



Douglas County History Research Center Oral Histories

Oral History Interview with Thomas Raymond Fallbach

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SUMMARY: Thomas Fallbach, born January 2, 1927 in Chicago, Illinois. After graduating from Taft High School, he worked for Douglas Aircraft as a riveter assistant helping to build C-54 Skymaster transport aircraft. He joined the U. S. Coast Guard in 1944. At the U.S. Coast Guard Manhattan Beach Training Center ex-boxer Jack Dempsey was the Commander of boxing and physical fitness. Training under this American icon left a lasting impression on the young Fallbach. He highlights his assignments after basic training, including diving in the search of torpedoes in Chesapeake Bay, working on a ship that refueled aircraft carriers at sea, and his assignments as a member of the crew on the Nantucket Lightship, anchored off the

Aircraft, Des Plaines, Illinois, as a riveter.

BELT: Oh -- OK.

FALLBACH: C-54 Skymasters, that's a transport plane. I worked there until I enlisted in the Coast Guard, October 1944. I went downtown Chicago, actually to join the Navy. I walked up to the Navy Recruiting building and next door, there was a big poster of Uncle Sam pointing and he says "Men of 17, we need you, U.S. Coast Guard." [Laughter from Belt]. So I walked into that door -- [Laughter from Fallbach].

BELT: So you didn't go into the Navy.

FALLBACH: No, I walked into the Coast Guard, got the papers, went home, and my Dad says, "Oh, yes, we will sign now. That's sounds good."

BELT: What made that sound better? I mean, what was the difference?

FALLBACH: Well, he thought the Coast Guard, I'd be on the coast. [Laughter].

BELT: OK.

FALLBACH: That they wouldn't send me over.

BELT: So, he was happy about that.

FALLBACH: They were very happy about that.

BELT: So you signed the papers and how long did it take you to be activated?

FALLBACH: Oh, my goodness, within a couple of weeks. I took the physical and the next thing I knew I was back downtown with the new recruits. Downtown Chicago.

BELT: OK

FALLBACH: With the new recruits aboard the train. They sent us to Boot Camp in Brooklyn, New York. They called it Manhattan Beach Training Center, U.S. Coast Guard. It was a typical Boot Camp. 6 a.m. get up, reveille, clean the barracks, breakfast, lots of marching, rifles with small arms training.

BELT: So this is just a Coast Guard Boot Camp or is it a -- ?

FALLBACH: Strictly, a Coast Guard base. Yeah, and of course --

BELT: What was the base? Do you remember the base? What Boot Camp was? The name of it?

FALLBACH: Yeah, Manhattan Beach.

BELT: Manhattan Beach.

FALLBACH: Manhattan Beach Training Center for the Coast Guard and of course, 10 p.m. was taps, and it was lights out. Interesting thing, the ex-boxer Jack Dempsey was our Commander of boxing and physical fitness. Being a boxer, he would like to see everyone else box and he had everybody and I was a little guy, but he didn't care, he'd put us up against big guys, but we learned from him. He pushed us into the ring and we had a lot of fun with Jack Dempsey.

BELT: Why would he be in the Coast Guard? That's unusual.

FALLBACH: That was probably for the physical activities.

BELT: Oh.

FALLBACH: 'Cause he wanted us not just to learn to box, but to learn to fight. And --

BELT: So, did you learn a lot from him? Do you remember him that well?

FALLBACH: Oh, sure. Let's see my nose was smashed up. I got black eyes.
[*Laughter*]. Yeah,...

BELT: You do remember him. [*Laughter from both Belt and Fallbach*].

FALLBACH: Yeah. So that was interesting and he was a real gentleman, real nice guy to everybody. He was like a buddy to us, although he was a Commander, with all the bars and stripes.

BELT: He was a Commander?

FALLBACH: So, I think I spent close to three months in Boot Camp and I don't know if you want put this in -- but something that I tried to install in my kids, too. Everybody smoked cigarettes at that time. Everybody! So I thought what the heck, you know, I'm a big shot now. I went to the PX, I bought a pack of cigarettes. Lit it up. Walking back to the barracks, I got smoke in my eyes and I got a little dizzy and I thought, "You

know this is stupid. Just because everybody else does it." I walked to the nearest trash can and threw it away and I have never smoked in my life.

BELT: When everybody was smoking?

FALLBACH: Right. Guess I just thought I should be different. I don't know.

BELT: So after your Boot Camp, where did you go?

FALLBACH: Christmas of 1944, they gave us a 62 hour pass, a leave, and I forget if it's a 50 or a 100 mile radius from the camp. That's all the farther we could travel, but I went into New York City to Grand Central Station, got aboard a train, and 22 hours later, I was in Chicago. Walked into my parents' house on Christmas and they could have died. They were so surprised!

BELT: They didn't know you were coming?

FALLBACH: No, they didn't know and I didn't tell them.

BELT: Were you wearing your uniform?

FALLBACH: Those days, you had to. You have to wear a uniform. So I spent that day with my family and at 11 at night, I had to be back on the train to get back to the base within the 62 hours and I just made it. [*Laughter*]

BELT: What did you think about leaving? Was it hard to leave? Or were you excited to leave and get started with your career? What were you thinking?

FALLBACH: I don't remember if it was hard to leave because I think I was numb from all traveling and the relatives that all came over and the hugs and kisses and the next thing I knew, my Dad had me down at the railroad station [*Likely the Union Station*] in Chicago. We kissed everybody goodbye.

BELT: And you were on your way?

FALLBACH: Yes. [*Laughter*]. Then I forget if it was another week or two in Boot Camp and then they sent me to Baltimore, Maryland. They wanted to train a group of us as a 'motor mack' [*Mechanic*], you call it. That is in the engine room. And this is something I really didn't want to do, but below deck on a ship. But I was there a month or so, and then they sent me down to Miami, Florida, not Miami Beach, but Miami, Florida. And they put me into another engineer, motor-type school.

BELT: A school?

FALLBACH: It was a school.

BELT: So they're teaching you. You're taking classes?

FALLBACH: Yeah, we're taking classes in engines and motors.

BELT: And you don't think you'll like this?

FALLBACH: No, because I like adventure. I would rather be above deck. [*Laughter*] To see what's going on.

BELT: Than working with an engine?

FALLBACH: Yeah, than being below deck with the engines.

BELT: So you weren't very happy at this point then?

FALLBACH: No, I put in a request for dog training for war dogs and the reason I did, my third year in high school, I worked at dog kennel, and the owner of the dog kennel trained war dogs or guard dogs and then we put on displays for the Army to show them these dogs and he showed them the proper way of trying to train them. And of course, I had to go along because I was the guy that had the big sleeve on my arm that the dogs would attack. [*Laughter*] So, I tried to get into that division and it was a small world, I guess, because the Commander in Baltimore knew the dog trainer that I worked for. So they corresponded and then they called each other and my ex-boss recommended that I do this. But the funny part was, I guess, they were filled. There was no opening at all. So here I am at the motor school [*Laughter*] A Chief Petty Officer walked in one day, into our school, and he said, "I just need a few volunteers for diving." And I didn't know what kind of diving, and I had no idea, but I was the first one to put my hand up.

BELT: 'Cause you wanted the adventure?

FALLBACH: Yes. [*Laughter*] So, he picked three of us and they sent us out for a physical. I was the youngest. I am now 18.

BELT: Are you a good swimmer?

FALLBACH: Yes. I spent a lot of time in the water. Yes. I was the only one that

passed the physical. Then the next thing I knew I had to go back to the hotel. They put us into the MacAllister Hotel. A very, very nice big --

BELT: In Florida?

FALLBACH: Right on Bay Front Park in Miami. They converted this beautiful big hotel into barracks. If you could believe it, they took off all the woodwork out of that hotel, doors, frameworks, they took all that beautiful woodwork and stored it somewhere. They made a bare, plain barracks out of this beautiful hotel, but we could look out the window and the view from there was Bay Front Park. And if you're familiar with Bay Front Park, we could see palm trees and you could see part of the bay.

BELT: Did you like Florida?

FALLBACH: I loved Florida. Florida was real good. My hobbies, mostly, the boys that I was with, I guess all of them young fellows, we thought we could go to taverns and have beers and you know, all that stuff. Which I did, you know, just a little and that, but mostly, I would find roller-skating rinks wherever I was stationed. Because I did a lot of roller-skating in high school and I also did racing, roller-skate racing. So I would go to these roller rinks and what do you think you'd find all these young girls?
[Laughter from both Belt and Fallbach]

So that's what I mostly did in Miami. I enjoyed the atmosphere, the ocean, the swimming --

BELT: So you were pretty happy at this point? Things are going good?

FALLBACH: Well, I didn't know what I was getting into with diving. 'Cause I'm back at the hotel packing and I left this nice hotel. They put me on a train, sent me to Washington, D.C. Washington, D.C. Naval Yards, they called it. It was where they had the deep-sea diving school.

BELT: So you had no idea when you said you wanted to be a diver what was going to happen?

FALLBACH: I had no idea. *[Laughter]*

BELT: So you're in Washington, D.C. now.

FALLBACH: So I'm in Washington, D.C. in the Naval Yards. U.S. Coast Guard was under the jurisdiction of the Navy during World War II. So, I think in my diving class,

there was only two Coast Guards and about six Navy men, and also a couple of officers that volunteered for diving, too.

BELT: Are you still the youngest?

FALLBACH: Yes. At that time, I was 18 and they told me I was the youngest diver ever going through the course. Now this is deep-sea hard-hat, we call it. Shall I mention the equipment?

BELT: Yeah.

FALLBACH: OK The diving suit, that we had, the helmet and breastplate were all copper. And weighed 54 pounds. The weight belt that we had weighed --

BELT: 55 pounds for your helmet?

FALLBACH: The breastplate and the helmet total.

BELT: 55. OK. Total.

FALLBACH: 54 pounds. The weight belt was between 80 and 90 pounds. Each boot or shoe weighed 17 and 1/2 pounds. They were made out of lead. *[Laughter]*

BELT: How much did you weigh then? Do you remember how much?

FALLBACH: I weighed probably 170 pounds and I was --

BELT: You were a pretty big guy.

FALLBACH: I was exactly six feet. *[Laughter]*

BELT: You were a pretty big guy.

FALLBACH: The complete suit and everything weighed 190 pounds.

BELT: Wow.

FALLBACH: And of course, once you're in the water, you have an air valve to make yourself buoyant. You don't even know that you have weight on. And the deeper you go, the more pressure, the more air that you will have inflated into your suit. So, we were neutral buoyant, this is.

BELT: Because you were going into diving, are you given another stripe or a promotion? Or any recognition for this?

FALLBACH: Well, when I finished school, I was a Diver Second Class, they call it. And my next service check had \$10 dollars more on it.

BELT: That's all?

FALLBACH: Yeah, and I questioned that. They said that was hazard pay. [*Laughter*] So I thought that was pretty nice.

BELT: Tell me about going to the classes for diving? I mean, what was that like? To learn to be a diver?

FALLBACH: O.K. The school, itself, has tanks that are probably 12 to 15 feet in diameter and probably 20 feet deep. That's a cylinder. And on top of the tank, there's a cover, a sealed cover. You will dive into the tank, they close the cover and they pump air into the top of the water to the cover for pressure. They build up air pressure, and by building up air pressure, it's just like diving under water in pressure. It simulates to pressure and --

BELT: How many cylinders were there?

FALLBACH: I would say about a half a dozen cylinders for, you know, different dives, because right at the beginning maybe they would just put us in the water and so how do you handle yourself just in a 20 foot tank. It's like a swimming pool, you know. And some of the boys were washed out.

BELT: Why would they be washed out? What was that about?

FALLBACH: It is scary at first.

BELT: Sure.

FALLBACH: Because all you have is that little face plate that you look out of, and some of the boys didn't think they had claustrophobia, but evidently it happens.

BELT: When they got into the water, it closed in on them?

FALLBACH: Yeah.--

BELT: Do you remember the first time you did that?

FALLBACH: Yes. I remember the first time I did that.

BELT: Scary for you, too?

FALLBACH: Well, yes it was. It was scary, but I thought what an adventure! My God, this is fantastic.

BELT: Oh --

FALLBACH: But I was nervous. I didn't sleep that night before the dive.

BELT: You knew what was going to happen when you took that dive?

FALLBACH: Yeah.

BELT: You knew --

FALLBACH: Yeah, because one thing I didn't expect. You sit down on the surface, up above the tank. It's on a level, on another floor. You sit down on the stool and the tenders help you get dressed --

BELT: A stool?

FALLBACH: This was on the surface. They help you get dressed. And then you have to stand up, and walk to the ladder to go down into the water. And here I am with 190 pounds and you walk like Frankenstein. [*Fallbach makes sounds: Clump. Clump. Clump*] [*Laughter*]

BELT: So you definitely have to be physically fit?

FALLBACH: Yes. Yes. [*Laughter*]

And then when you go down the ladder, then you remember what we had in class about inflating the suit to a certain degree to make yourself buoyant. But you can't get over buoyant because you will pop up like a balloon. [*Laughter*] So we mostly [had] classes at first, and then we would have a short dive. Then, after the --They'd see how you are accomplishing this, getting along, then they would close the hatch on top and then they would admit air to make pressure. And they'd bring you down, we called it that. They bring you down to 30 feet or so. And if you remember, if you dive in a swimming pool to the bottom, your ears have to be equalized and so as we descend, we

have to equalize our ear. And if we can't, and have a cold, or a little stuffiness, we could -- we talked. We had like two-way radios and we'd say, "Hold it" until we clear our ears, 'cause they would hear us up above. And then, OK, and then they'd pump more air in as we go down. And this went on for, I can't remember how long that this went on, but every time that we go deeper and deeper and deeper. And one time --

BELT: Are you still talking about being in that cylinder?

FALLBACH: Yeah. Yeah.

BELT: OK And then you'd go deeper and deeper --

FALLBACH: With the air pressure being pumped in on top of the atmosphere. At one time, my partner and I, we were at 150 feet, and our job for the day --

BELT: So you went down with partners in some dives?

FALLBACH: Sometimes.

BELT: Sometimes?

FALLBACH: This was a working chore, this time.

BELT: OK You went down together in one cylinder?

FALLBACH: Oh, yeah, you can get four divers if you wanted --

BELT: Oh, you could --? OK.

FALLBACH: Yes. We got down to the bottom, as we call it, 150, they stopped it and our job, there was a big iron plate, that looked like a wheel, oh, about three feet in diameter, a couple of inches thick, and was setting on some kind of steel sawhorses, they looked like, and had a real heavy rivets. Our job was to have a, to extract the rivets. They had a chisel, and a sledgehammer. One fellow would hold the chisel and the other would have the sledgehammer. And maneuvering underwater and in that pressure, it's not easy. [*Laughter*] But this was all part of our training. How can you handle yourself under there, because we were destined for salvage. We were going to be salvage divers.

BELT: You knew that?

FALLBACH: We weren't sure. They told us a lot of things. [*Laughter*] But we could

see where they wanted us mechanically inclined; there was other times we had steel plates with big nuts and bolts and we had wrenches and such. And so, my partner and I, and I remember his last name, it was Renny, and after we struggled down there, knocked the riveter too loud, it was time for us to come up, because you can't stay too long under pressure. You get what's called the 'bends' or decompression sickness. Your body and your blood vessels fill up with nitrogen. We don't expel nitrogen, we expel oxygen when we exhale under pressure. And when you come back to the surface, you have got to come back slowly and you have to stop at different stages for a short while so that nitrogen gets out of your blood system. Nitrogen bubbles.

BELT: You have to be a very cool and calm person, don't you?

FALLBACH: You have to listen and do your studying. [*Laughter*] But we had no control over coming back to the surface. The chief, up above, has the stopwatch and the clocks, the timers, and he knows at different stages from the pressure where to stop you. Well, it was near lunch time, and I accused him of being hungry and bringing us up too fast 'cause Renny and I were walking to the mess hall. They undressed us, naturally, and took all our equipment off. We were going to the mess hall and Renny says, "My arm, my arm really hurts." And I looked at it and it's broke out in sort of big, red blotches. And just as I looked at his, my right shoulder, like someone hit me with baseball bat. And we knew immediately that we had decompression sickness, so we rushed back to the diving school and thank goodness, one of the medics was just leaving, so we told him of our symptoms. He got on the phone, called the doctor, and put us in a decompression chamber.

BELT: Hum...Hum.

FALLBACH: Well, in a decompression chamber, they have to bring you back down to 150 feet because I had a bubble lodged in my shoulder. And the dangerous part of that is if it breaks, it could go up your --

BELT: Cause a stroke?

FALLBACH: And could go to your brain and kill you. It's stroke, you're right. And what they do, they bring you down to 150 feet, the same depth that you had --

BELT: You were actually in the water?

FALLBACH: No. This is decompression chamber.

BELT: You're not in the water with the decompression chamber.

FALLBACH: No. This is a big chamber

BELT: But they bring you down?

FALLBACH: They pump air into it to...

BELT: So you were in that chamber with Renny?

FALLBACH: Yeah.

BELT: You were in it together.

FALLBACH: We were together.

BELT: Scared?

FALLBACH: We didn't know. We were kids. [*Laughter*] Geez, we got 'the bends' [*Decompression sickness*].

[*Laughter from both Belt and Fallbach*] So, at 150 [*feet*], the bubble was still lodged. It didn't break, so they went down 15 more feet, 165 feet, as I remember and the pain went away. Completely. His arm was clearing up from that, so they kept us at 165 for a short while and slowly brought us back to the surface and I was there for 12 hours and the doctor would come in and out because there is another chamber and they would bring the doctor down to that pressure and they would open up the door and he would come in to us. He kept checking us. At one time, he brought blankets and a pillow and books. [*Laughter*] I said, "What's that for?" He says, "You're going to be here a while." [*Laughter*]

BELT: 12 hours?

FALLBACH: It was 12 hours before I got out.

BELT: And that was in school?

FALLBACH: This is school.

BELT: Are you thinking that you don't want this job anymore?

FALLBACH: No, oh, no. This was a challenge now.

BELT: OK What happens after this now? Where are we? What happens? Were do you go? You finished your classes and you graduate? Graduation?

FALLBACH: Yeah, we were there three months and we graduated as Divers Second Class.

BELT: What did your Dad think of you doing this? Or your family?

FALLBACH: Oh, he was proud of as a peacock.

BELT: Proud?

FALLBACH: My Dad was a milkman, and I think everybody on his milk route knew that I was a diver. [Laughter] Our next assignment, after the school, after I was a Diver II. Oh, let me talk about Washington, D.C. a little.

BELT: Go ahead.

FALLBACH: While I was in Washington, D.C., there was four things that I really remember about that place. This has been on my mind all these years. Number one: Germany surrendered at the time, and --

BELT: Do you remember that day?

FALLBACH: No, I really don't. It must have been April or something. Before I get into that, I am ahead of myself. Let's go back. Number one: President Roosevelt died while I was there. I was in a barbershop getting my hair cut and the barber had tears in his eyes and he's crying and I looked at him kinda funny. And he says, "The father of our country just died." Every serviceman in Washington, D.C. at that time had to pay some respects, like a funeral procession. We did some marching and stuff like that.

Number two: The war ended a month after that, I believe. I don't have my dates here. The war ended and they told us to go downtown Washington. They told us to go to the capital building, we didn't know why. So our whole group went to the capital building, and the lights went on that evening. The lights had been off during the whole war in Washington, in the capital building, so we were there to see it lit up. And it was kind of a tear jerker, to see something like that, and see all the servicemen just looking, there's our capital, beautiful, all lit up at night.

BELT: We had when you couldn't see that for years, probably?

FALLBACH: No, I had no idea it was off. You know. That's number two. What was my number three that I did? I had four things that I did.

BELT: There we got it. Go on.

FALLBACH: OK. Number three: One Sunday morning while we were on duty and our job that day, and it was just about four of us, I remember. We had to clean up a dock, a pier, and we had big corn brooms and we were sweeping the dock, and right next to us was the Presidential yacht. And I think the name of it, I'll get that out, I can't think of the name.

BELT: Presidential yacht?

FALLBACH: USS Constitution. [*Likely the USS Sequoia*] The Presidential yacht was there. So we're sweeping the pier and all these big limousines pull up along the pier. Admirals, generals, got out and they stood in line and here's this little man in a hat. And I had no idea who it was. It was President Truman. [*Laughter*] He walked up between the line of admirals and us guys, we're standing by the boat.

BELT: With your booms?

FALLBACH: With our brooms and the President walked by us and waved at us. We saluted back and I didn't know who the heck he was. I didn't know who the Vice President was? I was only...I was just a kid. [*Laughter*] So that was Number three.

Number four. There was a ladies, a woman's Marine base there also. And they liked to play baseball, so we got together -- us guys. We played baseball against these marine ladies and we could not beat them. We had three games and we could not beat those ladies. [*Laughter*] Geez, so OK.

BELT: And you never forgot it, did you?

FALLBACH: No, I didn't forget that. Thank goodness. I -- OK. Then from the diving school in Washington, D.C., we were assigned to a ship at Piney Point, Maryland, and the ship was a diving tug, they called it. Piney Point, Maryland, was on the Chesapeake Bay and that's where they tested torpedoes. From what I understood, almost all the torpedoes they put aboard the vessels during the war had to be tested. They were shot off of barges. Of course, they had dummy heads on them; they didn't have the warhead on them. And they were tracked and traced because some of them would verge [*veer*] to the left or verge [*veer*] to the right. They didn't stay on a straight course. And they had to correct that. [*Cough by Fallbach*] Excuse me. And some of

them wouldn't have a range. They would just sink. So they had to be retested and recalibrated. And our job was to retrieve these torpedoes. And when they would shoot the bar, off the barge, they had a blimp flying overhead to trace the torpedo, and where it went down, they would all sink at the end of the run. They would radio a pick-up boat, like a speedboat. They would go out to that area and drop a buoy and an anchor in that area. But they never did get real close to it -- to the torpedoes, because that was our job. The next day, to try to find these torpedoes and Chesapeake Bay is not like Miami Beach, because it's dirty, there is no visibility and the bottom was just mud. So we were, we dove into the black mud. And we groped around until we would find the torpedo. And we would hitch a line on the torpedo, we would come up that line.

BELT: You mean you just walked along the bottom until you bumped into it?

FALLBACH: Yes, well, we had a pattern down there to try to find it. And I don't believe I could talk about that pattern because it's gets quite complicated with a line or a rope.

BELT: So then there's a certain --it wasn't a random walk that you did?

FALLBACH: No.

BELT: OK.

FALLBACH: No, it was a pattern that we had. It would be one diver at a time though.

BELT: One diver at a time?

FALLBACH: And we would find the torpedo. We would tie the line to the front of the torpedo.

BELT: Was it dangerous? I mean, I mean is it dangerous to use?

FALLBACH: Yes. Because of the pitch-black darkness, everything was by feel. And they told us stories about the torpedoes that somewhere -- some had air pressure to motivate the counter rotating props on the back. And that sometimes that air pressure would start up and then naturally the torpedo would flip around in the mud. And the first thing that we had to do, we had a unit with wire and we would take this bracket, this unit, and put it on the counter rotating prop, so it wouldn't start up. They told us stories about it starting up but it never happened to us. Thank goodness. So that's what we did. That was our assignment.

BELT: Did you like doing this job? I mean --

FALLBACH: It was nerve-racking. Yes, I liked doing it. I wanted to do it. But it was a challenge again. I think the nerves -- nerve-racking part of it was when you wake up at night thinking about the next day. That was kind of nerve-racking.

BELT: How many dives were you doing now at this point? Quite a few dives looking for torpedoes? I mean --

FALLBACH: Yes. You could only, if it was a pressure dive, let's say that I went down to 150 feet and I spent too much time down there, I'd have too much nitrogen built into my system. I would decompress coming back to the surface and they wouldn't let you dive the next day. They'd keep you off for twenty-four hours or so. But if it was just a shallow dive, 50, 60, or 70 feet, you could dive the next day. Depends on the depth and length of stay.

BELT: You never had bends or [other] than at school?

FALLBACH: That's right. Yeah, just at the school.

BELT: O.K. You're looking for torpedoes and how long are you doing this?

FALLBACH: That was for a few months.

BELT: Oh, a few months, that's all?

FALLBACH: Yeah, huh huh.

BELT: Where are you going from there?

FALLBACH: From there, they assigned us to ships, to be a ship diver, and I went back to Miami, of all places. And the ship was an AOG, Aviation Oil Gas tanker. And the purpose of it is to refuel aircraft areas at sea. 'Cause we had the aviation gas, gasoline, and the oil that is used in aircraft engines. So they gathered the crew together in Miami, and we went up to Jacksonville, Florida, to the shipyards and there was a brand new spanking AOG [*Aviation, Oil and Gas tanker*], and the name of it was USS Klickatat.

BELT: Klickatat

FALLBACH: Klickatat. And that's an Indian name and Indian river in Oregon. And there were three or four of these ships, AOGs, and they were new and they wanted to put in the service because they were fast. They were small. I think they were 350 feet

long, something like that, which is small. So we commissioned the ship. A big ceremony, commissioned the ship out of Jacksonville. And they had a shake-down cruise as they call it. A shake-down cruise consists of civilian engineers that designed and helped build the ship along with the crew. We all had assigned jobs. OK, so we had a shake-down and we came back, I remember. And I was the ship's diver and I had a diving locker, but it didn't have the deep-sea gear that I was trained in. It had shallow water gear, which is fine. Really, simple. Shallow water gear with a compressor and such. And I had my own locker, which I thought was really nice. They sent me to fire fighting school. I thought that --

BELT: Did you ask for that?

FALLBACH: No. It was part of my job --

BELT: Job description?

FALLBACH: Yeah, that's my job description. [*laughter from Belt*]. Ship diver, so they thought well he'll probably never dive on the ship, so let's put him into firefighting school, which was very interesting 'cause they had big steel iron building and they'd set gasoline and kerosene inside and they'd burn it.

BELT: This was another adventure for you?

FALLBACH: Yep, so --

BELT: So you liked it, didn't you?

FALLBACH: Oh, yeah. That was good. I liked that very much. That was good. So I went to fire fighting school.

BELT: How long was that? A couple weeks or how long would that be?

FALLBACH: No, I think it was probably one week or so. Sometime that that; maybe not even that long. Three or four days, I bet.

BELT: Nothing, too intensive, huh?

FALLBACH: No, No. Well just the bare necessities and how to handle a hose and how much pressure you should be using and such.

BELT: O.K.

FALLBACH: After a short fire fighting course, it was back on the ship and they gave me or they added to my diving locker, fire fighting gear and the proper clothes and such. Also, they said that they would probably never have a fire, so you are in charge of all the fire extinguishers aboard ship and I want to see them painted red and I don't want to see any scrapes or scratches on them and I want them weighed at the proper time to see if you have the right material in there --so --

BELT: What are you about 19 now?

FALLBACH: I'm 19 years old. This is the summer of 1945. So, I was in charge of fire extinguishers and a lot of my buddies would make a lot of fun of me because they were out swabbing the deck, they're painting the deck, they're chipping paint and I'm walking around with my paint brush. [*Laughter*]. So I had it easy; it was pretty nice. But refueling at sea, that was our purpose, we would go alongside of an aircraft carrier which is about five or six times as large as our ship and we would send the hoses over from our tanks and from our pumps. My job was to stand by with the fire fighting equipment.

BELT: Ok, lemmie stop there and let me reverse the tape...

End Tape 1 Side 1

Begin Tape 1 Side 2

FALLBACH: We refueled the aircraft carriers in the North Atlantic. That's where we mostly patrolled and when we had to refuel our own ship with aviation gas again, we would have to go back down into Texas to the oil fields along the river and refuel and then we would go up the river and refuel and then we would go up the Atlantic to the north again and refuel another aircraft carrier. Now you have to realize the war is over, but they are still patrolling the North Atlantic.

BELT: So you are doing ships and aircraft -- refueling ships and aircraft?

FALLBACH: No, just aircraft carriers that had the aircraft aboard.

BELT: I see then. OK.

FALLBACH: Now on one of our trips going up north, we had engine trouble on the ship, so we pulled into Norfolk, Virginia. And we were going down the Norfolk River, I'm not sure if that's the name of it, and we pulled up alongside a dock to tie up and there were many ships there, other ships, and we heard hooting and hollering and whistles going off, and every other ship there with people -- the guys were dancing

with joy, we found out that Japan had surrendered.

BELT: Wow.

FALLBACH: [*Laughter*] So, our Captain broke out, as we call it, sick-bay alcohol. And I forget cherry soda or whatever pop we had aboard, and he poured a little sick-bay alcohol in everybody's pop. [*Laughter*] So we all toasted and cheered and hollered like these other ships. Another thing like -- something that you just don't forget. [*Laughter*] So, we went out to sea again for a short time, and I'm forgetting the dates, now. It was the fall of 1945 is when the Japanese surrendered. You can check the dates, I'm not really sure. OK, towards the end of 1945, we decommissioned the ship. That means that we put them out of service. That was near Christmas time; they gave me a Christmas leave. Legally, I went home this time. [*Laughter*] And I didn't -- the war is over, but I wasn't in the service long enough to accumulate points as they call it. You had to have a certain number for the longevity of the time that you have been in, and I didn't have enough, so they had me report to Woods Hole, Massachusetts. And they assigned me to the Nantucket Light ship is anchored offshore, I forget eight, ten miles or so, near the rocky shores. The reason is, it's a floating lighthouse. And that kept the other ships off those rocky shores.

My duty, and I volunteered for it, I never did this in my life, but they didn't have a radioman. And I put my hand up, of course. [*Laughter*] Here I am a radioman. Then I thought, "Gee, I don't know the Morse code at all." But thank goodness, I didn't have to use it. We used the phonetic type, that's ABC, Able, Baker, Charlie, Dove, Easy, like that. We verbally used that. Thank goodness. [*Laughter*] That was easy to learn. And my duty most of --

BELT: So you're not diving anymore at this point?

FALLBACH: No. No. I'm not diving anymore.

BELT: Is this something that you said, that you didn't want to dive? Or just what the service said?

FALLBACH: This what the service thought they were doing with people like me that didn't have enough points to...they didn't assign us to anything really special. People...men

BELT: Were you upset about not diving anymore? Or did or you glad to be out of it?

FALLBACH: No, I would have liked to have to if they could have assigned me to

something.

BELT: It didn't work out anymore.

FALLBACH: It didn't work out that way.

BELT: OK.

FALLBACH: No. That was on the Nantucket Lightship which is a famous old ship, has quite a history to it. The first one went down in a storm with all hands aboard. We were the second Nantucket and there was just twelve of us aboard the ship for two months duty. Anchored out there.

BELT: And you're doing the radio?

FALLBACH: I'm doing the radio. I should say "thank goodness" again because at night when I had my duty, just sitting listening to all the other ships is quite boring. I could turn on my favorite music, which is Country and Western. [Laughter] So I could get WSM, Nashville, Tennessee; I got WLS, Chicago, National Barn Dance, and when some of the other boys heard it [Laughter], and so they asked me to put it over the loudspeaker, and that made everybody happy with good Country/Western. [Laughter]

FALLBACH: Yeah --

BELT: Did you like being on the Nantucket?

FALLBACH: No, I didn't care for it, because it was just a floating lighthouse and off-duty, there was just nothing to do.

BELT: No adventure for you?

FALLBACH: No. I guess that's it, I don't know. Very relaxing. [Laughter]

BELT: Tell us about when the day that Life magazine came?

FALLBACH: OK.. After 30 days of being on Nantucket, the supply ship would come out with fresh milk, fresh food and whatever supplies. And a Life magazine photographer came aboard.

BELT: Did you know he was coming?

FALLBACH: No, I had no idea. No, I didn't know who, you know, who was this guy

with a camera? So, the Captain told us that he's going to write a story about the life aboard a lightship. So, he spent a lot of time with us. I don't know if he spent the 30 days to get off of us or not. But took a lot of pictures, wrote a real nice story, this was in May of 1946, my -- that's right, my 30, 60 days was up on the ship, so they assigned a whole new crew and we got our crew of 12 got off with, that's right, the photographer and he says, "Well, maybe in a couple months, you might see the story." And sure enough, June third issue of 1946, there was a nice story about our ship, our lightship. And I got my picture in there. [Laughter]

BELT: That was exciting to see that, for your family?

FALLBACH: Yeah, because my father, if you see the picture, I have a beard. And my father got phone calls from old friends of his, saying, "I didn't know you were in the Coast Guard?" [Laughter]. So, I must have looked like my father. But they put a pipe in my mouth, so I looked salty.

BELT: And you don't smoke?

FALLBACH: And I don't smoke. [Laughter] So that was the life aboard the lightship.

BELT: Where do you go from there?

FALLBACH: I was discharged right after that. I was discharged in May of 1946.

BELT: So that was the end of --

FALLBACH: Yeah, they sent me to Detroit, Michigan. That's where I got my discharge papers. And they put me on a train, sent me back to Chicago area.

BELT: When you look back on your military life, what -- do you, I mean, have good memories, I think, don't you?

FALLBACH: Yes. It was good part of my life. A good time of my life. It was probably like most veterans, they don't look back and see the tough times they've had. You look at the good times they've had and as young as I was, I think I grew up. I had a chance to really, really grow up 'cause I was with fellows my age and I was with fellows that were 30 years old.

BELT: When you left the service, did you take any of your experiences with you? I mean, did you --

FALLBACH: Yes. What I did later was join the YMCA as a scuba class. And I went through the scuba class, and they saw what, the knowledge that I had, so they asked me to be an assistant instructor, which I did. They built a brand new YMCA, beautiful, in Glen Ellen, Illinois, and I became the head instructor. Scuba instructor.

BELT: So, it did follow you?

FALLBACH: Yes. And from there I became -- from there, I advanced to a scuba commissioner for the northern part of Illinois for YMCAs, and my job was to certify instructors, scuba instructors.

BELT: Now is there anything you'd like to add to this tape? Or that you have forgotten that you'd like to add to this tape? Anything that comes to your mind that you'd like to say on this tape?

FALLBACH: Yes. If I may go back to the Klickatat. We had trouble with the engine, another time, and we pulled into Key West, Florida. And I put on that shallow water diving gear.

BELT: Oh, so you did get to dive on that ship, then?

FALLBACH: Yeah. Just practice. And there were some fishermen up that in their little boat. They were sponge divers. And we took the little boat, and went out to their boat with my little portable compressor and my shallow water diving gear. We just drove by and they waved us over. They said, "Hey, you dive?" I think there were three people. They had a very broken accent, "You dive?" I said, "Yeah." "Well, try." So I went down with a Greek diver [*Laughter*], and he's pulling sponges.

BELT: Did you pull sponges?

FALLBACH: Nah, I was watching him. I didn't know what to do 'cause I would probably break one in half or something, you know. So it was just a short little thing there. But there --

BELT: Were you shallow water diving? What -- why did you quit? Was there that much difference? You're not wearing the helmet?

FALLBACH: No, what you have is mostly a mask that fits over your face completely with air being pumped into the mask.

BELT: OK.

FALLBACH: Huh huh.

BELT: And then?

FALLBACH: And fins. No, you don't use fins. You are still maneuvering. You have a weight belt.

BELT: I'll be --

FALLBACH: You are still maneuvering, walking around.

BELT: Oh --

FALLBACH: It was that type.

BELT: Shallow water diving, you're -- weighted down still, is what you're saying?

FALLBACH: You put the proper amount of weights on so you can sort of bounce around on the bottom.

BELT: OK.

FALLBACH: It's not too heavy.

BELT: Did you do a lot of practice dives, at all? Or?

FALLBACH: No, just a few of them, just a couple. Just to show off to some of my buddies. [*Laughter*]

BELT: Do you have your experiences with -- on the boat. Do you keep in contact with friendships?

FALLBACH: For a short while.

BELT: The military --?

FALLBACH: Yeah, for a short while afterwards. I had contacts with a couple of the guys. Another one that lived in Chicago would stop out to see me, and we got together a few times. Another time, a fellow drove from Iowa up to Chicago, and he looked me up and we stopped and talked.

BELT: So you kinda lost contact with --

FALLBACH: I lost contact completely with them.

BELT: OK. Is there stories, or anything else that you'd to add?

FALLBACH: Barbara, I can't think of any right now.

BELT: Well, that's a wonderful story, and I thank you for your interview.

FALLBACH: [*Laughter*] You're welcome. It was my pleasure. Thank you.

End of Interview