got to Noumea the next day and some of them were on the way to Guadalcanal. The squadron was shipped up in increments. I finally went up by an old ship, which was on October 13th, which was the night that is always referred to as "The Night" or "The Night of the Shelling" or "The Night of the Bombing." The Japanese Navy was off shore and they had two battle ships there. They threw 900 14" shells, which landed, in the area we were camped in between the beach and Henderson Field. The three senior officers in my squadron were all killed that night along with one of the flight surgeons was mortally wounded. We lost two other officers also. So, that was the beginning of the bad news. During the time I was at Guadalcanal in a period of six weeks I had eight commanding officers.

Mark: All killed, I suppose.

Falk: Well, after the first three, the fourth one went out on a mission and didn't return. The fifth one, after I had grounded him, he'd been my commanding officer for two days and then I shipped him out. The next one I had for five days and I shipped him out. So on down the line.

Mark: Sounds like a flight surgeon has an awful lot of power in that situation.

Falk: Well, this is an unusual situation.

Mark: Perhaps you could describe your duties, a typical day if there was such a thing. In a combat zone. How could you perform your duties under shell fire and--

Falk: Well, the shellfire wasn't continuous. It just happened the first night I was there. It was the worst night they'd had. I thought, my gosh, no wonder these guys are tired if it's like this every night. It never was like that before and it never was again. We moved out of this coconut grove area into a ravine and the Seabees built me a sick bay down there. Two-thirds of a Quonset hut with about 20 cots in it and there we took care of mostly malaria, diarrhea and that sort of stuff. Anybody wounded, we shipped them out. This is in the early days of air evacuation of casualties, using DC3's, and we'd never know from day to day whether one plane, two planes, whatever would come in and we'd transfer them from the Division Hospital on the planes and back 400 miles out to the Hebrides. But as far as the day-to-day it was looking after sickbay, looking after the pilots, seeing who is coming back and maintaining a logbook. It was the only one they had of who was missing, who was killed and so on.

Mark: A lot of the pilots didn't come back. This is something you've already touched on but with the number of pilots being killed and those sorts of things, I'm interested in the sort of psychological impact that would have on the pilots and others generally.

Falk: Well, it was depressing and this fellow not knowing whether he'd be alive the next day or the next day and some of them, of course, were kind of funny, they'd start grimacing and looking at the flight surgeon indicating they were gone overboard and I should ground them but they were good natured about it.

Mark: How would you characterize the Marine pilot? You have already mentioned the spirit of the Marine Corps.

Falk: Physically, they were top-notch. They were also all college graduates. Some had been schoolteachers, some had been phy. ed. teachers, one thing or another and they'd gone in, of course, before Pearl Harbor, for training. The requirements were extremely rigid at that time so these were top-notch physical and mental young men. Even at this late date, in spite of all they've gone through, some of them say those were the happiest days of their lives. Which is kind of bizarre, but

they've forgotten the bad parts, they remember the happier times and the fellows they were with and so on.

Mark: And so how long were you on Guadalcanal?

Falk: Only about six weeks.

Mark: What happened after that?

Falk: Went back to the Hebrides, New Caledonia. We had a villa in New Caledonia outside of Noumea that they rented, we called it the Aviatorium for flyers coming out of Guadalcanal. They spent a couple of weeks there. They were usually pretty comfortable, they had a supply of beer and French bread and cheese and Spam and they thought they were in heaven. Then they all got to go to Australia for a week, which was the original R&R and then. The squadron I was with, they were sent back to Samoa, most of the squadrons would come back to New Caledonia, recoup there in the Hebrides and go back to Guadalcanal for a second or third tour. My squadron, though, was unique and also the squadron that preceded it. They went back to the States.

Mark: How come?

Falk: Well, they were pretty well decimated too and had done an exceptionally good job and so they were rotated back as instructors. My pilots got back home after a year out and they also became instructors at El Toro, California. We reformed the squadron. That was at Marine Headquarters in New Hebrides. I had an opportunity to go to New Zealand, which would have been plush duty. They had about 20 healthy Marines on it and thought they should have a medical officer with them. I turned it down to go back to Guadalcanal.

Mark: Do you have regrets about that?

Falk: Not at all. For the second time around, by 1943, it was a different world. I was with the squadron, had the same designation as the original, but there was nobody with us that had been at Guadalcanal before. We did have half a dozen pilots who had been at Midway and some Admiral promised them that they were going home. Instead, they were sent to the South Pacific. They were an unhappy lot to deal with for a while. They had all been awarded Navy Crosses and were all on the hero side and they weren't prepared to go right back into combat quite that soon. But we lost none of them.

Mark: So you went back to Guadalcanal? How was that the second time around?

Falk: It was a breeze. By that time, it was kind of a rear area they were still going on bombing runs farther up and farther up north, but we were perfectly safe.

Mark: It sounds to me like you got around the South Pacific a little bit.

Falk: I got to Australia for one week also, between Christmas and New Years 1942. That was quite an experience also.

Mark: Where'd you go, Sydney or--

Falk: Sydney.

Mark: The reason I'm asking is I'm interested to know if you had any sort of contact with some of the native peoples of the South Pacific islands and I'm interested in your impressions of the South Pacific in general, not based on the play or the movie or whatever. I'm interested in a real veterans--

Falk: No, just as a matter of fact, I'm in the process of rereading Mitchner's Tales of the South Pacific. At Guadalcanal there were Melanesian natives. We saw a few of them. They were very helpful, very friendly. If one of our fellows made a water landing some on a remote island they would paddle him back in a canoe or something. So, we just had a little contact with them. Not a great deal. In the New Hebrides, there were Melanesians there, also a lot of Talcanese from Talcan, China. They were brought in as indentured laborers by the French plantation owners and this was something like the South Pacific situation. There was French plantation owners near the fighter strip. Freddy LeBorg. They were built like Ezio Pinza to start with and he had a family back in New Caledonia, but he also had a live-in significant other, a little Talcanese girl named Poo Pet. That's when she became impregnated by this big plantation owner. My college roommate by that time was an Army medical officer in the New Hebrides and he delivered Poo Pet. He was halfway through his OB-GYN training here at the University. So, this Freddy LeBorg would entertain periodically and it was quite an experience to go to his plantation. He had two little black people, Sealone and Sadie were their names, waiting on table and we'd have quite an elaborate dinner, but one evening they served something that they told me was stewed duck. I thought it was pretty good and had a second portion and then later on they told me it was giant bat. These fruit bats, they're not carnivorous, they strictly lived on coconuts. They have a wingspread of about 5-6 feet and hideous furry bodies and a mouth full of teeth, but I would not have eaten bat if I'd known what it was.

Mark: I'm not sure I could either. So, were the islands romantic, intriguing, did you really care, were you scared of the jungle?

Falk: No. We were not in jungle. There was one nice aspect of this near the fighter strip was a place we called the Dorothy Lamour pool. It was a bottomless crystal clear swimming hole. We'd swing out on the vines and drop into it. That was about the extent of the life in the South Pacific. There was no romance involved,

with the exception of the Army Hospital had 25 nurses that were very much in demand.

Mark: Was this in New Caledonia or--?

Falk: This was Espirito Santo, New Hebrides. Those girls could get anything they wanted. They could get Navy blanket, they could get a concrete floor in their tent, money, whatever was--so they were very much in demand.

Mark: I can imagine. So, after the battle of Guadalcanal sort of wound down, where did you go after that?

Falk: Back to Guadalcanal in 1943 and since it was quite tame by comparison, medically there was not much going on, the pilots were relatively content and no injuries, then I went back to New Hebrides after another couple of months up there, and got orders to come back to the States. Came home on a Dutch ship from Espirito Santo. That was kind of unique too. 'Cause the Dutch ship leased by the British, we in turn lease it and the U.S. Navy had a few people on board, a transportation officer and petty officers and so on. So on the way home, I think there were under 60--it was a big ship--60 passengers, maybe 16 officers and being a Dutch ship they didn't have the Navy regulations and the purser had a good supply of refreshments. So, each night, first the Dutch officer had duty, the Navy officer had duty the second night, the third night the petty officer. Then we'd start over again. This went on for 16 days until we got back to San Francisco. I went back to San Diego, then home on leave. This was in October November of 1943. I damn near froze to death back here in Madison. I could hardly wait to get back to California. I was at a place called El Toro, which is near Santa Anna, a big marina which was brand new at that time and I also went to the bomber-training unit and most of the pilots in it were fellows I'd been with. They were used as instructors training new dive bomb pilots for overseas. One fortunate thing the Marine's took over the Laguna Hotel, downtown Laguna Beach for bachelor's officer's quarters, which was very plush living. I suppose our quarters cost them about \$28 a month. Usually my granddaughter's kids for one night, \$150 for the same hotel. After a time at the El Toro they were forming a new air group at Santa Barbara and I went up there as the senior medical officer with this newly made admiral after a few months. Then overseas again to the Ulithi.

Mark: Where is that?

Falk: Well, on the way out we stopped at Pearl Harbor, we stopped at Etiwetok and got to Ulithi which is in the western Carolines. Its about 100 miles from Yap, not too far from Peleliu.

Mark: How far from the Philippines?

Falk: About 700 miles from Samara which was the closest in the Philippines. We were much closer to Guam, which was about 400 miles. So we had the big Air Group there and here we did have more to do with the natives. And these were Micronesians and we moved them all to a remote island, which was quickly off limits to the troops. We were housed on a 250-acre island for a year. There were 5,000 of us. Half the atoll was taken up with the airstrip and revetments. But the important thing was the anchorage. It was called Nimitz' Secret Weapon. There were as many as 1500 U.S. ships there at a time. There would be a row of battle ships, carriers, everything--something we'll never see again.

Mark: What was the main function of this base? Was it a supply depot, a transition--

Falk: Yeah. It was the fleet anchorage and also to neutralize Yap which was 100 miles away.

Mark: Which was Japanese held I take it?

Falk: Yes. There were 6,000 Japanese there. We bypassed it instead of rendering it and kept them fairly neutralized with a daily milk run. They'd go out every day and bomb and they didn't have a supply of any sort for one year. We also had protection from the fleet anchorage. This is where the sea base for the beginning of Iwo Jima and Okinawa. The fleets would change command and then go on the next battle.

Mark: I'm interested in this idea of putting the natives on a different island and keep them separate from Americans. What was the reason for that?

Falk: Well, we had 5,000 Americans there and the natives were either very young or very old. The Japanese had taken away all healthy young people as laborers. We completely disrupted their lives of course, ruined their tarot patches, filled in their wells and tore down all their dwellings and they were just much safer on the remote island. We had a Navy chaplain with us. The natives, incidentally, were 100% Catholic and our chaplain went down there once a week. When he first went he had a great backlog of marriages and baptisms to perform, which he enjoyed and I went down there a couple of times. After a couple of months, the Navy put a medical officer, a Chief Pharmacist down there and they lived there for months and took care of the natives. Most of them had yaws at that point, which is caused by a muscle disorder like syphilis, but it's not a venereal disease. Got that cleaned up, cleaned up the island and they are a very kind gentle people. The King was a polio victim and was transported in a little rubber-tired cart. I went back to Guadalcanal in 1972 and again in 1992. The second time with some of the pilots I'd been with in 1942. January this year I went back to Ulithi and had the most heartwarming welcome. To get there was quite a process. Northwest Airlines, Minneapolis, Honolulu, Guam and then Air Micronesia from Guam to

Yap and then a wait for Pacific Missionary Airlines from Yap to Ulithi. I was the only passenger on this plane. When I flew down there, the whole island was at the airport to greet me. I counted 8 floral offerings around my head and around my neck. "Welcome Home, Dr. Falk." Most of these people hadn't even been born when I was there, but I spent several days there. One interesting thing, I mentioned Ulithi before, they brought a young boy eight years old to our sick bay. He had osteomyelitis, bone infection of the leg, which we operated on. Never saw the kid again. So, when I got there I said, "I wonder what happened to that guy"-- "You'll see him tomorrow." The next day this monstrous fellow came up, big as a house, big scar on his leg, all healed and he got along just fine. It was fun to see him again. Since that time, I've had a lot of communication with the people there at Ulithi. They were grateful for our liberating them, in spite of all the damage we did and all the junk we left behind. But they wanted to have a celebration this year, September, celebrating their liberation and our occupation. So, I wrote a lot of letters on their behalf. I wrote to the Admiral on Guam, the Ambassador Ponepei and the Department of the Interior and they wanted a ship to come down there and also they wanted a Navy band to come out and play for them. Well, lo and behold, this came about last month. If I hadn't been there in January, I would have gone back again, but they were quite excited about all this. Fifty years ago, I told you this anchorage was unbelievable place and now the biggest thing there was a 25 horse power outboard motor that the natives had, otherwise the lagoon was vacant.

Mark: Interesting. During the war this sounds like a pretty remote place. Are you familiar with the term "rock happy"?

Falk: Well, I've heard it. Periodically, somebody would flip. Some would get religion, which was a little unusual. This one officer, he wasn't in combat, he was in New Hebrides, but he had everybody swear a tap on the shoulder. While this is unique among Marines, they a rather colorful vocabulary and another one night I heard this guy screaming "I want to go home. Anybody want to go home?" Completely out of his mind. So they did get rock happy.

Mark: What did you do with someone like that?

Falk: Shipped them out.

Mark: As a doctor? As the medical officer were you the one who actually did--

Falk: Yeah.

Mark: And they would go where?

Falk: Probably end up back in the States. But probably started off in New Caledonia and then probably Hawaii and then home.

Mark: This didn't happen all that often though.

Falk: No. Infrequently.

Mark: As a medical doctor what sort of medical problems did the South Pacific present to you. I think you mentioned--

Falk: Diarrhea and Malaria. Probably 3/4 of my outfit got Malaria.

Mark: Explain how that would come about. Why so many--weren't there immunizations before they sent them overseas?

Falk: No, not for Malaria. Atabrine had not been dreamed up at that point. We had quinine for treating it, which was in rather limited supply. But the problem was that at Guadalcanal, every night there'd be an air raid, which meant out of your cot and into a foxhole and the malaria is transmitted by the female Annapolis mosquito, which was a night flyer. So while you're sitting in a hole in the ground you're pretty vulnerable and that's where they picked it up. There was also Dengue, which is also transmitted by a mosquito, not as serious, but it was also called break-bone fever because it felt like every bone in your body is going to break. It was so thoroughly miserable. But with malaria about every three days you get a severe shaking chill, followed by high fever.

Mark: Do these diseases affect the operational capacity of the--?

Falk: Sure, as far as flying. You couldn't fly with malaria. Because you'd get airborne and get a little chill you'd really have a chill.

Mark: In your own estimation was it a serious problem, semi-serious, not so serious?

Falk: It was extremely serious. Diarrhea we could treat. Kind of a funny story, one of our pilots--with altitude you have to expand, Boyle's Law. This pilot was airborne and he started having gas trouble and also had serious diarrhea so he talked to the radio gunner, the rear seat and said, "You take the control." The rear gunner had a stick and a pedal. He slipped out of his parachute and put his butt over the side of the plane. Well, he let loose with this diarrhea and the canopy was open and the gunner got a face full of liquid stool--the pilot is hanging on by his fingernails with his butt over the side of the plane. Fortunately it leveled off and he was able to get back into his parachute again. But it was quite a hairy experience while it lasted. I'm laughing about it now but I wouldn't want to be the gunner!

Mark: What sort of long term--as a doctor you would know--effects would malaria or dingy fever or break bone fever--

Falk: That was self-limited. Malaria--some people can later on become chilled back in the States and some would have recurrences. Some of them exaggerate everything. If they had any kind of an illness they were sure it was a recurrence of malaria, whether it was upper respiratory or whatever. Mostly the dengue burned out, malaria would retreat with quinine. Later we had Atabrine. The second time in Guadalcanal we insisted they take Atabrine. Of course, there were a lot wild stories. They heard it caused sterility, which was not true but it terrified them. There was a sign in the mess hall that said, "Even your medical officer takes Atabrine." That controlled the malaria pretty well, even though we were back in the same area.

Mark: That was more of a problem on Guadalcanal than Ulithi?

Falk: That's right. On Ulithi we had a lot of flies, which we controlled. We converted an old torpedo bomber into a spray plane. Once a week we'd spray the island at tree top level. 5% DDT and kerosene. It controlled all of the insects and as far as we were concerned there were no ill effects. We breathe d it, ate it and slept in it and got along fine.

Mark: Perhaps you could discuss the difference between your days in Guadalcanal and how it was different--was it the Carolines?

Falk: Yes. Western Carolines.

Mark: How is that different?

Falk: Well, aside from occasional outbreak of diarrhea, there was no malaria. We were involved there in the area of evacuation and when the fleet came back, we'd have a lot of casualties. We'd bring them to shore and fly them to Guam. So we took care of that. Other than that, I had a nice sick bay there. The Seabees put up a bunch of Quonset huts for me. We had eight medical officers, six dental officers, 80-hospital corpsmen. One unique thing though, we consolidated all the medical facilities into one operation, whether it was Army, Navy or Marines or whatever. We took over. Some of them had no medical officers, some had their own hospital corpsmen, but we all joined together and had a unified operation long before the Department of Defense was conceived.

Mark: I see. And so this was a local initiative kind of thing.

Falk: That's right. It was a small island and it was easy to do.

Mark: I was going to ask whether there was inter-service rivalry. You came in contact with Army. Being in the Navy attached to the Marines.

Falk: At Guadalcanal, we inherited quite a few Navy pilots when the carriers were sunk. They could not believe our living conditions. They had clean sheets for the night--excellent food and all of a sudden their thrown into this mud hole, with very limited rations, basically we had sausage Spam and corn beef when we could get it. Dried potato, dried carrots. On one occasion on a reverse lend-lease they got 500 cases of lambs tongue. I couldn't even eat the gravy of this. Just awful. At Ulithi the food was quite a bit better, the first few days of course, canned rations and from then on, passable.

Mark: What did you do for--what did you do in your spare time, if anything?

Falk: Guadalcanal there was no spare time. There was no fun at all. We did go swimming along the river that was to get clean rather than recreational. We were very busy. Back in New Hebrides, daily volleyball games in the coconut league.

Mark: You'd play other units?

Falk: Yeah. Other than that there was no recreation at all. On Ulithi some of the fellows went fishing. The Seabees constructed a couple of barges out of tanks of some sort, with an outboard motor to get rid of our garbage cause we--with 5000 people on 250 acres, between all the coconut debris and all our garbage, we had to get rid of it some way, so we took it out to sea and dumped it, which would be frowned on now. Some of the fellows went along to do a little fishing.

Mark: I had a question, it escaped me. It had something to do with some of your spare time activities.

Falk: Well, there wasn't much spare time. I was able to get around some. I had flight orders and periodically I'd fly to Guam, which was like going to town for the weekend. Much more activity up there. I flew to Peleliu a couple of times, and then when the war ended, the Marines sent 20 of us down to Yap, which had been bypassed. I went along as a medical officer. That was quite an experience too.

Mark: The Japanese were gone?

Falk: Oh no. There were 6000 of them still there. They gave us the tour of the island. We had lunch with a lieutenant colonel and finally ended up at the colonel's quarters. He gave us melon, saki. It was a perfectly friendly atmosphere. By that time, they were dismantling everything when we got there. The dock at Yap town was covered with anti-aircraft barrels. They'd taken all the guns apart and they had the Japanese enlisted men, carrying shells from way back in the hills, for the dock and they were all taken out to sea and dumped.

Mark: I remember what I was going to ask you now, and that was about drinking. A lot of vets describe alcohol--

Falk: At Guadalcanal, the flight surgeon had a small supply of 2 oz. bottles of brandy, which we dispensed on occasion. My supply of brandy went up by air and I came up by ship. By the time I got there it was all gone so I had to have some replenished, but liquor was an extremely scarce commodity out there. One kind of a funny story, there was a lot of trading going on of course and the AP aviation had a little better supplies than the ground people. They would take these 2 oz. bottles of brandy and trade it for a flag or a gun or something. This was concentrated brandy, so you dilute this with a canteen full of water and have a pint of pure brandy, although there were only 2 oz. of brandy in the bottle. This is a trick they--incidentally, I'm sure you must have a Japanese flag with all the letters and stuff on--you don't need another one?

Mark: I'll ask. Because they're all unique in their own ways.

Falk: Well, I have one of those. Back in New Hebrides there was a good supply of beer and every night the squadron would get together and sing a few songs and have a couple of beers and some peanuts and the squadron commanding officer would lead the singing and each guy was supposed to contribute a verse or something to the singing. We had a pet dog there that had come off some ship. It looked like a miniature police dog and I don't know where they acquired the name Gonads--the Marines of course. [END SIDE A, TAPE 1] When we were loading up to go to Guadalcanal he disappeared. He saw something was going on and when we left the rear echelon he turned up and we did fly him up to Guadalcanal with us. For some reason he took a great fancy to me and he was at my heels all the time, when I was going to Chapel or the mess hall or whatever, he was always with me. He loved to ride in the jeep with his head hanging out. Unfortunately one day he fell out and was run over and that was the end of Gonads.

Mark: He was just a mutt?

Falk: Yeah. A very friendly little dog. New Hebrides, there was plenty of beer but not much else, the week in Australia of course was pretty much wide open. We celebrated New Year's Eve there. This bagpiper came in and piped in the New Year, which of course, which launched the champagne flowing. The second time out at Ulithi each officer was entitled to two bottles a week. It cost between one and two dollars. A lot of liquor was not so hot. Free Feathers which was called Free Ulcers, and Black Label was called Black Death. Plus we had an officer's club where we could buy liquor for 10 or 15 cents per drink. At Wing Headquarters they had a couple of officer's clubs there in the New Hebrides.

Mark: As a medical officer did you see any problems with alcoholism?

Falk: Yes. One officer, we had to ship him out. He was always whining about something anyway and he was complaining first of all, I was senior to him and

second; the dental officers were part of the medical department at that time which he resented thoroughly. So one night he got overloaded and started cursing the colonel who happened to be in the tent next door. He was on his way the next day.

Mark: This might seem like a dumb question, but I'll get your reaction to it anyway. I'm interested in why you think people drank oftentimes to excess.

Falk: Well, boredom. Sometimes insecurity. Some of them just liked to drink. They were seasoned drinkers before they ever got into combat. When the supply was cut off they were pretty distressed. There were some real hardy drinkers in the Marine Corps and that hasn't changed I don't think.

Mark: Did you have much black market activity?

Falk: No. Very minor and in Ulithi there was nothing to trade for. There was no problem.

Mark: So you were in the Carolines for how long?

Falk: A year.

Mark: So you went back when? You left there when?

Falk: I left in September after the war ended in 1945.

Mark: So when Japan surrendered you were in the Carolines? Do you recall hearing the good news?

Falk: Yeah. It came on the radio. There was no major celebration. We were glad it was over and then very shortly afterward, we went down to Yap, had an interesting tour down there and came back and got orders to go to the 3rd Marine Air Wing at, which is outside of Pearl Harbor. I just got on the plane and the thing was airborne and they got a message canceling my orders but they couldn't catch me. So, I stopped at Guam and then went back to Pearl Harbor. One other thing, I had made a trip back to Pearl Harbor just about the time the war ended. I had an unusual case there. Shortly after I got to Ulithi, I'd been there about six weeks, I had this enlisted man came in with a full-blown case of gonorrhea. It was so hard to explain. There were no women, native or otherwise and the incubation period had been a little too long. Well, he accused a Navy officer of propositioning him and he was an Army fellow in an anti-aircraft outfit and he claimed that this Navy officer came and propositioned him one night in a gun pit or something. There was no doubt this guy had full blown gonorrhea, well, the Navy--this is a difficult thing to prove. The Navy officer, unfortunately was the nephew of Admiral Leahy, the second in command back in Washington. So it

was kind of a sticky situation. Finally, six or eight months later, three of us got called to Pearl Harbor at this guy's general court martial. We didn't know if he had gonorrhea or not. We suspected he probably had anal gonorrhea but we couldn't prove it, so we made a trip went back to Pearl Harbor and spent a couple of weeks there. Unfortunately I was in charge of all the medical gear and had to go back to Ulithi, which was a long hop in propeller planes in those days. By way of Guam, Quad reline, Johnson Island and then Pearl Harbor. It wasn't long before I was headed back to the States.

Mark: You got back to the States?

Falk: October 1945. On the Saratoga, that big carrier which was converted to a troop ship at that time. There was 6,000 people on board, 5,999 were seasick. We had a terrible storm, you couldn't go on the deck, it was wobbling around too much and I, unfortunately there were three of us in the stateroom I had and I drew a cot, which was not fastened down. So, this cot was rolling back and forth on the deck all night long - it was not a very restful night. Got back to the States in San Francisco, went back to Miramar, the depot down at San Diego again. I requested a course in surgery. I had a couple of years of surgery before the war and that was turned down and I was sent to the Naval Air Station at Corpus Christi. I spent almost a year.

Mark: Doing what?

Falk: As a flight surgeon in the outlying fields, senior medical officer and flight surgeon.

Mark: I want to backtrack a little bit. On the ship coming home what was the mood on the ship? First of all, who was on the ship? Was it mostly Army, Navy, Marines?

Falk: Anybody trying to get back to the States. But mainly Navy and Marines.

Mark: How would you characterize the mood on the ship? Joyous? Anxious?

Falk: Oh yes. Everybody was just raring to get home.

Mark: So you were in Corpus Christi until when?

Falk: August 7, 1946. Again, I was trying to get some training in surgery and I also thought it would be nice to get back to the middle west so I was sent to Detroit for a while and ended up at Great Lakes, where they thought I was kind of an agitator because everyone else wanted to get out too, so I was assigned to the--they had to have one medical officer on the court martial board. Medically, it was totally unrelated, so I was at that point, a little irritated with the Navy and in many cases I recommended clemency and leniency for everybody.

Mark: What sort of reasons were people being court marshaled for?

Falk: Mainly absent over leave or absent without leave. I was very sympathetic at that point. So in every case the Captain asked if anybody other than the doctor recommend clemency in this case? They knew I automatically recommended it. This other guy who fell on the board his reason was HP (hot pants). That's when these guys wanted to stay home and not come back to active duty.

Mark: So when you were at Great Lakes, I assume you got to come up to Wisconsin to visit?

Falk: No. When I went in the regular Navy, they assure you, you'll be able to get out at least as soon as the Reserves. The point system didn't apply to regulars at all. I had points to burn.

Mark: So you finally got your free and clear discharge.

Falk: I finally did. This was totally irregular. I had a chance for Residence in Chicago in Surgery starting January 1, 1947. But, only on January 1st. So I called an Admiral in Washington, which you just don't do and I explained the situation and he said, "Okay. You send me a letter to the Chief of Staff and I'll have you out in a week."

Mark: And he did it. So when you came back to Wisconsin what did you do?

Falk: Well, I was married in 1944 and my oldest son was born when I was in Ulithi. I came back to Wisconsin (Madison) for a week or two and then went to Chicago.

Mark: How long did that last?

Falk: A year. It could have gone on forever, actually, but toward the end of that year I had a second son, born in Chicago and he picked up polio at age six months and they wanted to send him out to Cook County Pest House which was not very attractive so that's why Wisconsin looked better than ever and my wife's father and his brother and their cousin were all veterans so I went back with them.

Mark: I see. What I'm getting at--I'd be interested in reemployment after the war. A lot of veterans had trouble finding work after the war and as a doctor; did you have trouble setting up a practice somewhere?

Falk: Not at all because I had been established there before World War II and they needed help at that time. No problem there at all.

Mark: One question I also ask is the GI Bill benefits.

Falk: Yes. During this residency in surgery.

Mark: It covered parts like training and things like that? Is that how you financed it entirely?

Falk: Well, it helped because my salary at the hospital was \$50 a month so it did help.

Mark: Were there a lot of other veterans in your program?

Falk: That's when the residency program just exploded. Many hospitals had not had residencies developed them and the number of residencies increased tremendously and they've been increased ever since then. When I was interning in St. Paul there were 36 interns and maybe 4 or 5 residents. Now there are literally no interns and dozens of residents.

Mark: Getting back to the government benefits, did you use any other sort of benefit programs, for example, housing? Or were you able to finance a home on your own?

Falk: No, none of that was necessary.

Mark: In the 1970's and 60's we watched the experience of Vietnam veterans coming back and some of the problems they had readjusting. Did you experience any sort of problems readjusting into society?

Falk: Not at all. You're talking about Vietnam. I went there five times, three times, I was a volunteer civilian surgeon.

Mark: Is that right?

Falk: Yes.

Mark: Where were you in Vietnam?

Falk: Mekong Delta working the Vietnamese civilian hospital. This was quite an experience.

Mark: Was there some sort of program?

Falk: Yes. There was a program. It was really called Volunteer Physicians for Vietnam. It was set up by the State Department and the AMA and total over the years probably over 750 American doctors in all. I went out three times on this. I'd been out there twice more recently.

Mark: What made you want to do this?

Falk: Well, sort of a recall of World War II. Partly adventure. I was just eager.

Mark: What sort of duties did you have?

Falk: At this hospital, I had the women's surgical ward. Even if there hadn't been a war going on, I had a full load. But with the war going on there was a tremendous amount of civilian casualties.

Mark: A lot of battlefield wounds and that sort of--

Falk: That's right. Whether out in the battlefield or in the rice paddies or in the home, they were caught from both sides.

Mark: As a World War II veteran, your reactions to the war--

Falk: First of all, I saw more casualties in Vietnam in a matter of a couple of months than I saw in all of World War II. The first couple of times I went out there I really thought we should be there. I was gung ho about it. By the third time I'd begun to have some doubts about what we were doing and whether we should be there at all and then the thing was just falling apart by that time.

Mark: Which years were these?

Falk: 1966, 1967 and 1972.

Mark: Did you go the same place in 1972?

Falk: The first two times I did.

Mark: This was where?

Falk: The province of Vim Bim in the Mekong Delta. That's southeast of Saigon and Canto was the big city that was anywhere nearby. This Vim Bim is a province--the Mekong River is on two sides--it sticks out like a thumb of the South China Sea.

Mark: Where did you go the third time?

Falk: Canto. By that time the situation had improved enough down the delta that they didn't need the American doctors there anymore. The first time it was a real disaster. I couldn't believe I was there--it was such a filthy dirty place. There were dogs following me around in the hospital and dirty dressings on the floor and surgical specimens they'd throw over the wall for the pigs to eat, plus the number

of casualties was great and also at 6:00 pm at night we had to leave the hospital. It was not considered safe because the Viet Cong would come at that time.

Mark: I was going to ask about your personal safety.

Falk: None of us was ever injured, but we had to leave at 6:00 pm no matter what was going on. I left in tears a couple of times, I was just in the middle of something and it was time to go. The Viet Cong were on the other side of the soccer field and they'd come to visit at night. It was a weird situation. The second time I was there, they would come and get us with an armed guard if there was some particular casualty and take us to the hospital.

Mark: Did you see American forces there at all?

Falk: Yes. An Army advisory team, maybe 50-60 people. Also at the hospital, was an Air Force military assistance team. They had three doctors with them. Plus, there were usually one or two American doctors. This was a province of half a million people and there were probably two or three Vietnamese doctors left. The smart ones had gone to Paris and the others were in the military. With all these casualties they had to have some help so, we had the military assistance team plus the volunteers.

Mark: I see. What were your impressions of the American military personnel there? Were they gung ho, were they demoralized?

Falk: No. They were not demoralized down in our area. One thing that was entirely different. During World War II of course the officers and enlisted men were miles apart. In Vietnam, they shared a common mess hall, they shared a common bar, they were much more together. Each evening there would be a briefing session. Everybody enlisted, officers, CIA, Navy Intelligence. This was a strange thing that I was critical of. There were about five different agencies competing with each other including the Army, the Navy had some people down there, the Air Force had a couple of people, the CIA was very active, psychology operations and they were not well coordinated, they were just competing all of the time. I was at that time, corresponding with the Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, who had been with me at Guadalcanal and also was my commanding officer at Ulithi so he finally wrote back and said, "Do you mind if I share these letters with the Commandant of the Marine Corps?" I didn't care what he did with them, but it was kind of a strange situation.

Mark: You mentioned that you had been back since the war ended?

Falk: Yeah. 1972 I went back. After my third trip to Vietnam I met my wife in Thailand and we took a trip through the South Pacific. I returned to Guadalcanal.

We had a nice hotel run by New Zealanders then, pretty decent roads, libraries, schools, museums. Back in 1992 our hotel was run by Japanese.

Mark: Did this seem strange to you?

Falk: It seemed kind of strange and yet knowing what's going--it's like in Honolulu, they own everything there anyway. Now they've gone back to Guadalcanal it was not nearly as good as it had been my first trip. But, they've got the agriculture going pretty well, they've got some industry started.

Mark: I'll come back to that. One more thing about Vietnam. Having been to Vietnam and seen the horror going on there and everything and then your own experiences in World War II when you hear about Vietnam veterans readjustment problems, as a World War II veteran and having been in Vietnam how does that strike you?

Falk: I think they've exaggerated it. Some of them act like this was the first time anybody with explosives--which was not true. I think they overreacted.

Mark: I see. My last area that I want to cover involves veteran's organizations and reunions and things like that. I'm wondering if you joined any veterans' organizations right after the war or later.

Falk: I joined both the American Legion and the VFW.

Mark: At what time?

Falk: 1948 probably.

Mark: Why did you join these groups?

Falk: Because we were told that every doctor in town belonged and you should belong. You don't have to come to any--just pay your dues and you never have to show up. That's why I joined. It was just a matter of public relations gesture. I became a life member rather than doling out something every year. It was just easier to send them a check and cover it for the duration.

Mark: Did you participate in the groups at all?

Falk: No. Not those two. A group that--the Marine Corps Aviation Association--I've been to many of their events. I was in Pensacola, Florida last month. There's another group the Marine Air Group's 11, 12, 14--they meet every couple of years. I met with them in Texas earlier this year and then the Ulithi Group--they meet every year or two and they met down in Orlando this year, so I've been to probably three different reunions this year.

Mark: When did you start attending these groups? Was it later on or right after the war?

Falk: No. Not right after. As a matter of fact, these things weren't even in existence right after the war. They were afterthoughts.

Mark: Was possesses you to go meet with--

Falk: See old friends. Of course the stories get better every year.

Mark: So it is an enjoyable experience for you.

Falk: Yes. Thoroughly.

Mark: When you traveled back, we've already touched on this; let's just touch on your travels back to the South Pacific.

Falk: This is going back to the western Pacific this year in January. When I got up to Guam I did not recognize one single thing there. When I'd been there in 1945 just acres of Quonset huts and huge refrigerators, all gone. Now it looks like Miami Beach. Luxury hotels, all owned by Japanese and largely occupied by Japanese. I went to Saipan one day simply because I'd never been there and again, Miami Beach. Beautiful hotels, many Japanese go there for honeymoons and for memorials because--I was anxious to see this place called Suicide Cliff where all the Japanese--they all, the kids, the wives they all went over the cliff--committed suicide and there were only Japanese there throwing out food and flowers and things. The other reason I wanted to go to Saipan--this Marine Artillery Battalion I'd been with before World War II had taken a terrific beating at Saipan. Every officer I knew was killed there.

Mark: And so it was a--would you say a cathartic experience?

Falk: I wanted to see--first of all I wanted to see where the Japanese jumped off the cliff, second I felt I should at least go and see where these guys had met their end.

Mark: Was the battlefield well preserved? Could you tell--

Falk: After the last Japanese commando post it was well preserved. Matter of fact it was a cliff. The US has a Marine museum on Guam and the other thing on Guam was the dog cemetery. Which is beautifully maintained. For the war dogs.

Mark: Is that right?

Falk: I was so surprised to see it, as I say the officers from the Navy--the Navy officers wives maintain that cemetery and its just lovely. Of course as--far as military

cemeteries, they're all gone. They either came back to the States or the punch bowl.

Mark: That pretty much covers the area that I wanted to touch on, is there anything you want to add?

Falk: No, but I will give you a couple of reprints which you can read at you leisure.

Mark: Thanks for stopping in.

[TAPE ENDS]

Mark: We have a small addendum here.

Falk: Ok this is where we got the drugs in the South Pacific. We were issued morphine syrettes and each had a half-gram of morphine and I saw thousands of these. Everybody carried them with them and I never saw one misused. And this was in four years of WWII. On Uthilite no problem with drugs at all in Vietnam I saw the problem with drugs, I did see some enlisted men get overloaded with alcohol a few times but that was all.

Mark: And that was nothing new at all?

Falk: No.

[End of Interview]