

U. S. S. NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP COLLECTION

Charlie Rosell Interview

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Interview #1

My name is Charlie H. Rosell 15 Ellen Avenue, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina. I first entered the Navy when I was living in Arkansas at the time, June the 6th, 1939. I went to boot camp in San Diego and then went on one of the old four stacker destroyers the Cassin. I was on there until 1941, I guess February in '41, and of course at that time they didn't transfer people like they do in the modern Navy by name. They just send out and send me in our case one fireman second. They take the drunk on the ship and send him, you know, and I caught the old Essex. I caught and rode her back to Bremerton and got in there in March of '41 and went to New York and reported aboard the old... I reported into the Brooklyn Navy Yard on the Seattle which was a receiving ship at the time and this was in March, I imagine around March the tenth. Of course we stayed on there and they had another ship that we actually slept on, the old Camden.

[In otherwords, you slept and ate probably aboard the Camden while they were fitting out the North Carolina. What were you you were, just a seaman apprentice?]

I was a fireman-second. When I came aboard and our first load the first twenty or thirty days before we went into commission, I was assigned to number two fireroom. We went down and Chief Hughes was our chief water tender and we reported to him. I guess the first thirty days we just got familiar with the fireroom and drew out our fire inspection lines and our fuel lines.

[Well you just tested everything out I gather, didn't you?]

Well we actually lit off after awhile but the first couple of weeks we were just getting familiar and of course back in those days the basic idea was that

you knew your fireroom so well if you had a blackout, you could still find your boiler and do your job. You knew where the valves were and this type of thing. Then later we went in commission and went on our machinery shake down first down off of Gitmo and we came back and went off of Portland for our gunnery shake down.

[Can you tell me anything about either shake down?]

Only about the gunnery shake down. Of course this is just scuttlebutt. Of course we heard the scuttlebutt down below. By this time Captain Badger had relieved Captain Hustvedt. The Gras Spee was working out of the Norwegian Coast at the time. It was a pocket battleship and we got the scuttlebutt down there that Captain Badger was making flights down to Washington trying to get permission to go out and encounter. Of course now it seems funny, but at the time it didn't sound so damn funny to go out and get that thing.

[Do you remember how hot it was out in the Gitmo?]

We use to go up to they called it the tin roof. It was up on a hill I guess about a mile from the pier. We use to go up and drink that hot tooie beer; and there was that one eyed Indian, and when he was looking at you with two eyes, it was time to go back to the ship. We sat there and I think that stuff was about eighteen percent about like a good wine. We sat there and drank it and as long as you were sitting in the shade and that cool sea breeze coming through it was fine. You drink about four or five of them and start that long walk back down to the ship in that hot sun, and then it would hit you. That's about all I really remember about it. And of course we use to get to go to Gitmo City and is it Cantemaro and get that train over there, use to take the boat across the bay over to the Red Barn. There was a place called the Red Barn, and from there you would take the train into Gitmo City. One of the roughest jobs on there was we had to furnish shore patrol for the train. Of course these were the old open coaches, and it wasn't too bad going to Gitmo City, but trying to keep those

drunks in the cars coming back add especially trying to keep them from getting between the cars where they really could get hurt.

[What do you remember of the trip through the Panama Canal?]

One thing I had to watch, I got on topside just to see what it looked like but that was about it. The rest of the time I was down below.

[They said it really scraped going through.]

Yes well you could hear it. I was down in the number two in the floor plate, it was the equivalent to about six decks below, counting the gradings and everything else and you could actually hear it.

[Scraping on the side.]

Yes scraping on the side. Of course we had fuel tanks and voids between us and actually the outer skin of the ship, but you could still hear it through all that. I think the canal, what is it a hundred and nine feet, I think, maybe a hundred and ten feet. And I think we have a beam on this thing of a hundred and eight feet and some odd inches. So you only have a foot clearance which would give you about six inches on both sides, you know on either side.

[All you had to do was move a little bit and you are bound to bump going through which you did. I'm sure they had to do some painting when they got in the Pacific. Well when you went through the canal, it was June of '42 and you went on to Pearl Harbor, right?]

No we went to Frisco first. We went to Frisco to provision ship and then went directly across.

[Were you below deck when they entered Pearl Harbor the first time?]

Yes.

[So you don't remember much about that.]

No, I did get topside. You know the guy would go up topside and I was a water tender at the time. A guy would go topside to see what it looked like

and come down and relieve me so that I could go up, just to see you know.

[Where were you when the ship was torpedoed?]

When it was torpedoed I was at general quarters when the ship actually got hit.

[Where was your general quarters?]

In number two fireroom on the foreplate. I had the boiler, number three boiler. That is the main reason I came in here because I think that is about the only thing that I can furnish that someone else might not have done already. I was on topside getting some sun when, we saw that the Wasp, the smoke coming from the Wasp up from oh I guess she ~~must~~ have been five or eight miles from us. She had been hit. Of course we didn't know it at the time, but they sounded general quarters and I went below. At the time, you probably have to get it from some of the other people, but I know number two and we only had one boiler on the line. We had number three on the line and number four boiler you would call boosting steam. You light it off, take it up to six hundred pounds, and then secure it. And it will settle down. When it got down to a hundred pounds, you would light it off again and bring it up to six hundred and drop back down. So they sounded general quarters and of course they knew the Wasp was hit. Then we got ours of course in number two fireroom or any of the firerooms as soon as it was hit all was smoke. The intake brought it down; you couldn't see your hand in front of your face.

[Smoke all throughout the room.]

All throughout, and this is what I was talking about earlier. Back in those days you were trained where you knew where your valves were. You knew how to cut on a pump and you could start up a steam pump without being able to see, because you knew where everything was. We put number four boilers on the line in five and a half minutes just bringing her from a hundred pounds up to six hundred pounds of steam and seven hundred and fifty degrees super heat. I've told other

water tenders and boilerment today that this was done, and they say it can not be done. They say you would knock the front out of your boiler. We did it.

[And you did it in the dark too.]

In the dark, right. We had people, I had one guy come down, of course he was in his bunk when we got hit, and he came down in his skivvies, barefooted walked across these gradings. They were hot and I can remember just one damn thing. When he came down, I was trying to get number four on the line. I said, "cut in the blower." And he said, "which blower?" And I said, "any god damn blower you can fine." I mean there was, I've never seen a bunch of people as I remember back that acted so damn calmly and everybody was just scared to death. I mean I think that was the scarest I have ever been in my life.

[You knew you were hit, is that right?]

Yes. Well, we had to be hit because as soon as we were hit we took a bad port list. I have no idea what the degrees were. Yes, we knew we were hit.

[And you knew you had to get that thing going quickly.]

Right. But that was the one thing I thought I had in getting a boiler like that on the line in five minutes. Like I've said, people said it can't be done. I will admit, I had the phones on with main control which was number three. I have no idea who, they kept an officer on there as main control officer, usually one of the division officers, but I have no idea who it was. He was young and inexperienced. He kept telling us we were going to knock the front out of the boilers. But, we didn't pay any attention to him.

[Well you didn't do it that's for sure and the ship did move and pick up speed very quickly.]

I have no idea but we must have, of course they probably have records of what speed we were making when we were hit, but I don't think we were making over twelve or thirteen knots.

[Five minutes later you had to be making twice as much easily.]

Yes within ten minutes all the boilers all the extra boilers were on the line. We were making flank speed, even that with that hole we probably weren't making over eighteen or twenty knots. That hole was slowing us down.

[How many people were in the place where you worked in the engineering and your particular boiler?]

Normally you had two burner men, a water tender, and a check man. That was what we had in the fireroom. Of course you had in the other side in the engine room, they had. . . .

[There were four of you where you were counting yourself?]

Yes, that was the normal steaming watch. In general quarters, I think there were, I don't even remember for sure, I guess maybe ten or twelve.

[Not all were there when you were hit, because you were not in general quarters, were you?]

No.

[Probably only four of you. In other words when you started putting the boiler on the line, there were only four of you there at the time.]

Right.

[Now you did the bulk of the work getting on the line that quick.]

Yes. Another thing too, I don't remember the name of the fire plate. You know your burner barrels in your boilers have different size fire plates. And I think 3905, that number sticks in my mind, that was a big plate. That thing was about the size of a pencil. Well that's what we lit off with, and of course you are never suppose to do that. You are suppose to use the smaller one to bring it up and then you change burners and use the bigger one. We led off with the biggest thing we had.

[Well, you were really were taking a risk, weren't you?]

I guess it was looking back on it, but at the time it didn't seem like that.

We knew we needed the power to get the thing out of there and I guess it was reflex.

[But under normal conditions you would never do that?]

Oh no.

[Were you taught to do that or were you just doing it instinctively?]

We did it instinctively.

[In other words, no one ever said that in case of a situation like this to do it this particular way. You just did it because you knew this is what had to be done in that particular situation.]

At least that is what we thought anyway, whether it was right or wrong.

[There were no questions asked later or anything about it?]

No, not that I can remember. Now of course if we had knocked the front out of the boiler, it probably would have been a hell of a lot different.

I was on her til May of '44 and I caught one of the transports back, one of the president lines, President Grant I think. I came back and put the Bonhomme Richard in commission.

[Well do you remember anything, I assume that when you were under air attack you were below deck most of the time there, you recall any feelings, anything about the air attack?]

Nothing other than we had a boiler maker name Stubblefield. His general quarters station was up on the super structure as a smoke watch. In other words if one of them started smoking, he would call down and tell us if the smoke was white or black and we would adjust accordingly. He was up there during air attacks and of course through the phone he would give a play by play description of it. I remember one time, I think it was in the Gilberts but I'm not positive, but he was up there and we were under air attack and I asked him, "hey Stubby, what is coming in?" And he said, "there are about three of them coming in." And I said, "well get out there and tell us what kind of planes they are." And

he said, "who the hell is going out there? You crazy, I'm not going out there. I'm watching smoke. I can do that from the inside."

[Yes, planes could spot the ship or ships.]

Or subs.

[Did you ever get caught smoking, I mean the ship in a combat situation?]

No. But that brought up another subject. In Portland, when we were up in Portland we were getting underway from Portland leaving Casco Bay. I threw, it was me, I had the runner watch, and I put a burner barrel in there and cut it on and didn't have a spare plate in there. So that meant you had a stream of oil about an inch and a quarter going right into the boiler, and I blacked out Portland, Maine, for about five minutes. I got a blast on that one.

I would say especially the commissioning crew on this thing, I was being a little facetious a while ago when I said you know they used to say, send me one fireman second or one boatswain mate or lets get rid of this guy. Well there was some truth in that, because the crew on the ship at that time of the commissioning, you get them at sea and they were the best damn sailors in their rate that I've ever seen in my life. Now you get them where they get on the beach and they got a little bit out of hand.

[Well, that was typical of the old Navy.]

Right.

[The first crew you had was old Navy basically.]

It was old Navy. At that time just about anybody if you had a chevron you had a hash mark to go with it. In other words, if you had a first class, you usually wore three or more hash marks to go with it. They really knew their damn job. We had an assistant engineering officer Commander Maxwell, Lieutenant Maxwell actually when he put it in commission, that I think is one of the greatest leaders of men that I have ever met in my life. He could get more out of a

bunch of people, a bunch of men, get them to work for him, than any man I've ever met in my life.

[He must have been an outstanding engineering officer.]

Well he was, and he was a mustang. He came up from the ranks and of course I'm talking about in '41 and he was a lieutenant then. They weren't making many mustangs before the war, so he had a lot on the ball.

We had a chief machinist named Greenly that used to come around on the steam-ing watch while we were underway. He would come around about six thirty and make his rounds before he would make his eight o'clock reports on the bridge. He used to come around and usually check my coffee. I'd be sitting on the guard rail around the fuel oil service pump drinking a cup of coffee. He would take the coffee out of my hand and smell it. If it had a little alchie in it, he would just sit down and drink my coffee and not say a damn word. He would get up when he finished my coffee and just walk on out.

[Where did you get the alcohol?]

From Offie.

[Was that rather common?]

If you knew the oil king. Well, I had one of my water tenders working in the oil king gang and when they were testing the water they were suppose to clean their instruments with alcohol. You'd be sure to get all the slime out of them. Of course we would drink the alchie and wash them with soap and water.

On your boilers, I don't know how much you know about boilers. Well you've got your steam drum above you and you got your mud drum down below. These mud drums have got covers over them, sheet metal covers, that you can take off to get in to them. Between your sheet metal covers and actually your man hole into your mud drum, you have I guess a spot about ten or maybe twelve inches in there. We used to get a piece of beef from the cook and some potatoes and some onions and we'd take us some sheet metal and make this like a baking pan and put that in

there with the potatoes and the meat and the onions and sit it in there for about an hour and a half. It was just like roasting, and it use to be delicious.

[What did you do to get that from the cook, you had to do something I know that.]

Well, usually at that time we used to just about every department or every division had to furnish a man for the masters of arms force. And that's who we would usually get it through. We would get it through the Masters of Arms. He would use his influence with the cook to get it for us, because there wasn't too much we could do for the cook.