

**National Museum of the Pacific War
Fredericksburg, Texas**

**Interview with Bob Balch, Sr.
September 19, 2004**

USS Blue Ridge (AGC-2)

Tape Number 1243

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June 29, 2010

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This is Joe Litzelfelner. Today is September 19, year 2004. I am interviewing Mr. Bob Balch. This interview is taking place at the Bush Gallery of the National Museum of the Pacific War. Actually this interview is taking place at the Fredericksburg High School. This interview is in support of the Center for Pacific War Studies, archives for the National Museum of the Pacific War, Texas Parks and Wildlife, for the preservation of historical information related to this cause.

Litzelfelner: Bob, when and where were you born?

Mr. Balch: I was born in Houston, Texas, August 24, 1925.

Litzelfelner: And who were your parents?

Mr. Balch: Joseph and Evie (or Evelyn) Balch.

Litzelfelner: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Mr. Balch: I have two younger brothers, two older brothers, and three sisters. There was another boy who died when he was eighteen months old, but there was a total of nine of us in the family.

Litzelfelner: Were any of them in the service during World War II?

Mr. Balch: All except my brother was in Germany in the tank corps – he spent three years over in Europe and he said he spent a whole winter watching the Leaning Tower of Pisa. His gun was pointing right over it. My youngest brother was in the Marine Corps, went to Korea in the First Marine Division, he died a couple of years ago, the brother next to me was in the Navy also. He was on a DE, a destroyer escort. He was a motor mach.

Litzelfelner: Did you go to high school in Houston?

Mr. Balch: Went to Jeff Davis High School, yeah. Went to Burbank... well, I started out in Hamilton. Alamo was the elementary school, Hamilton the junior high school, and then

we moved to the country where I finished up in Burbank High School out in northwest, east of Houston, then I went two years at Jeff Davis High School.

Litzelfelner: Where were you on December 7, 1941, at the time of the attack?

Mr. Balch: We lived at Route 2, Box 1192, it's out off of Hirsch Road, out in the northeastern part of Houston off of Humble highway.

Litzelfelner: Do you remember that date?

Mr. Balch: Yes, I do. I listened to the radio all day long.

Litzelfelner: What were you doing?

Mr. Balch: At that time, my father had a Houston Post route, and me and my brother had to go with him. We went up until the time I went into the Navy in '43. So after we came home from the paper route, we milked our cows and did all this, and we just listened to how the war was going then.

Litzelfelner: Did you have any idea beforehand that something like that was going to happen?

Mr. Balch: Oh, no, I sure didn't. I didn't think about world affairs, really.

Litzelfelner: Were you still in high school at that time?

Mr. Balch: Yes. I was probably in Burbank which went to nine grades out there instead of eight like all the rest of the Houston schools. It was probably just before transferring to or graduating to Jeff Davis High School.

Litzelfelner: So then when did you join the Navy?

Mr. Balch: I joined the Navy in early August 1943, and I left on my eighteenth birthday for San Diego, California for boot camp.

Litzelfelner: Had you graduated from high school?

Mr. Balch: No, I didn't graduate.

Litzelfelner: You were eighteen?

Mr. Balch: I was eighteen, yes.

Litzelfelner: How did you like San Diego?

Mr. Balch: Well, I didn't get to see much of it. We went through boot camp, and I only had one leave after it was over with, and they shipped us off to Moscow, Idaho, to go to radio school.

Litzelfelner: You say you got one leave when boot camp was over?

Mr. Balch: Yes.

Litzelfelner: Were you able to go home then?

Mr. Balch: No. Didn't have any leave to go home.

Litzelfelner: How did you get from Houston out to San Diego when you joined the Navy?

Mr. Balch: Southern Pacific Railroad.

Litzelfelner: Do you remember how long it took you to get out there?

Mr. Balch: Took us about three days I think. Three days and three nights. It was a very interesting group. They had – I don't know what the occasion was – I don't know whether the USS Houston had just gotten sunk. But they had a lot of volunteers out of Houston to go at one time. In fact, I remember one fellow, he had been in the Navy. He was a baker. And him and his son – he re-signed up, and went with his son out to California. And he tried to talk to us to become bakers. He said it was a good life, really. But he was a Chief Petty Officer. He had spent his time in already, but he went back in with his son. Kind of interesting.

Litzelfelner: You got a few days off then after you got out of boot camp?

Mr. Balch: No – we went straight from boot camp to University of Idaho – Moscow, Idaho. We went to radio school lasted five months – October through February of '43 to '44. I didn't get leave after the school, either. They gave me eight days delayed orders to get from Moscow, Idaho to Seattle, Washington, or Bremerton, Washington. I did go home and stay – but I overstayed my time just a little bit.

Litzelfelner: Your eight days?

Mr. Balch: Yeah – it took me about four days by train to get home. And then another four days to get back. But I stayed over an extra two or three days. Course I had to pay for it when I showed up in Bremerton, Washington.

Litzelfelner: Was that where you got assigned to a ship?

Mr. Balch: No. They put us aboard a ship there – the ship went from Bremerton, Washington, down to Shoemaker, California in June. We pulled into Shoemaker, California, and they loaded some more guys that were going to go overseas. We left there the morning of June 6, which was D-Day, 1944. We didn't realize it was D-Day, we didn't hear much about it because we were aboard that ship. Later on we did, you know.

Litzelfelner: Was it sort of like a transport ship?

Mr. Balch: Yes, it was a transport. We went straight from there to Melanie Bay, New Guinea. It didn't stop anywhere.

Litzelfelner: Is that right?

Mr. Balch: That's right. It was a long time. It didn't go over seven or eight knots. But they had a lot of troops, a lot of pilots, but mostly replacement for Navy and Army, the whole works.

Litzelfelner: What did you say the name of that town was in California that you went to?

Mr. Balch: San Diego.

Litzelfelner: I thought you mentioned another town, when you came down from Bremerton.

Mr. Balch: We left out of Shoemaker. It was the receiving barracks for California.

Litzelfelner: Was that up near San Francisco?

Mr. Balch: Just below San Francisco.

Litzelfelner: New Guinea is south of the equator, isn't it?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, way south and across the International Date Line.

Litzelfelner: Did they have any kind of a ceremony on that ship when you crossed the Equator?

Mr. Balch: Yes, we did. We all became – you know, you are a polliwog before you cross it, and then you become a shellback. We had a real initiation – they got ready for it – they made chutes out of canvas and dumped all the garbage into it and everything. The sad part of it was, one fellow that was going through the line, he got hit in the kidney. You know, what they do, some of the guys made up canvas bags and fill them with wet rags and stuff, and they were pretty heavy. He got hit in the kidney and it killed him. I often wondered what the Navy told his parents had happened to him on that. But it was good, when we became a shellback, the next time we went across it, we went across several different times, and then I got to dish it out.

Litzelfelner: Did they give you some kind of a card, or something?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, you had a shellback card. You had to have that, otherwise you have to go through the line again. Everybody didn't go through the line again.

Litzelfelner: That was probably one of your most prized...

Mr. Balch: One time, Larry Rowan, there was a lieutenant commander aboard a ship, he said he had already taken his initiation, but he didn't have a card to show, so they had us go get him and bring him (laughter)... They take that initiation pretty seriously.

Litzelfelner: I guess he should have hung on to his card.

Mr. Balch: It was hard to hang on to anything, the way you know. Living out of a seabag, that was all you had. That was your wardrobe.

Litzelfelner: What were conditions like on that transport ship?

Mr. Balch: We ate good, and what they did they had movies, and then they had smokers and they had boxing matches and so on. I boxed a little bit at the time – I was pretty good, and there were a couple of matches that I won. To pass the time, you know. I was standing out there one day when they were having target practice, and there were a couple of pilots just going over with us, you know. They were saying, “These guys can’t hit nothing!” They were shooting at a sleeve. But I guess it is hard to hit a moving target.

Litzelfelner: You ended up in New Guinea?

Mr. Balch: Melanie Bay, New Guinea, at a receiving station. It was just a big old two-story barracks out in the edge of the jungle. I had my orders with me, and I was supposed to report to the first duty station up in Highlandia (?). It was a flagship up until then – USS Blue Ridge. You are just on your own to find a ride up there. So I just hunted around and found a Coast Guard cutter out of Galveston, Texas, and I found out they were going to go up there. It’s north a couple of days. So they gave me a ride on that Coast Guard cutter. That was kind of nice, because there were a lot of Texas boys on there.

Litzelfelner: Coast Guard cutter?

Mr. Balch: It was a Coast Guard cutter that used to be a private yacht. Because the ladders, it had spiral staircases going from one deck to the other deck. That was a good crew on there, one coxswain said he made his coxswain’s rating driving an elevator in the Hotel Galvez! So they were a good bunch of guys. They treated me good.

Litzelfelner: Were they in the Coast Guard, or were they in the Navy?

Mr. Balch: They were in the Coast Guard – it was a Coast Guard cutter, out of Galveston. They didn’t have a bunk for me, so I had to string up a hammock on the fantail for the one or two nights that I was with them up to Highlandia. It worked out okay. I got up there, anyway.

Litzelfelner: So when you got to Highlandia, then you reported to your ship?

Mr. Balch: Right. USS Blue Ridge.

Litzelfelner: What kind of a ship?

Mr. Balch: It's a AGC-2, which was a communications ship. You had your ship's company, they ran the ship. They had a flag, an admiral on there, with his thirty radiomen and thirty signalmen, and what they call a small detail, a general detail, to take care of other things, other duties.

Litzelfelner: So you were one of thirty radiomen then that were aboard ship?

Mr. Balch: I think there was thirty. Somewhere around that number. Because we had a radio room gosh as big as this thing right here aboard that ship. We had rows here, receivers and transmitters on one side, on the other side. We had about three or four rows of them. It was a big communication ...

Litzelfelner: What you would do, all the radio communications would be in Morse Code, wouldn't they?

Mr. Balch: Yes, they would.

Litzelfelner: Like you'd have to send ...

Mr. Balch: We didn't do much sending. We mostly were copying. They had a radio station out of the Manus Island in the Admiralty Island group, they had a big communication station that send out on tape 5 letter groups. They sent out twenty four hours a day, and you just copied all of those coded messages. Five letter code groups, with a heading and a group in the body of the message, and then the ending. And that's what you did all day long.

Litzelfelner: So this would be encrypted?

Mr. Balch: All encrypted, and you couldn't read nothing.

Litzelfelner: What would happen to those after you copied them?

Mr. Balch: After we copied the code, we would give them to our supervisor, or put them on the desk up there, and then they'd send them to the decoding room. I didn't have anything to do with the decoding room. What they did, we had some little machines that we could put the heading on the message, we had to encode it, it was kind of like a little thing that had numbers and letters – you had a little pen, you'd pull it up, kind of like a combination lock, only it had big dial numbers and stuff. You had to decode, or encode, the message that this was going to, information so and so, from so and so. We were able to do that but, that is as close as we got. The other was a big decoding machine they had in a separate part of the ship.

Litzelfelner: Did you ever see those messages after they got decoded? Did they ever come back to you?

Mr. Balch: Oh, no, no. We never...but we'd hear scuttlebutt. We had friends that worked in the decoding room. We would hear what ??? (talking over each other.) But it was just orders, orders, orders. We also had about four teletype machines aboard that ship, too. You could send teletypes from place to place.

Litzelfelner: Would some of those reports be just sort of routine stuff, like weather reports?

Mr. Balch: I don't really know, they were called skids. They just operated twenty four hours a day. Message after message after message, all encoded. Later on, we were able to send messages in what they call "open", but you couldn't break radio silence most of the time. We used to get jammed, you know when the Japs were listening to us. They were monitoring us. They would jam the whole circuit, so we couldn't hear after about the first paragraph of the thing. They'd jam it in the middle, jam it in the end.

Litzelfelner: Would you have on a set of earphones?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, you were working with earphones, you know.

Litzelfelner: Would there be a whole bunch of guys in there receiving messages, coming in on different frequencies?

Mr. Balch: Normally, on the big ship we had one primary copier and one backup copier for each of the stations that we were receiving.

Litzelfelner: So those would each be a different frequency that they were sending on?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, different ones for different senders. Or maybe they were coming out of the same place but on different frequencies. Like Manus. Manus was a real big communication center. Manus Island.

Litzelfelner: Where is Manus Island?

Mr. Balch: It's in the Admiralty Islands. Down way south – due southeast of New Guinea. It had a big dry dock down there, in fact, that's where I worked when the war was over. August 15, 1945.

we had gone down there on the USS Wasatch to get outfitted for new guns and new this and new that. Getting ready for the invasion of Japan. Luckily the war was over on the 15th. I was sitting out on the ball field with three other of my buddies – we were drinking a couple of beers and we heard all these whistles and toots going off in the harbor on

those ships, and we knew something was up. Pretty soon they said the war was over. Course that was after they dropped the bomb – that was on August the 15th.

Litzelfelner: Was there a lot of celebrating going on?

Mr. Balch: There was a lot of celebrating. Well, I'm glad that they did that. That saved a lot of lives. I know it was horrible to drop the atomic bomb, because later on I went up to Japan, had a chance to go to Nagasaki, and it's terrible. Just seeing some of the pictures. Like a straw going through a tree and things like that. Was very devastating and killed so many people, but it did save a lot of American lives.

Litzelfelner: Did you worry about the radiation when you were up there in Nagasaki?

Mr. Balch: No – actually I was in Japan, but I didn't go to the town. I really didn't care to go to the town. This was much later, when I was stationed in Korea as a civilian. We took a trip over there, me and my wife, and we landed there. And we could have gone to Hiroshima and Nagasaki. But when we went to...after the war was over, and we went up from Manus Island up with the convoy to sign the peace treaties, we went up there and we went to Nagoya first and stayed a little while, and then went to Wakiyama and stayed a little more. That's when they took us off and put us on the Blue Ridge and sent us to China. That was in October of 1945. I learned a lot about radiation later on working with ammunition because we x-rayed a lot of ammunition and stuff and we had radiation devices. It has to be checked every so often to see if they are leaking. The container that's holding it, or something like that. Yeah, radiation just sticks right there for years and years and years. It does.

Litzelfelner: Back when you were receiving all these messages, what kind of watches would you have? Would you have to do this for four hours at a time?

Mr. Balch: Our watch was eight hour watches at that time. Eight hours on, and sixteen off. But the only time during GQ (general quarters), which came later when we got up to Leyte and from then on, when they had GQ, you were on four on and four off. That was the worst one, because you don't have time to sleep, you don't have time to do anything. Eight on and sixteen off is not too bad. Eight to twelve, or whatever it turned out to be. But I do know that I worked so many mid-watches at nighttime, sometimes I used to kind of doze off copying that code. You know, it just drums in your ear? A lot of times you get radio interference, so I would just put on there "garbled." As long as you were on the big ship,

when you had a backup, most of the time they got all the messages. When we went off on that APA, every person had to copy – just a single copier had to copy it. So you had to stay alert and stay awake.

Litzelfelner: When you were receiving a message like that in Morse Code, you're typing on the typewriter, can you talk to somebody at the same time?

Mr. Balch: No, I can't. I had to concentrate. There again, some people are better at copying and sending than other people. I've seen – well, we had a man, a sailor aboard our ship. His only duties were to copy press which came over in English from the States. It came over so fast I couldn't even read it. But he could copy sixty or sixty-five words a minute. The most I ever could copy was probably thirty-five. Thirty-five words a minute.

Litzelfelner: At that rate, his fingers must be going pretty fast on the keyboard.

Mr. Balch: But he told me, I used to go watch him when he was doing it. He would copy a whole sentence behind, you know like this here? All the way across? Maybe he's down here in his copying. I don't know how he could do it, but he did it.

Litzelfelner: Was it true that you get to recognize who's sending from the way they handle the keys?

Mr. Balch: We never did have that much direct communication with any people. I learned to use a bug, which is a speed key instead of a key. I used to practice because this other guy practiced, and he said that would help me to increase. I used to be able to send thirty or forty words a minute, you can send faster than you can receive. You know what you are going to say. I used to practice that a lot. I never did know of any, but I'm sure you can. If you and I corresponded for a while, I could get to tell your key. But with that speed key, I don't think you can. Have you ever seen one?

Litzelfelner: I don't think so.

Mr. Balch: It works from side to side – it's got a counter-balance on it. It goes "zip." Like >>>, that's an "s." (Sound effects describing speed key.) I used to try to stay knowledgeable in the code – I used to practice and listen to this, but I probably couldn't copy anything now.

Litzelfelner: Did you ever get interested in being a ham radio operator?

Mr. Balch: No, I never did. When I got out of the service, I went down and talked to the railroad people, and they didn't want it – of course, they didn't send very much, and actually, ours was International Morse Code, and the railroad used some other little off brand, similar

but if they hired you, they would want to send you to some little jerk-water town, so I didn't want to fool with it.

Litzelfelner: When did you make third class radioman?

Mr. Balch: I never did make third class. I stayed a seaman first, because in the Navy, you have to have a 3.8 average or something to get promoted. I could do the work of a first class radioman, but I was curious, and I took some leave aboard ships, and I had to pay for it. So I never did make it.

Litzelfelner: Did you have to take a test, or something like that?

Mr. Balch: No, I was doing the work of any of them, but I stayed a Seaman First Class all the time I was in the service. It was one of those things.

Litzelfelner: When you were on that first ship, did you ever get attacked by the Japanese, and that ship go to battle stations?

Mr. Balch: Oh, we went all the time. I can show you here on this (consulting papers). From October 20th we were on APA 44, the USS Fremont. From October 20th to the 17th of November, we had 175 air raids in Leyte. It's in the log right there.

Litzelfelner: Where would you go when the alarm sounded to go into battle stations?

Mr. Balch: We'd go down to the radio shack. That's the only place we would go. I'd just stand by – because we had other people there and you really didn't need to go there. That was all we did was radio. When I was off on that LCI rocket ship, two different times, they asked me to be a loader on a 50-caliber machine gun, which I was there... (laughter).

Litzelfelner: Did you learn how to do that?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, oh yeah. Just pull... I was going to do it, actually, I was just supposed to help feed those boxes – those M2A1 cans loaded with 50-caliber bullets? (Garbled) Mostly just a loader, really. Just helping.

Litzelfelner: Was your ship ever attacked where people got injured?

Mr. Balch: Not aboard our ship, no.

Litzelfelner: The Fremont, or AKA, or the rocket ship.

Mr. Balch: No, we had lots of air raids during the Leyte invasion, in fact, one incident, you know I can't remember the name of the group, but they came out of Nashville, Tennessee. It was a group – a band – and they made them all Chief Petty Officers in the Navy, and they just went around and entertained the troops. They came aboard our ship, and were putting on

a show, and it was stopped three times for air raids during that particular night. I will remember – Eddie Peabody the Banjo King was with them. You've heard of him?

Litzelfelner: No, I don't think so.

Mr. Balch: He was a banjo player out of Nashville, Tennessee. They came right up to the front. I don't know how they worked out the deal, but they made them all Chief Petty Officers in the Navy, and that's what they did.

Litzelfelner: Like they were chief musicians.

Mr. Balch: Yeah, all of them were. They were a good group.

Litzelfelner: When you were handling for that 50-caliber gun – what were they shooting at?

Mr. Balch: On this rocket ship, it's an LCI (Landing Craft Infantry) converted – and what it is, it's got little things that let down in the front – little ladders where the troops could go off. These were converted to rocket ships. And what they did, on each side, the port and the starboard side, they put some metal racks, looked like a Coke bottle holder. Made out of thin metal. And each rack held thirty-six rockets. And they were from front to back. We just went in to the beach and they fired them. Fired this group, this group, this group. The closer to the beach, you just spread out. They just covered a pattern, you know. They would go in, fire all of them, and then back off, then reload them up again. Course I didn't load them, because they had other ordinance people to do that. They'd load them all back up again, and we'd go in again.

Litzelfelner: This would be that AKA?

Mr. Balch: No, it was a LCI rocket ship. (Landing Craft Infantry)

Litzelfelner: Where would you go back to get reloaded?

Mr. Balch: You would back off the beach, straight out. We went in as a group. You'd have some more over here, some more over here.

Litzelfelner: Where would they go to get reloaded?

Mr. Balch: Just back off the beach a little ways, and just reload.

Litzelfelner: Oh, they carried a bunch of ammunition?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, they carried it all. The rockets were only 2.36. They were just a real small rocket, but they were long – about this long. You just stuffed them down in those things, and it was all electrically fired. But we got stuck on the beach twice in a row. And the other

LCI had to come and pull us out. But luckily, we didn't get any resistance on those particular times where we were hitting. Some of them did, some of them didn't.

Litzelfelner: What island was that?

Mr. Balch: That's the one I can't remember so clearly. I volunteered to go with this commander, and it was somewhere down in the south – either Mindoro or Mindanao. Somewhere way out in the far away little islands. And they had some LCI rocket ships and also some gun ships. They had mostly 40-millimeter cannons which I think was the largest – it may have had a three inch. And they would go in because they were shallow-bottomed, and they could go into these canals and places, and just shoot up the jungles. In fact, wherever this place was, that's when the Japs started using not only the Kamikazes, but they had a Q-boat (small motor boats) loaded the same way. It was a little small boat with a high-powered motor on it loaded with explosives. They came in and they got one of our LCI's.

Litzelfelner: Just ram it into them?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, just ram it into it. The night that they got one of them, the next day we just went all up and down, everywhere we could, and they just fired and fired. They just shredded the jungle, you know.

Litzelfelner: How long did you have to do that?

Mr. Balch: Well, that lasted all day long that day. But I volunteered to go off two different times on rocket ships with this commander. And they would last for say like a week or so at a time. I lived on there with that crew, which I really liked. They got to dock up next to the beaches and everything you know.

Litzelfelner: I didn't know that would be big enough for you to sleep on.

Mr. Balch: Oh, yeah, they're little...

Litzelfelner: They carry enough food on there?

Mr. Balch: Yeah. You don't eat as good as I did on board my main ship. Fact, being on the Wasatch or the Blue Ridge, they have big re-supplies. Smaller ships used to come alongside and we would give them ice cream. Five gallons of this, ten gallons of this, fifteen gallons of this. They didn't have any facilities to have ice cream. They would do that – all of them did that.

Litzelfelner: Of all those ships that you served on, which one did you like the best – which one was the best:

Mr. Balch: They were all the same, really. They were made up the same. Except the Wasatch was a newer type – it was made in Newark. The Blue Ridge was the original AGC in the South Pacific, and I think it was modified overseas, I don't know. But the Wasatch was made in the States, in fact I've got a deal on the USS Wasatch. When it was put in commission – there it is right there. It was AGC-9. These dates I was aboard it, but like I say, it was just newer. But same facilities for us. Sleeping quarters weren't very crowded for us, except that APA-44, we had really, really crowded facilities there, because it was a troop transport, and we carried probably... I don't even know how many we carried. But it was a whole bunch of them. We didn't even have tables in the dining room on that ship. It just had stanchions that you stood up and ate. And you ate real quick. Cause they had to feed a lot of people, you know. So you would eat and get out of there, and more would come in. Over all, it wasn't too bad. I wasn't even old enough to know too much.

Litzelfelner: Did you ever get to go on liberty on board any of these ships? Would they pull into a port somewhere where you could go on liberty?

Mr. Balch: The closest thing to liberty we had was they would give a beer party. Like over on the island, and take you over in a landing craft, and they would let you have two or three beers each, and you drank it over there because you couldn't drink aboard ship. Like the limeys do. And that was it, but we never went around any towns. There was no...

Litzelfelner: Did you ever get to go to Australia?

Mr. Balch: No, I never did. Went straight on up, our first invasion was Morotai. I think we landed there September 15, 1944, or something. Well, it tells you on there when it was. But from there we went on up to Leyte – stayed up there awhile. Then we came back and then we went from there on up to Lingayen Gulf, and landed some more troops. And then we came back to Leyte and went ashore. We changed ships – that ship, the APO-44 went back to the States, and they took us off and put us on the beach, and we stayed in tents for a couple of weeks over there until they decided what they were going to do with us. Our admiral, too, he went there. Then after that, that's when we went to... well, it's not clear whether I went straight to those LCI's from there, it's kinda hazy about that part of it. I'm trying to find out now through the Navy Department... if they can put all these

things on my discharge, they could also put some dates on there, too. Whether they kept records of that close or not, I don't even know whether they stated that I was actually went with this commander. I think his name was Commander Day, I don't know. But he was a very interesting...he was older. He was a New York lawyer, and he told me one day, he was kinda small, and he said, "You know, after this war, if you're not a veteran, you're not going to do very good." So he came back in the service – but he wasn't scared of anything. He used to sit up on the conning tower with his legs hanging over when we would be going in there firing those rockets!

Litzelfelner: He wanted to have a good view, I guess.

Mr. Balch: But it was something.

Litzelfelner: You say you were at that one island when the war ended?

Mr. Balch: Yes, it was Manus Island. Our ship was in dry dock. USS Wasatch – was in dry dock, we were getting outfitted for – I guess – they told us for - new guns, new equipment and so on - getting ready for the invasion of Japan.

Litzelfelner: That was a communications ship?

Mr. Balch: Yeah – AGC. Here – AGC-9. They had AGC-8, which I think was the Mt. McKinley, they're all named after mountains. Blue Ridge, you know was AGC-2. We used to run with the Mt. McKinley a lot, too. Theirs was Comfib (Commanded Amphibian Group) Group 9. It's funny, you know we were on AGC-9, but ours was Comfib Group 8, and they were Comfib Group 9. Which is vice versa. I often wondered if they made a mistake.

Litzelfelner: It's to confuse the Japanese. (laughter) Where did you go, then, after the war, when the Japanese surrendered?

Mr. Balch: When the Japanese surrendered, we went from there, on the Wasatch, up to Japan. Nagoya, Japan. We stayed at Nagoya. This was in September, 1945. And then from there, we stayed there a few days and then went on to Wakiyama, Japan, and we stayed there. That was all the time they were signing the peace treaty on the USS New Jersey, or Iowa, or...?

Litzelfelner: Missouri.

Mr. Balch: Missouri, right. We were due to go home. We had been overseas twenty-some-odd months. You know, you had points. If you had so many points, you could go home. We

got a few extra points for being in those landings, I guess, I don't know. But anyway, when we got there, a couple of days before we were due to take off and come back to the States, we got word that we were going to go to China. So they took us off of that ship, and put us on the Blue Ridge and we went from there to Inchon, Korea, in October or November of 1945. And it was cold, cold, cold over there. I never will forget, you know they had some kind of sampans. We pulled in there and anchored. And some of those sampans would come up – beggars – and some of the guys in the ship turned their hose on them – squirting them. And it was cold out there – I felt so sorry for those people down there. Some Americans are not too considerate. But then from there we went on up to Tsingtao, Japan (correction - this is in China), I think that was our first stop. And I had a chance to go to Peking – that's what they called it then. But you had to go on an LCI – we were here out in the bay. You had to go on an LCI fifty-some-odd miles up a river. And I decided against going up there. I didn't go – it would have been a good experience, I guess, but it was an overnight trip. You went up one day and come back the next. But we just went back and forth up and down the Chinese coast Tsingtao, can't even think of all the names now – between there and Shanghai. Back and forth – I don't know really what we were doing.

Litzelfelner: Patrolling.

Mr. Balch: Although we did get liberty there. Our admiral – he was in charge of repatriating all those Japanese who had surrendered over there getting them back to Japan. We didn't ever see any of them.

Litzelfelner: You didn't ever pick up any of them?

Mr. Balch: No.

Litzelfelner: Were there other U.S. ships there that were maybe picking them up?

Mr. Balch: I don't know.

Litzelfelner: AKA, or somebody? Transports/Troop/

Mr. Balch: Possibly there were. They had to get them back over there somehow. But I never will forget the first liberty I went on in (garbled) in Japan, too, when the war was over. We didn't know what they were going to think, and they didn't know what we were going to think, and we were only allowed to take fifteen dollars in yen ashore with us. I think they were just as scared of us as we were of them. We weren't scared, because it was over,

but one of my buddies – he had a brother who was on the Arizona and got killed. And his name was Fisher – he lived in Iowa, the same town that those Sullivan brothers came from. I said, “You’re not going to go ashore?” He said, “No – what do you think my Mother would say if I went into Japan – and they killed my brother.” So he didn’t go. He felt real strong about it.

Litzelfelner: How long did that last that you were over there in China?

Mr. Balch: It lasted until February 22 of ’46. We took off – our admiral was the senior officer afloat, and we were in the Yangtze River – they didn’t have a dock. You went down and it was a huge river. And they had buoys out in the middle. That’s where the ships anchored. When we took off that day, all the ships had to stand at attention for the senior officer. I never will forget seeing a British ship – we passed it – sometimes the British were not too ??? topside because they had to stand at attention. We just waved at them. But it was a happy day, heading home.

Litzelfelner: So from there you came back to the United States?

Mr. Balch: We came straight to Hawaii. Stayed a couple of days and then from Hawaii to the United States. I was overseas twenty-two months. It was pretty action-filled.

Litzelfelner: Was there any action you got into that you were kind of worried about how things were going to turn out?

Mr. Balch: Well, yeah, specially at Leyte. I didn’t hear any guys mention this in this thing today, but being on the radio circuit, we monitored air circuits and listened. We would get word that there were five hundred bogies heading for us. Bogies are a foreign plane, enemy plane. Then they’d say...no. We had planes going up to meet them. Time they got to us, they always shot the hell out of them. We were thankful for that. But sometimes we would have fifty or seventy-five coming on in. And they would come in. And all during the time we were at Leyte, when we would get the word that they were coming, they would send these LCI’s or LCVP’s that had smoke generators on them. Just all around. They kept us...so they couldn’t see. When they couldn’t see, we couldn’t see either. But we saw lots of planes come in and try to hit ships and so on.

Litzelfelner: But you say your ship never got hit?

Mr. Balch: No, it didn’t. That was the biggest convoy up until that time. And then when we went up to Luzon, that was the next biggest convoy. Strung out a long way. Now, when we were

going up there, a Kamikaze came in just across our bow, and missed us pretty good, and hit the ship next to us and killed twenty-one or twenty-two sailors on it. Right in the port side amidships. And that was really sad. Specially seeing them bury them the next day. Dropping them off the chute with the flag over it. That's why later on – you know, like I say, well, I went to work for D.O.D. (Department of Defense?), and I traveled quite a bit in lots of foreign countries. And the people were so worried about the missing in action at Viet Nam and here and there. But what did they think about those guys, those sailors who were buried at sea?

(End of side one)

Litzelfelner: Well, when you got back from Hawaii, then you came to San Diego, when you were coming back?

Mr. Balch: Oh, no. We went to Hawaii, came into San Pedro. I was on the USS Blue Ridge again. That was an old AGC, and what they did, they went in dry dock, and they started outfitting it for the Bikini Atoll test, and they were fixing up all the staterooms for all the senators and the congressmen and everything to go out on that. That was the flagship to go out there later on when they had the test.

Litzelfelner: You didn't go on that?

Mr. Balch: No, I was out of the Navy. I went on back to Houston.

Litzelfelner: You got discharged then in San Pedro?

Mr. Balch: Actually, I was at Galveston. I went down to Galveston - that's a receiving station down there, and was discharged.

Litzelfelner: You got on a train again?

Mr. Balch: No, I think I drove down there. I just came home. My mother and dad had moved from out in the country there into town. When I came home on that delayed orders leave, fortunately I met my wife. She was from Baytown, and we corresponded all during the war, and we were married September 28, 1946, after I got out.

Litzelfelner: Didn't take you long, did it?

Mr. Balch: No.

Litzelfelner: I was going to ask you if you got much mail while you were out there?

Mr. Balch: She used to write me...course you didn't get it all the time...but I would get four, five, six, seven letters at a time. I didn't write too often, in fact, she went to the Red Cross one

time, and I got chewed out about not writing home. Well, you know, the younger you are, a lot of people... now, when I worked for civil service, I wrote faithfully all the time. Young people just don't do that kind of stuff too much.

Litzelfelner: Maybe you had a good excuse – you were busy!

Mr. Balch: Right! But over all, I enjoyed my work as being a radio operator. I guess I'm glad – when I hear some of the stories of some of these guys – they really had it tough.

Litzelfelner: Were you aware of this big battle (of Leyte Gulf) that was going on?

Mr. Balch: You're durn right. We knew Halsey's troops were – his group was several hours – They had gone up north looking for that carrier task force, and we got word that the Japs were – yes, we were well aware that on October 24 – the night of the 24th and 25. We were well aware how close they were. We expected them to come right on in there. Cause they could have. There is still an argument about whether he was to blame or not. I don't know. I don't blame anybody – everybody was just trying to do their job.

Litzelfelner: You don't blame Halsey for taking off?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, for taking off.

Litzelfelner: Well, that was the Japanese plan I think, wasn't it? They planned to lure him away.

Mr. Balch: Over all, it was a good experience. But some of those guys - One guy who talked there today – he was shot down, and he lived on the islands. Some Filipinos saved him. He lived with them two or three months. But we recruited a lot of young Filipino boys, and they took them in the Navy, and they came aboard our ship as stewards. Working in the mess hall and so on. Gave a lot of them a good break. The Filipino people were sure glad to see us, I'll tell you that. When we went back up heading – I don't know exactly what time it was – we stopped off in Manila. I did get a liberty in Manila, and I talked to some people. In fact I met some Filipinos, and they took me to their house for supper. This guy told me, he said, "You know, they bombarded Manila for fifteen or twenty days with all the cruisers and everything." And he said he was hoping the Americans would quit and go. They were tearing up everything.

Litzelfelner: Could they speak very good English?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, most of them could. How long is that? Thirty minutes or so?

Litzelfelner: I think it's forty-five minutes. Are there any other experiences that come to mind that you'd like to get down?

Mr. Balch: No, I think that covers just about everything. When I was on the LCI ship, we were close to Samar, and I had a chance to go to the landing strip there. I did see...I used to go...I loved to see the planes with the Zeroes on the side of them, and I saw... there was a Major Bong, and he had – the whole side of his plane was full of those little Zeroes – little flags painted on there. I remember his name because I said I'll remember it, but he got killed later on. I think he was a test pilot after that. He was an ace many, many times over.

Litzelfelner: I was going to ask you whatever happened to him.

Mr. Balch: He got killed several years later.

Litzelfelner: You mean after the war was over?

Mr. Balch: Yeah, after the war. So tragic you know – you hear so many stories about people going through all this kind of action and then some freak accident and they get killed. So you can't ever tell.

Litzelfelner: It sounds like the only man that got killed on that one AGC you were on was during the initiation.

Mr. Balch: Now, that was on a troop transport going over. No, we didn't get anybody hurt aboard any of the ships that I was on.

Litzelfelner: I would say you were lucky.

Mr. Balch: We were, yeah. And you know, I asked my sister. My sister and her husband – he went to Howard Payne College. He was going to be a preacher. And I asked him – they were very religious. I said, "I don't understand it. You see some of these guys ???, why could it not have been us instead of them?" She said, "Well, you had an awful lot of prayers said for you." So you don't know.

Litzelfelner: As a radioman, if you had gotten sent to a destroyer, you might have had a lot rougher time.

Mr. Balch: Oh, yeah, probably would have. Actually, out of school, I applied for – I put in for submarine duty at the university. They asked everybody if you want to go to New London, Connecticut. I did pretty good in school, but I wasn't in the top five percent. They picked another guy, and they sent him there, and I saw him in New Guinea. He didn't stay there. But he said, "You're lucky you didn't go there." Evidently he didn't like it at all. Being on a submarine. I don't think I would have liked being on a submarine, either.

Litzelfelner: He got off the submarines?

Mr. Balch: He never did get into it for some reason, I don't know. But those guys, they had it too you know. Course, everybody had it. Some people are lucky, some people are not lucky. I don't know. That's why you have to live every day to the fullest. That's my motto. I've seen so many guys – ammunition especially – I work with people with ammunition. A lot of chiefs say, "When I retire, I'm going to do so and so." When you retire, you may live two days and you may live six months. I've seen so many that happened to. I try to live every day to the fullest.

Litzelfelner: Sounds like a good idea.

Mr. Balch: I'm 79 years old, I was just 79, and me and my son we raise produce out in Seguin. We have ten acres over there. We go to the little markets around that area. It's a lot of fun, but it's getting pretty old. You can't do as many things as you used to could do. How old are you, sir?

Litzelfelner: I'm seventy.

Mr. Balch: Hanging in there good.

Litzelfelner: Well, thanks a lot, Bob, for volunteering to provide us with the interview, and letting us know about your experiences.

Mr. Balch: You're quite welcome. Thank you very much.

PROOF

Nancy Cason, Transcriber

Bob Cason, Proofreader

National Museum of the Pacific War

Interviewer: Joe Litzelfelner

June 29, 2010

Tape #1243