

U. S. S. NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP COLLECTION

Jerry S. Gonzales Interview

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I am Jerry S. Gonzales and I am from Houston, Texas. I joined the Navy on April 18, 1942, right after Pearl Harbor. As soon as my brother got out of the hospital, I joined it right away. I went to boot camp in San Diego, California. From there I was assigned and commissioned to the minesweeper U. S. S. Conflict at Portland, Oregon. I was a plank owner at the time on that. We had a shake down cruise and immediately went over and took the first floating dry dock to the Solomon Islands, the ARD-5. Then we got the fleet assigned to the New Hebrides Islands just south of the Guadalcanal. We got off that ship because men were critical in the South Pacific, and they would try to get as many men as they could off every ship. I got off the minesweeper Conflict and spent six months in the New Hebrides Islands. When you are young you want to see action. So I asked ^{for} a battleship, and after six months in the New Hebrides I went to New Caledonia and I was assigned to the battleship North Carolina which was the newest. I was a right proud man when they told me that.

[Do you remember which day you were assigned?]

It was approximately July. I was assigned around June of 1943, but at the time I went to New Caledonia she was out. In the meantime I heard she was torpedoed and was in Pearl Harbor. So I waited approximately two months in New Caledonia, Rs 131 Receiving Ship. When the North Carolina came up alongside I was a proud man. Incidentally, when I got aboard the North Carolina, I went aboard with a new draft just in from the states. I was the only one that had a sun helmet, dress and khaki

pants, big old clodhopper shoes, and needed a haircut. Among all the clean-shaven crew coming aboard the ship, I was the only one who stood out. Right away I caught a new name. Someone yelled, "Hey look, Jungle Jim is coming aboard." I was assigned to A division at the beginning. I was a machinist mate and I was in the room with Mr. Bar and Mr. Gerber. To me this is a joke, I'm not being radical or nothing. This really happened. When I first got into the Navy with a bunch of yankees, my name was Gonzales, an old Spanish name from Texas and all the yankees called me Gonzeles, Gonzeles. So after a few months time I answered to the name Gonzeles. On the minesweeper a new division officer took over; he was from Louisiana; he was a frenchman; he called me Gonzoleus, Gonzoleus. When I went on board the North Carolina, I answered to Mr. Bar and Mr. Gerber and Mr. Gerber says, "What is you name?" I can't remember whether I said Gonzeles or Gonzoleus. But he was from Arizona and when I said Gonzoleus, he said, "Your name is Gonzales. Say Gonzales." So I said, "Gonzales," and he answered in Spanish "hablas Espanole?" And I said "Si!" So he said, "Don't you ever let me hear you talking that Mexican. You are an American on an American ship." I said, "Yes Sir, Yes Sir." Now I laugh about it, but at the time I was probably confused. Now I'm just proud of it, proud of my heritage too because we are all Americans.

[Was Mr. Gerber?]

My division officer.

[Your division officer]

Yes. He and I, he liked me after that, he just told me that to put me straight to begin with. In the old Navy we obeyed the rules and we were proud of it. When I was assigned to after diesel generator room,

and things I recall back there; first off, everyone had to serve three months mess cooking which is the same thing as KP in the army. No matter where I went, I had to get the three months over with. I got the mess cook duty off and I was assigned to the after diesel generator room. The people I would like to remember, who stand out, Pat Pasqualivella, they called him Pat Vella, from Rockport, Illinois; Dragma from New Orleans, and Eagleburger from Utah. I remember when I met Eagleburger, he kept saying "I'm not a Mormon, I'm from Utah but I'm not a Mormon." He was Paul Richard Eagleburger. Incidentally we wrote each other and lately he is a detective in Arizona. I believe it is Farmington, New Mexico or Mesa, Arizona, one of the two places. Patrick Bonclayberry from L.A. I remember him well.

I made a wooden ship inside of a bottle. Incidentally I have one of them at home and I'm going to send it over here one of these days. The first one I made, I constructed it and put it in the bottle and put wax to keep it in place. I got a little wax and no one has ever, ever known this, and this is the first time that I'm going to put it in the record. If it had happened thirty years ago, I would have been shot in the fantail. But once I put that wax in a bottle and I got some on the sail. After that it didn't look good so I figured I'd put it all on the sail to make it look even. I had a coldiron watch, which meant that everybody on the forward diesel generator didn't have any duty. We'd just stand by. I was a machinist mate then, and I had a fireman and he went out somewhere by coincidence. I put the bottle on the hot plate to melt the wax, and it clicked, and the whole thing set on fire. I got a blanket and smothered that and the fireman came back there and said "what has happened?" "Oh nothing." Incidentally the fireman is just like a deck four seaman on the lower rate, machinist mate. No one

ever knew that, and I thought about it. There I was in a battleship in the middle of the war zone with aviation gasoline above us and turret three gun powder in the back and I would have gotten a general court martial and been shot.

[Were you on board when the ship was torpedoed?]

No sir. I came on board that's why You see I was at New Caledonia here waiting for it and it got torpedoed.. After that we were in every battle of the Pacific. We bombarded Majuro, which everybody knows was the first battleship bombardment of Jap territory, the Gilbert Islands and the Marshall Islands, Tarawa, Saipan, Peleliu, Yap, and all the way to Tokyo Bay,

[Your battlestation was aft?]

Number forty millimeter, I was the gun fast.... Number forty millimeter on the fantail, on the port side, the last one.

[Do you recall anything about any of the air action?]

At one time I was passing ammunition in a little cubby hole and they told me, they said a Jap plane just barely missed us. He said if it had been just a few more inches, we would have been dead because it would have blown the whole fantail off. They said they don't know why. Whether it was a smokescreen or fall but something. He said the Jap plane came all of a sudden. They could see his face real good and he looked like he was scared and he looked down and they looked up and they didn't shoot at him. Another time on my forty millimeter we had to have general quarters every morning and every evening at sundown. One time I remember, me and another guy, he said "What kind of plane is that?" I told him "F4 stupid." He said " that ain't no F4. That ain't no F4, that's a 6..." All of a sudden the ships started opening up and it was two Jap planes coming in. They dropped two bombs on the carrier and

barely missed it.

[You thought it was an American plane?]

That's right. And another time there, we had sunk this freighter. It was in a harbor, I can't remember which it was. They said there is a ship in the harbor, so they were firing at ease and we were watching them bombard. I can remember you could see the flashes and you could see the three or six shells of ours go real slow like orange going further and further. Then I noticed three balls getting bigger and bigger in the same spot, getting bigger and bigger; and then there was another three balls coming getting bigger and bigger. Then all of a sudden, it came over the speaker, "take cover, take cover. They are firing, they are firing back." And I saw some splashes way off. They couldn't reach us. But man they opened up with everything. It was sunk in, to me it looked like thirty minutes flat. They sunk it and they also sunk a sanpan which is a little smaller than a shrimp boat. We all laughed about it because we wanted credit for two ships.

[And were you in the forty millimeter at that time?]

That is right. One thing I could always remember, we were way down below and the sound effects to us were a little different because I could always tell when the Jap planes were coming. First of all you heard the five inch go boom, boom, boom, boom, boom. After awhile you hear the forty millimeter cut in boom-boom, boom-boom, beside the boom, boom, boom. Then you hear the trill, trill, trill and then they are going to be right overhead and all of sudden it is quiet.. Then about ten or fifteen minutes later all of it will start again, boom, boom, boom; then you got that boom-boom, boom-boom; trill, trill, trill all of a sudden it is quiet again. That is the way the battle went.

[That's how it sounded below deck?]

Below deck, yes, below deck. They would start firing five miles away, about five miles away. Then they would get closer and they would open the smaller guns. As soon as we heard the trill, trill, man we get up there and pray.

[Did they require quiet and silence in there, were you talking?]

That's right. I remember the Siapan turkey shoot, I get nervous when I think about it. The first time I ever threw up; from then on I never got nervous. Something happened. I was between the diesel engine room and I had the sound power telephone. All day long the boogey kept coming in there 90 miles and boogey coming in at 80 miles. They would get closer and closer; and then they would go away and come back and go away and come back; and I remember the boogies coming in in all directions, and I remember I felt real faint; and I wanted to vomit and I wanted to go to the dressing room and just vomit. I was shaky. And I felt real weak. I never had fainted in my life and I felt like I was going to faint. But from then on, I don't know why, but I always think about that. That's when you are really scared, and you are prepared to die.

[It was your first time?]

No, it was just over and over and over. There was just so much of it. I remember that real well.

[Do you remember anything else unusual that happened to you on liberty or anything of this sort?]

One time I remember, in a way I laugh about it now. I was coming from mess cook duty and had to bring the laundry back. One of the main reasons I went up for rate was to keep from getting laundry duty. Right somewhere close to forward diesel, I fell with a big old bag of laundry. I slide all the way down and fell straddled one hand bar.

It was on a Friday, and I remember they drug me off. I had a big swelled up bruise on my left leg. I went up there and they drug me to sick bay. Someone said "this man just fell off a ladder." I don't want to use no profane language but they said, "you get that SOB out of here. This is a field day and we got captain's inspection tommorrow. Bring him back Monday," If you recall this was war time conditions and up there a man was just another man. Now we laugh about little things like that. After all, I lived, so I don't think it was too bad.

In 1942, everything was spam, spam, spam for breakfast, dinner and supper with eggs. Then they had powdered eggs and then dehydrated spuds. Then they got a little bit better and a little bit better for a while. Now that I'm old and think about it, they had the finest food but we were young and criticized the cook and everybody else. There was a chief steward, his name was Jackson and for awhile he started giving nothing but bologna. I remember everybody making their "Oh horse collar Jackson." Somebody starts calling the captain, everybody, and they are going to throw him overboard. If I recall right they had an orderly with him for awhile. I believe and followed him around for a few weeks and they finally changed the menu. Actually it was just a rough time for everyone. But we were just young kids and I remember everybody talking about it and then everybody going to the captain. Everybody went around and and they said if anyone gives the name of who it was, they would get thirty days leave when he gets in. Nobody knew who it was. I remember that about the food, but it was just rough in those days. See, I came on board around June or July 1943 and I stayed all the way until the war was ended. I had, soon as the war was ended, I got off. Everybody west of the Mississippi had to get off at Pearl Harbor. I begged to stay with the ship, but the only way I could stay was to sign on for four years.

[You didn't want to do that?]

No, I didn't want to do that. I caught a BE to St. Pedro.

We changed captains ever so often. I can't remember all the names but one captain and I believe it was Captain Dunlop. I remember they had general quarters and I was laying on my bunk way down in the cat-a-combs down in the third deck. I remember they said, "set condition one on the A battery, set condition one on the A batteries." And then he said "expedite setting condition one on the A battery." I had never heard of that word, neither had a whole bunch of guys. We got confused and I remember some of them went back to the bunks. We didn't know what expedite meant. Suddenly we heard that boom, boom, boom. Then it came over the speaker, "Hurry, hurry, put in condition one A battery, hurry." I always remember what that word "expedite" means.

[He was a new captain right?]

He had just come on. I'll always remember that, "expedite." We never did hear that word anymore.

I spent some time on after steering. That's another thing at the time, I guess we were all the same way. We were young and the Navy was real short of men and they just made them as brave as quick as they could. I remember when they told me I was going to be in after steering and they also had that for a watch, They said "look, you have a red button and a bush and after steering in case you get disabled up forward you can steer the ship from aft you got one starboard and one port. If you are disabled from up forward and they get a hit on that side then you can steer from this side, so what you do then is you open this valve and close this valve and open the other up and push this button." They told me twice and I started asking. They said "are you a machinist?" I said "Yes", and they just told me that I should know that. I was

ashamed to ask and I thought every time I would go down there I'd be scared and there would always be a quartermaster, an electrician and me. There would always be a different one. We never let the other check. I often wondered now, I'm an electrician I've been to engineering and industrial engineering studies, now all I know is the hot rod of the unit. What you do is turn off one valve and just open it but at the time I didn't know and I always wondered. Should I push this button or that one or should I open that valve or that one. I used to say that to myself over and over and over. Since then I joined a reserve in '55 and stayed eight more years; and now in the new Navy they have little old pamphlets telling you where everything is, how to do it and all that.

[You don't have to worry about anything.]

No, but in the old Navy, man you learn the hard way.

Let me tell you when I got off in San Pedro, another man from Texas, his name was Alex Sander, was from Corpus and got off with me. I then went to Houston and he spent two days with me in Houston. I never have heard from him since but every now and then there is a dog tag with his name and address on it. Alex Sander, one of these days I might send it over here to the museum and maybe he might pick it up himself.