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Interview With

ALAN A. FOUTS

Place of Interview: Fredericksburg, Texas

Interviewer: William J. Alexander

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Mr. Alexander: This interview with Alan Fouts is being taken in Fredericksburg, Texas, at the National Museum of the Pacific War. It's December 6, 2001. I'm interviewing Mr. Fouts in order to get his experiences while assigned to the Submarine Base during the Japanese attack on the American naval base at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941.

Let me ask you this, Alan. Where and when were you born?

Mr. Fouts: I was born in Port Arthur, Texas, on October 13, 1920.

Mr. Alexander: Tell me about your mother and father. Were they immigrants?

Fouts: No. My father was a Texan. His name was Horace Arthur Fouts. My mother was a Louisianan. Her name was Willie James Edwards. That caused many a comment (chuckle). Her parents had thirteen kids, and they finally got a boy. After they named my mother "Willie James," they got a "John" (chuckle).

Alexander: What about your sisters and brothers?

Fouts: I have a brother, who's two years older, born in 1918, named James Fremont Fouts; and I have a sister, Elizabeth Ruth Fouts, born in September, 1919. I'm the youngest.

Alexander: Did you go through school in Port Arthur?

Fouts: I went to school in Port Arthur.

Alexander: What did your father do?

Fouts: My father worked for the Texas Company [Texaco] oil refinery. He was a success story. He started rolling barrels in the barrel farm and ended up building two refineries for the Texas Company, all on a high school and ICS education.

Alexander: So, you were in Port Arthur through your grade school?

Fouts: I was in Port Arthur until the fall of 1928. We moved to San Antonio, Texas. He built the first refinery for the Texas Company in San Antonio. In 1934 we moved from there to El Paso, Texas. He was the superintendent of the refinery there. He modernized it and stayed as the superintendent. I joined the Navy in 1939.

Alexander: Let's go back to your education. Where did you go through grade school?

Fouts: In Port Arthur and San Antonio. In El Paso, I finished high school. I got a GED [general education diploma].

Alexander: Why did you do that?

Fouts: Well, I had an English teacher who didn't like me, and she flunked me in English. The notebook with all my daily tests, weekly tests, notebook reports and everything said that I should have gotten a "94," but she flunked me. I went to see the principal, and he sided with the teacher. He said that she knew best, so I said, "Well, you lost a student." I went to the El Paso Technical Institute, and they said, "No problem!" They

gave me credit for it. I went through there, but then I joined the Navy in 1939. I thought I joined the Navy on November 26.

Alexander: Did you join at El Paso?

Fouts: Yes. There were fourteen of us who left El Paso for San Diego, California, for boot camp. We got in on the day before Thanksgiving. They got us all suited out and everything.

On December 12, 1939, they got all fourteen of us from El Paso and said, "The commanding officer has invited you over to his office." We dressed up in our dress blues and everything and got shined up, wondering what was going on. We got over to the personnel office. The personnel officer greeted us and said, "Gentlemen..."

That was the first time we'd heard that word (chuckle). The recruit routine was to be up at 4:30 a.m. and then going through all the general routine of the day there in boot camp--marching your hind end off every day. Every day you scrubbed a suit of clothes out of a bucket of water. We slept in hammocks

in those days. So, anyway, we were looking at each other, wondering what was going on. He said, "It'll be just a moment."

The executive officer, a commander, walked out. The executive officer said, "Gentlemen, come in!" He took us into his office and said, "One moment. I'll see if the commanding officer's ready." He opened the commanding officer's door, looked in, and said, "They're here." He said, "Gentlemen, come in!" We went in, and the commanding officer stood up and said, "Gentlemen, how are you this morning?"

Alexander: Did you have your caps on?

Fouts: Oh, yes!

Alexander: Did you salute him?

Fouts: Oh, yes! Everybody saluted and everything, and he said, "That's all right! That's all right! Gentlemen, sit down." They had seats there for us. We sat down, and he said, "Have a cup of coffee."

Alexander: Then you knew something had to be coming!

Fouts: Something *had* to be coming! He went over and got a tray of coffee cups. The executive

officer was passing out the coffee and cream and sugar. They offered it to us, and we all took it black. We were afraid to take the cream and sugar (chuckle). So, we sat there and drank a little coffee.

He started asking: "Where did [you] come from? Where did [you] come from," and this, that, and the other. We all came through the recruiting station at El Paso, but we came from the western part of Texas and New Mexico, from Clovis, New Mexico; Dalhart, Texas; Amarillo, Texas, and all around.

So, anyway, he said, "Well, gentlemen, I have some startling news for you." Everything got quiet, and he said, "You're not in the Navy." He said, "That's right! You're not in the Navy." We had this one guy, by the name of Buell, who was a misfit. He hated everything. He stood up and said, "You mean if I wanted to leave this office and go home right now, I could?" He said, "That's right." He said, "See ya!" and walked out (chuckle). The executive officer opened the door, and he left.

He said, "Well, it appears that the recruiting office failed to swear you in before they sent you here, so legally you're not in the Navy. Now, all those of you who want to get in the Navy, stand up and raise your right hand." We all stood up and raised our hands, and he swore us in. That's how I stayed in the Navy (chuckle).

Alexander: They hadn't sworn you in before?

Fouts: No. They just gave us our traveling orders and train tickets and sent us in.

Alexander: How long had you been in San Diego and boot camp when this happened?

Fouts: We did the full six months. So, I got out of boot camp and went to the USS *Argonne*. It was named after the Battle of Argonne Forest in World War I.

Alexander: What kind of ship was the *Argonne*?

Fouts: It was a submarine tender. She was converted into a transport and repair ship, but she still retained her "AS" designation--AS-31. She ended up as a small-craft repair ship. The admiral who was in charge of the service craft, tugs, oil barges, tankers, and repair

ships of the Pacific Fleet was known as Commander, Fleet Base Force. [Editor's note: Rear Admiral William L. Calhoun was Commander, Fleet Base Force, at the beginning of U.S. involvement in World War II.]

Alexander: But he was in San Diego, not in Pearl Harbor.

Fouts: He was in San Diego, on the *Argonne*. She was his flagship. On April 1, 1940, we were in San Pedro, California. We went out on a six-week maneuver to Pearl Harbor. We got out to Pearl Harbor. Then we went to Lahaina Roads, Maui, where the Pacific Fleet passed in review. That was the last big congregation of Navy ships. All the major ships of the Navy went past in review. Everybody was on deck. Of course, we had all the dignitaries on the *Argonne* because we had a long promenade deck with a cover over it in case it rained (chuckle). I think there were five admirals aboard that day, and a whole bunch of other dignitaries.

Alexander: How many other ships passed by? I don't mean exactly. Most of the ships that were in Pearl Harbor?

Fouts: All of the ships in Pearl Harbor. They came from other places, even from the islands, just for that parade.

Alexander: What would be the significance of doing that? I know it was an old Navy-type of thing to do it.

Fouts: Primarily, it was just a matter of showing strength and national pride, and it was good for recruiting.

Alexander: We were having real problems with Japan at that time.

Fouts: We were starting to have them, yes.

Alexander: So, that was probably what it was for, wasn't it?

Fouts: Yes, that's what it was for. They had started increasing recruitment requirements and everything. By 1940, they had changed the recruit training from six months to three months, and it stayed that way for the rest of the war.

Alexander: But you have a pretty good memory of what that was like. How did you feel about it when you were standing there, watching all these ships go by?

Fouts: Quite frankly, I got "sold" on the Navy when I was a kid. My grandfather on my mother's side had a book that was given to him on the "Great White Fleet," which was made when it did the same thing. [Editor's note: The "Great White Fleet" was a detachment of sixteen white-painted battleships and other ships sent on a worldwide show-of-force tour by President Teddy Roosevelt from December, 1907, to February, 1909.] It was a big book about eighteen inches long and about twelve or fourteen inches tall and three-quarters of an inch thick, and it had all the battleships, cruisers, destroyers, and ships going past in review off the East Coast. I saw that, with all these sailors sitting all over the guns and superstructures of the "battlewagons" when they took their photograph.

It took me three years to get into the Navy. When I was seventeen years old, I tried to get in the Navy. They sent me out to the Army post at Fort Bliss, Texas, near El Paso, and the Army dentist said I had a

malocclusion of my lower left two molars. They sent that information in with my paperwork to Houston, which was the center for the recruiting district. I got a letter from the Navy Bureau of Personnel rejecting me because I had this "medical deformity," as they called it.

My dad was talking to one of the people in his office at the refinery, and he said, "Why don't you go and see the state representative?" He was a guy by the name of Thomason. He said, "He can probably get you in." So, I went down and saw him. He looked and saw what the letter said, and he said, "Does this affect your chewing or anything like that?" I said, "No, sir!" He said, "Can you chew peanuts?" I said, "Yes, sir!" He turned to his secretary and pulled a dollar out and said, "Go get him a package of peanuts down at the shoeshine stand!" She came back up and gave me some peanuts. I chewed the peanuts up, and he said, "I don't see anything wrong with you! I'll write a letter."

That didn't get me in. I got a letter from the chief of surgeons at the Bureau of Medicine saying that he'd reviewed my case, and that I still wasn't fit. I showed that to ol' Thomason, and he said, "Any damned fool ought to be able to see this isn't a problem!" He called his dentist and talked to him for a little bit. The dentist said, "Send him down!" So, I went down to see him. He looked at me and said, "There's nothing in the world wrong healthwise!" He made a plaster cast of my teeth. He mounted it on a hinge so that you could see how they fit. He put some wax in my mouth, and I bit down through the wax. He boxed it up, and they mailed that out to the chief of surgeons (chuckle).

We got a letter back from him: "We've reviewed it once more. We've inspected your interesting display, but he does not fit the Navy's requirements medically. For instance, if he were assigned to submarine duty, he could not properly hold a Momsen lung [an air-recycling bag] in his mouth. Therefore,

he could not escape a submarine safely. So, with regrets, he is rejected."

I forgot about it. I had bought a motorcycle, and I was working for the Harley-Davidson motorcycle shop in El Paso. One day, a Navy chief rode in on a motorcycle. He was the recruiter for the El Paso district. We talked a little bit, and I said, "I tried to get in the Navy a couple of years ago." I told him my story, and he said, "Well, how about that!" This was in 1939.

About two weeks later, he called me up and said, "Fouts, are you still interested in getting in the Navy?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I found your paperwork. You made a '99' on the entrance exam. You should have been taken." I said, "Well, you know the story." He said, "Would you still like to get in?" I said, "Sure!" He said--this was a Monday--"Could you leave Wednesday morning, early, for San Diego?" I said, "What's going to happen? Am I going to get out there, and they're going to send me back?" He said,

"Well, you can't beat a free vacation, can you? Don't say anything about it!" I said, "Okay." He said, "I'll have your train ticket for you Tuesday night. Drop by the office and pick it up." (chuckle)

Alexander: But he didn't swear you in.

Fouts: No. He didn't swear any of us in because he was enlisted. Being as he was an enlisted man, he could not swear us in. It took a commissioned officer to swear you in, and he was a chief yeoman. So, that's how I got there.

In those days, they'd take you to the sick bay and line you up in the hall. There were about forty of us. We stripped down when we got there. We took off our shoes and everything, and then we went through the medical examination. They took your pulse and blood pressure. You said "Aah," "Ooh," and all the other things--"Cough!" and the rest of it (chuckle).

Alexander: And, "Grab your ankles!"

Fouts: Right! "Spread your cheeks!" (chuckle) I got around all that. From there, you went to

small stores and got some clothes to put on.

Alexander: I hope they gave you something to wear to get to the stores.

Fouts: No! It was right next door, just down the hall from there--out one door and into the other door. We got some "skivvies" [underwear] to put on, and then we got the rest of the stuff. They had a room there to put your clothes on. Everything else--your old clothes--you put in a cardboard box, and they sealed it up and sent it home. Now you'd probably be violating somebody's privacy if you took that many guys (chuckle)...particularly, it'd be amusing with an integrated crew.

Anyway, from there, like I said, on April 1, 1940, we went to Pearl Harbor. In October, 1940, we were scheduled to come back to the States. We had everything almost completely loose from the pier. We were getting ready to back out from Ten-Ten Dock. [Editor's note: Ten-Ten Dock was so-named because it was 1,010 feet in length.] They secured it, and we pulled back alongside.

They said, "You're going to stay and go through repairs." They were going to arm the ship. The ship, at that time, had a 6-pounder saluting battery on it, and no other guns of any sort. It had small-arms for boarding parties and things like that, but it didn't have any basic armament like you'd expect--guns and stuff.

Alexander: Did you get leave there?

Fouts: No, we stayed there. People who had time could get leave and go, but we didn't. We stayed there and chipped that ship from top to bottom. We chipped the paint with a chipping hammer or an air-chipping hammer, a file scraper, and a wire brush every day for six weeks. They would take three little gondola cars from the pineapple train--the cars were about half the length and size of a regular gondola train car--full of paint chips away from the ship.

Alexander: What did they do with it?

Fouts: I don't know what they did with it. I think that they put it on a barge and dumped it at sea, probably--good ol' lead-based paint!

Alexander: You were in dry dock, then.

Fouts: No, we were alongside the pier. We went into dry dock later. We chipped the superstructure, from the top of the mast right on down to the waterline. Then we went into the dry dock. We were the most beautiful dry dock crew you've ever seen! They had done away with the dress whites. They used to have the white uniforms with the blue-striped collar and the blue-striped cuffs. They did away with that uniform and the flat hat. Everybody put on their dress whites and went over the side in the dry dock (chuckle).

Alexander: To do what?

Fouts: To chip the bottom of the ship from the waterline down (chuckle). That lasted for about a day, and then we went to dungarees. The whites got too dirty, and most of them ended up in the trash. So, we chipped the bottom of the ship there.

I'd put in a gunner's mate third class course because I wanted to be a gunner's mate. They tried to talk me out of it

because we didn't have any guns on there except for the saluting battery. I said, "I don't care. It shows I'm interested in it, anyway."

I was over the side chipping paint alongside the pier, and here came a couple of railroad cars with four 5-inch/51 cannons. They were all rusted up and full of red lead and everything. They really looked bad. The guy on the flatcar said, "Hey! Who up there's in charge of these things?" I said, "I don't know! Ask the OD [officer of the deck] back there!" He went back to the gangplank and went up and saw the OD.

Next thing you know, the executive officer came over there and said, "Fouts!" I looked up, and he said, "See those guns? You wanted to be a gunner's mate. There's your chance!" (chuckle) That's how I became a gunner's mate.

Alexander: What did you do with those guns?

Fouts: I chipped them and everything. I ran into a sympathetic civilian from Shop 38, which was the ordnance shop there at the repair base.

I was out there looking at them, and he said, "Are you the gunner's mate?" I said, "I just became the gunner's mate?" He asked how I just became the gunner's mate, and I told him. He said, "Well, look. Who's gonna help you?" I said, "I haven't got any help, yet. It's just me."

He said, "Why don't we do this thing right? Let's go see your executive officer." We went aboard and saw the executive officer. He said, "You've only got Fouts here. Who's gonna help him?" He said, "We don't have anybody we can assign with him right now." He said, "Well, Commander, I don't think that's fair. I'll tell you what I'll do. If that's the way things are, we'll take those guns back over to the ship. We'll sandblast them and teach Fouts how to dismantle them and put them back together. We'll paint them and send them back. How's that?" He said, "That's fine."

So, I said, "What am I gonna do about muster?" He said, "Don't worry about muster. It'll be taken care of. Just tell the OD

when you leave that you're going to Shop 38." So, I went over there.

While I was over there, they decided to put four 3-inch/23 antiaircraft guns on the ship. The way that works with a 3-inch/23 or a 5-inch/51 is that the inch is the bore diameter; and the caliber is the number of bore diameters in the length of the barrel. So, a 3-inch/23 gun is three inches in diameter and twenty-three calibers--69"--long. They were completely manual, as were the 5-inch/51s. They were hand-trained. With the 3-inch, you walked around the thing and moved it. It had a shoulder mount. The gunner pointed and trained it all at the same time.

Also, while I was over there, the 20-millimeter guns came in. They had just come into the fleet, so I got to learn how to overhaul and repair 20-millimeter guns. They decided to put twelve of those on the ship. I already knew how to overhaul and repair .50-caliber machine guns and .30-caliber machine guns, both the Lewis and the

Brownings, from my brother, who was in the National Guard. I was in ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps], and I learned how to take those apart, and .45s [-caliber pistols] and the old .30-06 rifles. So, that part was easy.

I got back to the ship. I had all this nice, freshly-painted stuff there. I had magazines that were full of metal cuttings and things like that. I was really working to get that stuff out. I still didn't have any help. Finally, I got some help. I got two guys--after all the hard, back-breaking work was done (chuckle).

Alexander: Were you at this point a gunner's mate?

Fouts: I made gunner's mate third class on the first exam I took. I was the first gunner's mate on the list for that section for the Base Force. In the meantime, all this was going on, but before I became a gunner's mate, I became a diver. I started on the ship "striking" [applying for a specialty rating] as ship's diver.

Alexander: A ship's diver at that time was primarily

what?

Fouts: There was a qualified diver, and there was a second class diver. As a qualified diver, you had a Miller Dunn, which was the old "pot" [helmet] that you put on your head. You pumped air in it, and the air bubbled out around the sides. You had an air hose to it. There was no suit or anything, just the helmet. Primarily what you did as a qualified diver was go underneath the ship and plug holes so that they could take a valve off inside and repair it. You'd go down and pull the plug out, or they'd hydraulic it out with water pressure from the inside. They could pop it out. You wirebrushed the screws [propellers] and zincs on the ship. You had zincs to prevent electrolysis from eating the ship's hull up. As a second class diver, you learned how to operate in the full diving suit.

Alexander: Where were you when you did this?

Fouts: On the ship.

Alexander: Before you became a gunner's mate?

Fouts: Yes. They decided that I needed some more

schooling, so on December 1, 1941, I was assigned to the [submarine rescue vessel ASR-1] *Widgeon* on temporary duty to go to diving school.

Alexander: There at Pearl?

Fouts: Yes, over at the Submarine Base. I was sleeping at the Submarine Base barracks. I was in what they called the outer foyer. They had taken this big porch and bricked it in and put windows in it. They put bunks out there, and lockers, because of the expanding personnel. We had a full view of Pearl Harbor from there. I could look out and see Battleship Row and everything.

Alexander: You were actually along the submarines?

Fouts: Yes, but up on the hill, at the Submarine Base. I was attached to the USS *Widgeon*, which was an ASR--a submarine rescue vessel. I was one week into school when the war broke out.

Alexander: Of course, December 7, 1941, is when it started. What were you doing on that Sunday morning?

Fouts: The night before we had been over to the "Tin

Roof." They had a big, long tin-roofed shed over behind the stores landing. The "Tin Roof" was a nice place. You'd go over there in the evening and get a bucket of beer for fifty cents. You could get a two-pound bag of popcorn for a dime, and peanuts for the same price. Potato chips were cheaper than heck! They had pineapple cans that were unlabeled and never had tops on them, and you drank out of them.

Alexander: Did you have any girlfriends that you brought on the base?

Fouts: No. Some guys would bring their girls in there, but primarily it was just guys. Very occasionally they'd have somebody come over with a little novelty act--sing or do a hula or something.

Alexander: How many people would have been in there that night?

Fouts: Probably about 150 or 200 (chuckle). It was probably "the price is right" on the beer! So, we had been over there.

We came back and were going to sleep in. We didn't have anything particularly planned

for Sunday.

All of a sudden somebody broke about twelve or fourteen windows, and glass was falling down and hitting the concrete floor. Everybody sat up, and the guys who were up were fooling around and looking out: "What the hell's going on?" Then, all of a sudden, we saw the *Vestal* and *Medusa* get hit. They were repair ships. I saw the *Arizona* go up. Then I saw the *Oklahoma* keel over. I saw the *Shaw* go up over in the floating dry dock.

By that time, I had made up my mind real quick to go down to the ship. I got my clothes on and bailed out. When I got down to the *Widgeon*, I went to the guy on watch and asked, "Where are the guns? Nobody's shooting at those people!" He said, "No! They're all locked up in the magazine!" I said, "Let's get 'em!"

He said, "The key's in the commanding officer's safe. It's locked up." I looked over there, and I saw a fire axe. I said, "Well, here's the key!" (chuckle) He went down there and broke the lock off. He came

up with two Lewis machine guns--you know, the old large-barreled ones with the pan-type magazine, like you see in the old movies.

Alexander: You didn't carry that and shoot it, did you?

Fouts: No, but you could. People did hang it over their arms and shoot that day, but it got pretty hot pretty quick. Up on the bridge, they had some stanchions [poles] that you'd put them in.

When he brought them up, they were all packed in cosmoline. They had canvas and beeswax over the top of the cosmoline. They were all sealed up. I grabbed a bucket, went over to the base torpedo shop, and got a bucket of solvent. I came back to the ship and washed them all up.

They brought me four BARs [Browning automatic rifles], which were packed the same way. I got them all cleaned up. People started loading the magazines and canisters. By that time, they got up steam in the boilers and the commanding officer got to the ship. We got under way and went out.

Alexander: You went out into the harbor?

Fouts: Yes, to see what assistance we could give to the ships. We ended up measuring damage. We'd go alongside and put divers over, and they'd go down and measure the holes.

Alexander: This was after the attack, then?

Fouts: By that time, the first attack had petered out. We got out there alongside the *Arizona*, the *California*, and the *Nevada*. We measured the holes.

Alexander: You were down underneath the water there doing that?

Fouts: Yes. You'd go down there and take a piece of white line. You got the top of the hole, and they'd tie a knot in the rope. You'd go down to the bottom and they would tie a knot in it. The first knot showed how far down from the deck the hole began. The second knot was the width of the hole.

Alexander: Was this a rope?

Fouts: A piece of white line--quarter-inch.

Alexander: And somebody was topside?

Fouts: Yes, at the rail. The diver would go down. He'd go to the top of the hole where he was measuring vertically.

Alexander: So, they'd know what it was...

Fouts: ...from the railing to the top of the hole. You'd tie a knot and then go from there straight down to the bottom of the hole and tie a knot again. You'd come up, and then they'd measure between the two knots. That was how wide the hole was.

Alexander: How wide were they, would you say?

Fouts: Twelve or fourteen feet.

Alexander: What were they hit with?

Fouts: Torpedoes. A couple of smaller holes were from blasts from bombs that dropped inside. They were blown out from the inside.

Alexander: What did you see when you were down there?

Fouts: Nothing, mostly. It was too dark. It was full of mud and everything.

Alexander: And this was between the two attacks when you were doing this?

Fouts: Right. When the second attack came, we had people in the water doing this stuff.

That night, when the aircraft carrier [USS *Enterprise*] came in and the airplanes flew in, the usual pattern was to fly up there and come over the harbor, make a left-

hand turn, go around the island, and come back and land. That night they changed the pattern. They reversed the pattern. The pilots didn't get the word, so we shot down three of our own airplanes because they came in and made the usual run instead of breaking off and coming around the other way. Nobody got killed. They got out.

Alexander: Let me ask you about this. You were in the water when the second wave came in, then?

Fouts: Yes.

Alexander: Did they pull you out of there, or did they just leave you there?

Fouts: They just left me there.

Alexander: The second wave was really going after more of the ground stuff--the planes on the ground and so forth--more than the ships. [Editor's note: The U.S. aircraft and their facilities were the initial targets of the first wave of Japanese planes.] Was there anything that they dropped? They still had torpedoes going in there.

Fouts: They had torpedoes going. One guy tried to launch one to go into the Submarine Base. It

hit a coral shoal that stuck out there in the channel. There was a spar buoy out there, and he hit it and blew it up. It blew the coral shoal out of the channel (chuckle). The thing was too hard for the dredges to dig out. They came out to it, and there was this hard piece out there. But the torpedo did it!

Alexander: Was that the closest that the Submarine Base came to being hit?

Fouts: That's right. If it had been another twenty feet over to the right, it would have hit right in the middle of seven submarines.

Alexander: I've always heard and read that, for some reason, they didn't attack the submarines.

Fouts: It wasn't because they didn't try. It was just another one of those things that got screwed up in their operation, I guess--like ours.

Alexander: At this point I'm going to turn over the tape.

[Tape 1, Side 2]

Alexander: So, that was the only time that anybody tried to catch the submarines. Did you happen to

see it happen?

Fouts: Yes.

Alexander: Let's go back. They left you in the water when the second wave attacked. What happened?

Fouts: They just dropped some bombs there. They came down and dropped them, and then basically it was over. You couldn't yank a guy up real quick because he was down there with all that broken metal, and you didn't know where he was. So, he was just as well off there as somewhere else, unless a bomb was coming right down on top of you.

Alexander: So, you just kind of stayed down there?

Fouts: Right. I got back out, but it was all over with, basically.

Alexander: What happened the rest of the day?

Fouts: The rest of the day we spent going from ship to ship, doing the measuring stuff. We measured some of those holes five or six times because we'd get a different bunch of VIPs [very important persons] (chuckle). They immediately, somehow or other, got some civilian salvage experts. Each group of Navy

officers had a civilian expert with them, who had to have his own measurements, even though the same guys were going to do it for him (chuckle).

The next day, I got stuck in a motor whaleboat--a twenty-six-foot whaleboat--with a crew and a set of Queen gear. Queen gear was a magnetic detection device. You'd take a couple of oars and tie them together, and on the end of them, you tied on and dropped down in the water a round globe that would generate a magnetic field. It worked on the gradiometer principle--that is, two magnetic fields join down there, and anything that comes in and distorts one field will react on the other one. It'll expand, and it'll show up on a meter, right or left on the needle. So, you'd know you picked up something metallic, and you'd make a criss-cross an--"X"--out there on a chart and drop a little buoy out there. You'd have a position. When you criss-crossed an "X," you said: "That's where it is. It's down there, somewhere." Then you threw over a clump weight with a

descending line and put a fifty-foot circling line on the clump. You dropped a diver over, and he started there and went around in circles to see if he could find out what it was that you had a signal on.

They were looking for a miniature submarine. A destroyer had reported seeing one out there on the backside of Ford Island. So, there was a destroyer sitting out there, and a PT boat with 250-pound depth charges. The smaller ones--the 250-pound ones--were used on the PT boats, and they had 300- and 600-pounders on the destroyers. So, they'd "ping" out there and then tell us where to go. We'd go over there and look, and if we got an indication somewhere, over would go the clump weight, and over would go me (chuckle).

If you want to know a great feeling, it was to get dressed up in a deep-sea diving suit and lay out there on the darned deck of the boat waiting for the next throw-over (chuckle). You'd wander around in the mud--sometimes ten feet deep, sometimes only a

couple of inches deep. We spent the day doing that, and then we gave up. We didn't find anything.

I went back to the *Widgeon*, and, finally, after about a week, I ended up over on the *Oglala*, which had turned over. It was a minelayer, and she was off of Ten-Ten Dock. The [cruiser] *Helena* was inside of her, and the Japanese torpedoed the *Helena*.

The *Oglala* was an old ferry that they'd converted into a minelayer, so it didn't draw but about sixteen feet of water. The torpedo went down probably seventeen feet or eighteen feet, so it missed the *Oglala* and hit the number two engine room or fire room--I've forgotten which it was--of the *Helena* and blew up. Since the *Oglala* was an old riveted-hulled ferry, we all said that it "died of fright." The concussion expanded the rivets and loosened up the seams, and she sank. They pulled her back to Ten-Ten Dock to get her away from the *Helena*. She rolled in toward the dock and sank. They put an air compressor on her and were pumping air into

her to keep her from sinking into the mud. It is very hard to pull something out of mud because of the suction.

So, I was sent over there. We took air hammers and caulked the seams where we could feel air coming out. We'd caulk them and then weld them. We did that for about two weeks, and then finally I ended up going back to the *Argonne*.

Alexander: How long were you there at Pearl Harbor?

Fouts: We stayed there until March, 1942, I guess. Toward the end of March, we went to Canton Island to try to salvage a cargo ship that had gone on a reef there.

Alexander: I'm not familiar with Canton Island.

Fouts: It's down about 1,500 miles southwest of Pearl. It's south of Fiji. You go to Fiji and drop south, and you go down to Canton Island. We had an Army base and an airfield there.

Alexander: Had they been struck, too?

Fouts: No, not at that time. They got shelled once during the war by the Japanese. We went down there to salvage that freighter.

Alexander: Was that pretty much what you did during your time in the service?

Fouts: No. Actually, I was mostly a gunner's mate for the first part of it. Then we went back to Pearl after we left there. In May, we went down to New Caledonia. We had changed admirals. We had Admiral [Robert L.] Ghormley then, who was the commander of the South Pacific Service Force. The commander of the Fleet Base Force stayed in Pearl, and we got Admiral Ghormley on the *Argonne*.

While there, I got blown off a screw. I was cleaning the screw of the [hospital ship] *Solace*. The Coast Guard blew a coral head out there about 200 yards away from me, and the blast blew me off of the screw (chuckle). We had the diving flag up and everything else as required, and they just didn't pay any attention. They were out there clearing obstacles that were in the harbor. They were smart guys [facetious comment]. They just popped over the side and put a case of dynamite under a coral head and blew it. I was down there wire-brushing the screw of the

hospital ship, so they just pulled me aboard the diving boat. I had some blood running out my ears and nose, but it didn't do any real damage.

Alexander: Where was this?

Fouts: That was at Nouméa, New Caledonia. Then in August, 1942, I guess it was, after the Battle of Savo Island, the [cruiser] USS *Chicago* got hit by a torpedo in the bow. It hit the chain locker. She came in, and she had about twenty fathoms of chain hanging out of her. Fortunately, when she came in through the controlled minefield, she missed all the mines, somehow or another. We picked the chain up, and then some divers from the [ocean tug] *Navajo* came and relieved me from the job. They trimmed up the hole and put some plates and stringers over it so she could get to New Zealand and get a temporary repair. She went to Brisbane [Australia], I guess, and got a new bow put on because she was pretty well out of line. On the deck there was about an eighteen-inch kink rolled up there. They didn't spare the horses after

she got hit (chuckle).

Alexander: So, you were still a diver.

Fouts: Yes.

Alexander: Where are we in time, now? It has to be in the latter part of 1942.

Fouts: Yes. After that, I had one more little experience. It was a good thrill. The tanker HMS *Bishop Dale* got a submarine scare. They made a break for Nouméa Harbor and cut right through the uncontrolled mines in the minefield and hit one of them, and it blew up. They were going about eighteen knots at that time, they figured.

The Jamaican crew that they had on there bailed out. They jumped over the side. They hit the floats and went. There were three people left on the ship--the commanding officer, the chief engineer, and the bosun. The chief engineer made a break for the engine room and shut down everything and started backing down. The commanding officer went to the bridge, and the bosun went to the anchor. When they got it slowed enough, he dropped the anchor (chuckle) and got her

stopped.

That's when I came in. They radioed for diving assistance. They had a mine hung up inside the ship. We took a motor launch and the diving gear to the tanker. We went to the starboard side and went up the ladder. We went aboard, and the captain said, "We have a mine. I don't know how. How lucky we are that it didn't go off!" They were empty. It hit the third tank back from the bow, and it blew this big hole clear through the bottom and out the topside. We got there and looked down into the tank. We could see this big, jagged hole in the bottom, and here was this big, round thing down there with a piece of chain caught in a crack in the hole in the bottom, just floating back and forth. You couldn't make it out because it was too dark in the hole. You couldn't see. You could just distinguish this dark brown object, but you could make out the chain hanging there.

I said, "Well, okay. What to do about it?" I hadn't had any experience with mines. I'd read about them in books and things

because I was just curious about them. I knew how basically they worked. When you launched a mine, they had a mooring arm on them. When you dropped the mine, the mine would arm when it reached the mooring depth. It would pull the mooring arm down and arm it. If the thing broke its chain and went up, it would fire it. So, I knew that much, but I didn't have the information. as to what type of mine it was.

I went down there and looked, and I figured I'd wrap some line around the mooring arm so it wouldn't go up. Then I'd get some heavy material and weight the darned thing down, take it out the bottom, and drag it away from the ship. That's what I was going to do. So, I rigged a line down the port side to get down to the hole.

We put the motor launch back at the aft end of the ship, and they threw me over the side. I pulled myself along the side of the ship to the hole and dropped down. I got the surprise of my life! It was a ball fender. In the Navy, you've seen those big, round,

ball fenders with the half-inch or three-quarter-inch line woven around them and chains hanging off of them. That's what it was (chuckle). The funny thing about it was that nobody could figure out how it got there. You certainly wouldn't store a ball fender in an oil tank. They had four of them on the ship--two up forward, near the forecastle, and two back, at the number three tank, one on each side. One was missing, and that was it. The one off the port side was down in that hole. It had gotten caught down there. How it got down there, nobody could explain. But talk about relief! That was it!

Alexander: I think it's incredible that you would even consider doing something like that when you hadn't had any experience with mines.

Fouts: Well, in those days, you did what you could with what you had. You figured out ways to do things that you didn't know how to do.

Alexander: That was pretty dangerous stuff.

Fouts: I got into explosive ordnance disposal later on.

Alexander: How long were you there?

Fouts: Shortly after that, I got transferred to submarine duty. I went to American Samoa first. I was the custodian of naval weapons. I was a first class gunner's mate and diver. I got sent there, and the Marines had four 6-inch guns and eight 3-inch/50 antiaircraft guns. They were Navy weapons that the Marines were in charge of. So, they had to have a Navy representative.

The commanding general of the base was a general by the name of Walker, who was famous for the fact that he squandered the Navy's funds to build himself a nice, American-style house. He mirrored his bedroom top-to-bottom (chuckle). He got relieved of his duty as a result of that and a couple other escapades. That's what he was famous for--his mirrored bedroom (chuckle).

So, I was there, and shortly after I got there, I got transferred to the naval station. They decided that they could do their own work primarily, but I would come and help them anytime that they needed me. I

was the station diver.

Alexander: And where was this?

Fouts: Tutuila, American Samoa. I stayed there for a while.

Alexander: Where are we now? Are we into 1943 by this time?

Fouts: This was in 1943. In 1943, I went to submarine duty.

Alexander: Was this something that you volunteered to do?

Fouts: I volunteered to do it.

Alexander: And why did you do that?

Fouts: Well, I just thought that it would be a good thing to do--diving, submarines, and everything. I'd put in for it actually about a year before. When I went to American Samoa, I put in for submarine duty. Out of the clear blue came the orders, so I ended up going from nice, warm American Samoa to Dutch Harbor, Alaska. I stayed up there, and then I went to Midway Island.

Alexander: What did you do there?

Fouts: Submarine refitting. I was in the repair and overhaul facilities.

When I was at Midway, I went aboard the USS *Pogy* [SS-266]. I made five successful war patrols on it, on one of which we...

Alexander: And you were doing what?

Fouts: I was a first class gunner's mate. On one of the patrols, we had a Japanese plane circle around us a couple of times. We came up with identification. B-24s [Consolidated Liberator heavy bombers] and "Betty" [Mitsubishi G4M1] bombers looked very similar. The tail was the difference. Ours had a square tail, and theirs had a round tail. So, they modified the tails on a couple of theirs, and they'd try to sneak up on our submarines.

We had submarine stations off the coast and did lifeguard duty for the airplanes that were bombing Japan. We'd have one out there ten miles off the coast of Japan, and then another fifty miles or so we'd have another one, and out there, another one. There'd be a PBY [Consolidated Catalina flying boat] sitting on the water, and then there'd be destroyers. The planes would fly in and out over us.

Alexander: Let me ask you a question. You're a gunner's mate on a submarine. The only time that a gunner's mate was going to be doing gunner's mate work would be when you were surfaced and you had a gun in your hands.

Fouts: There was a 5-inch deck gun on the forecastle, and there were 20-millimeter and 40-millimeter guns.

Alexander: What did you do when you were submerged? Did you have any duties?

Fouts: Yes. You stood lookout watches, control room watches, or room watches. [Tape stops]

We were talking about the "Betty" bomber that saw us out there while we were patrolling off the coast of Japan. He signaled and flashed us with his light. We were on the surface just cruising along, like we normally did when the airplanes would come over. We made a couple knots just to keep under way. We were quiet so we wouldn't be heard from a distance. He came up with "AAAA," which was okay. We flashed back with our light "AAAA," but then he was supposed to come back with a day-time group. He came

back with "AAAA" again. He came across and over to the left, which was proper. He stayed out a mile, came up and made a square corner, went across and did the same thing. He came back around: "AAAA."

The third time he did it, the "old man" [captain] said, "I don't like this! Let's go!" He sounded the alarm and we started to clear the bridge. About that time, he turned in on us and opened fire with his machine guns. He sprayed the boat. I was on the port lookout. We had three lookouts on the submarine.

Alexander: On the topside?

Fouts: Yes. Up along the periscopes, there were two platforms, one on either side, for the port and starboard lookouts; then, about eight feet below, there was the deck, and back on the "cigarette deck," as they called it, was the aft lookout; and the OD was the forward lookout, normally.

So, the "old man" sent the OD down. He went down first, and then the port lookout and the starboard lookout dropped down. The

port lookout ran forward and went down the hatch, and the starboard lookout was right behind him. The aft lookout got in in between there somewhere, because he had three times as far to come distance-wise. We dropped down into the boat. When you dived, you went off of diesel propulsion and went to electric propulsion immediately when you sounded the diving alarm and went to "all ahead, full." The last man came down, and we clamped the conning tower hatch down.

We had just gotten down, and "WHOOSH!" The plane dropped two depth charges and blew the aft end of the boat clear out of the water. The screws were going: "WHOOMP! WHOOMP! WHOOMP!" We had to come to a stop because that would do damage. We took about a seventy-degree down angle and went down. The concussion broke all of the porcelain insulators that went through the pressure hull. Under each of them, you had one wire going through. With small wires, you had a metal wedge that you could screw up, make a metal-to-metal seat, and shut off any water

flowing through it. In the radio shack, you had a twelve-inch-diameter porcelain insulator where the TBL antenna lead went through. The TBL was the main transmitter and receiving unit. In the radio shack, you had the bottom of the antenna trunk. When diving, you could pull the antenna leads out of the trunk and close a flapper valve. It had a three-foot arm on it for closing in emergencies. It had a "dog" [fastener for a door or hatch] to catch it, and then you'd "dog" it down with thumbscrews to make it watertight. Well, that was a flaw in design. When you broke that doggoned porcelain insulator, you dropped a twelve-inch-diameter column of water down on top of the guy who's trying to close the thing (chuckle).

Well, it knocked the radioman out of the radio shack. He came through the door and piled up against the trim manifold operator. He grabbed hold of the radio operator and got him back in there. He and the radar operator managed to get back in there and pull the antenna leads out and close the flapper.

They modified those and made it to where it would close with water pressure after that (chuckle). So, when the flapper would come down, it would pull the antenna leads and automatically drop with pressure and latch.

So, we were extremely heavy with all this water coming in, and we'd gone to all ahead, full. We had picked up good speed going down there. We were heavy, and we couldn't blow the tanks because we were at too much of angle with all these open tanks. If you blew, the air would just bubble out. So, we went to all back, full, and set the diving planes to neutral. Finally, when we got to almost 400 feet--we were at 397 or 398--we backed out of it. We got leveled off and were pumping full-bore.

We were a 300-foot boat, so our operating depth was 300 feet. We were almost a hundred feet below our operating depth, but they had pressure-tested these things much deeper than that.

That was an interesting boat. It was the first Manitowoc boat built at Manitowoc

[Wisconsin]. It was floated down the river on a barge down to Biloxi, Mississippi, I guess it was, or one of those places. Then it was outfitted there. It had a spring-steel hull, so it took shock and everything well. It was just the porcelain that didn't hold up.

Alexander: Did that "Betty" have any depth charges?

Fouts: All he dropped were the two. Whether he hung around or not, we didn't know, because we went down there, and we were busy with our own problems. We stayed down there for the rest of the day and didn't come up until dark. We came up in the dark and assessed the damage topside.

He hit the 5-inch gun with one round on the left-hand side. By the breech of the gun, there was a three-eighths-inch-diameter rod that went through the cheek of the gun and went to a safety treadle. You had to push the safety before you could fire the gun. He drilled that right dead-center with a round, so the gun was useless.

He hit the surface radar and pinned it

tight. It went through the bronze cap and into the bearing and pinned it. All of the antennas were broken, and the insulators, and then the water whipped them off, so we lost all of our antennas.

We got the dryer--basically, it would be a hair-dryer now, but it was a "heat gun" then--and used it to dry the radio parts. We dried it out and everything. We went for eighteen days out there before we could get communications of any sort going.

Alexander: You were doing this all yourself?

Fouts: We were doing it all ourselves. Being a submarine with no communications, they thought that we were sunk. We hadn't reported for eighteen days. Then we made communication with a submarine to the north of us.

Alexander: Let me ask you this. Did they send information back to your home that you were lost at sea?

Fouts: No. They didn't do that for sixty days, unless there was some breaking news about your ship being sunk. So, we stretched a

welding lead out of the conning tower hatch. We took a bottle and drilled a hole through the top and tied the welding lead on one end of it. The other end was tied to the superstructure and the deck gun.

We got a message off. We got enough to where we caught the submarine in the next sector above us. That night, we agreed to meet. That's a "hairy" [hazardous] situation when you have two submarines getting together. You don't know who you're talking to for sure. We were asking all these questions: "What's your commanding officer's mother's name?" and things like that! There was all this biographical data that you had available to cross-verify.

So, we made communications. We got up and were "pinging" every so often, and we got an echo back. We got one of their "pings," and then by Morse code we "pinged" over the proper daytime group. We had the catalogs with us for all that stuff. We got up alongside each other, and we got enough material off of them. They had a spare

antenna and some insulators, so we got those. They kept us out there for another twenty days, and then we got back to Midway (chuckle).

Alexander: I want to ask you another question. Did you pick up any aviators?

Fouts: No. We had one in our sights one day, but he said he wasn't riding in that "sewer pipe." He had an engine hanging off, flopping off the wing of his plane. It was almost broken loose and flapping in the breeze. All he wanted was to be headed toward home. His compass was gone, so we headed in the direction he was supposed to go. He lined up on us the second time around, and that's the way he left. We sent out a message, so a PBY probably picked him up. We never heard any more about him.

Alexander: But you were out there in case somebody needed help.

Fouts: Yes. If they wanted to ditch, we'd pick them up; or they could jump out--however they wanted to do it.

Alexander: How far off the coast would you have been?

Do you know?

Fouts: We were off ten miles. So, that took care of that. We were back on patrol again when they dropped the two [atomic] bombs.

Alexander: You went back to Midway to get provisioned and all, and then they sent you out again. Where did you go?

Fouts: We went to a different place. We were right on a direct route for the two planes that dropped the atomic bombs. We were there when they dropped them. The thing about that was that they were supposed to keep radio silence, but they were talking, as they usually did, back and forth. They were talking to the other airplanes going with them.

Alexander: Did you pick them up?

Fouts: Oh, yes. They used to put it over the RBO circuit on the submarine. It was a matter of interest to the guys to listen to that "crap" (chuckle)--to hear them talking about their girlfriends and all kinds of stuff. They'd chit-chat all the way across. The guy said, "We're gonna let it loose, so get the hell

out of here!"

Alexander: That was probably Tibbets. [Editor's note: Colonel Paul Tibbets was the commander of the "Enola Gay," the bomber which dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima.] He was talking to whom?

Fouts: He was talking to the other airplanes. I don't remember the exact words they said, but he said, "Well, it's gone!" The next thing you knew, the guy said, "My God! Look at that! Get the hell out of here!"

Alexander: Did you hear the same thing for the second bomb?

Fouts: No. They were quieter than the first ones. I don't think that there was anybody with them on the second bombing. I think they flew another one along with them in case something happened so they'd know where it went. He was probably twenty miles or so from the other guy.

Alexander: Let me ask you this. Were you at sea when the command came out to muzzle your guns? I would think so, probably.

Fouts: No, I was at Midway Island. I had gotten off

the submarine, and I was on the USS *Bushnell*, a submarine tender. I'd gotten aboard her. I was back to just being a gunner's mate again. They had plenty of divers on there already. I was staying on her when the armistice came over. It came about a month-and-a-half after I got on her.

Alexander: August 15, 1945, was when they said that they would surrender. Of course, the ceremonies took place in September.

Fouts: We stayed there until October. Then we came back to San Diego.

Alexander: From Midway?

Fouts: Yes, on the *Bushnell*. We got there and offloaded all the ammunition and stuff. There was no parade, no bands. We were "old hat" by that time. A whole bunch of ships had already gotten back by October. They'd had enough parades (chuckle).

I made chief gunner's mate in June while on the *Bushnell*. I got off of her and went over to the receiving station. While I was at the receiving station, I was sent to the commissary. I got to be a checker. I ran a

cash register in the commissary for something to do.

So, after a tour of duty in the commissary--about three months--I got sent aboard an APD [high speed transport]. I reenlisted at that time when I was at the receiving station. I went aboard the APD-127, the USS *Begor*. We went to San Pedro.

We made the CROSSROADS operation. [Editor's note: CROSSROADS was the atomic bomb testing that took place at Bikini Atoll in July, 1946.] They exploded the aerial bombs, and then they exploded the underwater shot. We had the drone boats that measured radioactivity in the water. We were right there at this little island. I can't remember the name of it, but it was part of Bikini Atoll. We were just beyond the reef, about a mile-and-a-half from the underwater shot when it went off. That was a good show!

Alexander: That had to be pretty scary, wasn't it?

Fouts: No, it was a thrilling sight (chuckle)! It was bigger than anything you've ever seen. They had this YSD or something like that--one

of those small landing craft--and they'd cut a hole in the bottom of it. They put a gantry on it to drop the bomb down and suspend it in the water. They had it anchored out there, and the target ships were all circled around it. There was a range-finder on the fire control director up in the superstructure. I had it trained on it, so I was getting a nice picture of it.

When that thing went, all of a sudden, a ring of water came up around it, and then it disappeared. Then a black bob showed up about a hundred feet in the air, and then the water kept going straight up in this big circle. A big column of water went up, and it seemed like it was never going to quit. The "old man" kicked it into high and made a circle (chuckle). He was going to leave there, and then he shut it down and waited because it had quit by that time. It had reached its peak.

We had a bunch of Army officers on there, and the Atomic Energy Commission people. We sent out the UDT [underwater demolition team]

team, who were operating the boats. Each boat could take six five-gallon water samples. They radio-controlled the boats to run them in there. They'd go in various grids and cycle the water siphon. A pump would pump the water and dump it into a can. Then they'd go with the next can to the next place and so forth.

After they'd done that for the first two days, they had a big, four-inch hawser line that they stretched off the aft end of the ship. They tied these six boats up alongside of it, two at a time. They trailed back off the aft end the ship.

One of the Army officers was having problems with his Geiger counter. Everywhere he went, the darned thing was registering. Another chief and I asked him, "How the heck do those things work?" He was giving us an explanation, and while he was talking, he happened to turn around and face aft. The darned thing went off, and he turned back, and he said, "Good God! There's something going on here!" They discovered that when

the boats went through the radioactive water and then tied up to the hawser, it rubbed off and collected radioactive material from the boats (chuckle). So, they cut the hawser and the boats loose. They brought them out one-by-one, washed them down with a fire hose, and tied them alongside the ship.

Alexander: How long did you stay in the Navy?

Fouts: Thirty years, two months, and two days--not counting the seventeen days I didn't get credit for (chuckle). I was in the Korean War--the Inchon invasion, Wonson, and Pusan. [Tape stops abruptly]