

U. S. S. NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP COLLECTION

Lester B. Tucker Interview

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My name is Lester B. Tucker and I enlisted in the U.S. Navy on November the 9th, 1939. I went aboard the U.S.S. Memphis after a short tour of duty in Hawaii, as our neutrality patrol, blockading German and Italian ships out of Tampico, Mexico, during that phase of the so called Quiet War.

[Do you remember anything interesting about that?]

We blockaded all nine ships; none of them escaped.

[Out of Tampico?]

Out of Tampico, Mexico; German and Italian ships refueling the submarines plying on the trade between Aurbian South America and Great Britain. We did operate with a British cruiser Delhi in those days. Not suppose to but we did .

I was ordered to the North Carolina to put her in commission in 1941. However due to some prostatic treatment I reported to the Boston Naval Hospital and was delayed from the actual commissioning ceremonies, but my orders covering the period to the North Carolina was for commissioning. I rode the North Carolina until 1943, a little over two years about two and a half years.

[What was the date you went on again?]

It was in May, I can not remember the specific date, of 1941. She hadn't even gotten underway yet. I was on her first trial run.

[Do you remember what was going on on the ship when you first went aboard?]

Well, certainly we were outfitting her with her material and her supplies and so forth, and trying out all of the new equipments, and training

the personnel at that. At that time I was in F division. I made gunners mate third on there and then I shifted to aviation shortly thereafter. Of course they were building up the aviation force.

[Had they put the planes on board yet?]

Not yet, they were over at Floyd Bennett, and the original aviation unit had gone ahead and formed over there, until we ran our test and so forth on our catapults. I was aboard when she was torpedoed and I was aboard, in fact I was a gunner on a twenty millimeter after the starboard catapult in the Eastern Solomons or Stewart Island Battle it was called then. During the attack on the twenty fourth of August, 1942, we were under high altitude bombing which no one had even noticed with very variable misses, dive bombing attacks, torpedo plane attacks, and strafing attacks. Of course we were protecting the Enterprise and the other ships of the force. One Makiuima 96 on the starboard quarter came in and strafed and Conlin who was the loader on Hinson's gun next to me took a seven point seven through his stomach. Luckily my loader had just leaned over to pick up another drum of my ammunition, and the same string of bullets came across my position and tore into the empty cartridge case retaining bag which I was straddling and dumped the hot shells on to my legs and my feet. But of course we kept firing. I was having my gun crew duck behind the shield each time the bomb splashes would appear to protect them from shrapnel, and especially if I didn't have a target. We made a very abrupt turn to port and a tremendous column of black water drenched that section of the ship. It was unknown to me that a bomb had fallen so close to the ship and sent up this tremendous column of water that no one actually realized it. To this date I can't remember hearing that bomb go off or anything. It was so close it did put a slight dent back there by the waterways and that gun. Conlan, George Conlan, who of course I knew

very well, was the battle's only casualty and the first one to fall in combat with the enemy during our first engagement as such in 1942. We were pretty well trained and everything was automatic for the majority of us old, I shouldn't say old sailors, we had had enough pre World War training that it was instilled into us to react in these emergencies.

[Let me ask you this while I'm thinking about it. You were of course pre-war Navy in what we would call old Navy. Was there a nucleus of pre-war Navy on board or were most of them in after the war? In other words, how experienced a crew did you have?]

I'd say by the time we went into action we were running approximately sixty percent of pre-war Navy, at that time only USN people.

[Then it was a pretty good crew for what you wanted, fairly experienced and well trained crew, a nucleus of old Navy hands with new comers]

I believe the U.S. Navy had taken a lesson on the tragedy of the Repulse and the Prince of Wales. They had sent her out there for a show piece and she had become involved in action with even people working out the mechanical difficulties in the operating equipment. The ship of course was sent under Winston Churchill's orders and not by the Naval chief of operations, and it was not ready for combat. I believe that the U.S. Navy had realized that and was not ready to jeopardize North Carolina in the same circumstances.

[North Carolina had a relatively long and thorough training period before going through the canal into the Pacific, is that correct? You were on board when she was in the North Atlantic for the trial.]

Yes, I was.

[When they fired those guns the first time?]

Yes. In fact I was in the conning tower with the gun boss Tom B. Hill at the time, and he asked me to give him a count down for firing from my watch which pleased me as a gunner mate third year.

[What else do you remember about the period. Firing those sixteen inch guns for the first time must have been an awesome experience.]

These were called structural firing test of course. We had fired several rounds one and two gun singles and so forth to operate the turrets and so forth and all I can tell you it was a tremendous blast. It popped several hundred light bulbs; it broke some lenses in the thirty-six inch search lights; we had a couple of boats aboard and it opened the strakes of these boats, peeling them back. Certain rivets and bolts that were over tightened and so forth, from shock, let go. This was what we wanted to learn in structural firing test, what can she take, what in future design do we have to improve on. We had what we called the angled roller bearing in the turrets instead of the old flat like on the old battleships so that the shock was transmitted in a tangent into your barbette instead of a direct broadside, and I can't say that there was any tremendous shift about the ship when she fired these dead to port. When the sixteens, nine sixteens and ten five inch thirty-eights, were all fired at one time. There was a slight roll, there was quite a shock. Structural-wise she certainly did pass the tests.

The ship was a hundred and eighty-six inches give or take one or two inches. She scraped a little paint going through. The very singular thing that I remember is that we had blocked out every identification mark, the "55" numbers and the letters U. S. S. North Carolina on the stern and we even covered up the numbers on the aircraft. And as we got through, everybody said how you people doing on the North Carolina? Security there I don't think fitted for the simple reason that there was nothing else that looked like her on the seas.

[Perhaps it would be a good idea to make some comment about aviation aboard the ship.]

Yes. I was talking to Captain Louie E. DeCamp just last Wednesday this past week confirming some things. The U. S. S. North Carolina's aviation unit consisted of three OS2U King Fishers, five aviators, and twenty-

one enlisted men to maintain these

one enlisted men to maintain these, which sounds like you are overloaded with personnel. This wasn't true. When we went to Portland, Maine of course we were sitting up there and the Tirpitz was in Brest, France the U. S. S. Washington our sister ship had joined the fleet in Scapa Flow. I understand the basic reason of being there was in case the Tirpitz made a run for the North Sea, the British Lord Nelson and the Washington and the North Carolina would be about the only thing they could possibly handle her. Well we sat there for several weeks and the aviation unit was called upon to fly dawn antisubmarine war patrols and dusk antisubmarine warfare patrols with two or three aircraft in each morning and each afternoon. Then in the late morning or early afternoons, we would run tracking drills for exercising the radars, the antiaircraft gun directors and the gun crews at their stations. At that time the V division manned the four twenty millimeters aft of the starboard and port catapults. Therefore they could be spared for maintenance on the third aircraft during these mandatory tracking runs. Then in the afternoons, the aircraft would go out for their own gunnery bombing, navigational and operational and search type flights. So at the end of the month, we had put in approximately five hundred and fifteen hours in the air with thirty O52U's. Now this averages out approximately a hundred and seventy seven hours a month per plane or five point eight eight hours per day for thirty days. The days were extremely long then because all of the maintenance had to be done in the evenings or the single aircrafts down. Now there is no way that we could prove this. But neither has it ever been challenged. Because every log of every ship that had an aviation unit would have to be scrutinized to get the exact figures. But to the best of my knowledge, we have never been able to find another ship that was called upon to conduct so many flying hours in any one month. I think this is some sort of record and I think it would stand, if the time could be taken to develop the complete

substantiation.

One of my best jobs as an aviation ordnance man was in the case of air attacks to throw over the depth bombs, the three hundred and twenty-five depth bombs and the bombs jetisoned off the fantail in case the planes came in at us. The aviation unit had two aircrafts on the catapolts and sometimes one in the center in a deck storage cart. Remember there was a six thousand gallon gasoline tank, a paint locker, and on the bombs I usually had four three hundred and twenty five pounds antisubmarine depth bombs on board, plus six to eight one hundred pound general purpose bombs there. So we were sitting on a keg of explosives back there. If we would have been struck by any type of a bomb or shell fire it would have started a fire. We could have easily been killed back there. It was a very potential, it was a very time-fused area to be in. It was extremely dangerous. A battle that didn't come off shortly after the Stewart Islands one, Commander T.B. Hill was the gun boss and Captain Fort was the skipper. In the organization if I remember right it was the gun boss's duty to inform me to jetison the bombs as an attack was imminent. The orders kept coming down through the J2V phone circuit to the man on the phone saying "throw them over." We would lift them up to throw them over. Then the order would say "set them back down," "Throw them over." This went on and I put on the phones and Admiral Hill, later later Admiral Hill, at that time he was Commander Hill and said, "Captain, it is my responsibility to give the directive." And the Captain said, "but I am the captain of the ship and I will give the order." "Aye, Aye, sir." He said "What have you done back there?" And I said "Sir, I hope I've made everybody happy. I have kept two and thrown over two."

I was listening in to the actual torpedoing of the ship. The aviation chief metalsmith Pappy Tyre was one of those who spotted the torpedo just

before it hit. And yes, I did feel the tremendous shock. I was practically at my gun station at the time. We had always been warned not to stand next to the lifelines in the sub infested waters of course because of the apparent danger. They had one man with the phones on who was talker for that group of guns right near where the torpedo struck and he was standing by the lifelines. We only found the broken lead, we never found or recovered his body at all. He was standing there watching the Wasp burn. He never knew what hit him. We were doing approximately nine knots. We had received the SSS flashes from the destroyer screen. We were just starting to rev up when the attack hit. It seems to me that we had gone to air defense but I don't know, if we had gone to general quarters I don't know. It was A.M., we'd been up for hours because we manned gun stations at dawn any way or just prior to dawn, antisubmarine protection.

I do remember one incident where the Hornet was under attack and I think the North Hampton; and a plane off the Hornet circled back and off of our port quarter he dropped a bomb approximately two hundred and fifty yards away, a depth bomb set for twenty-five feet. That torpedo that had been fired came up out of the water and as it came down and hit the nose it did explode also. This I did see. This torpedo was headed for the U.S.S. Hornet, and aircraft carrier and escort at the time. We did notice this dynamic feat of this aviator, the precision it took to put that bomb at a torpedo that was traveling approximately thirty-five miles an hour, for it to sink the twenty-five feet for it to blow this thing up out of the water. It undoubtedly saved the Hornet from being struck at the time.

[The pilots I suppose were very efficient professionally]

Yes. Now John Burns, the one who made the rescue, I had the pleasure

of making five flights with John Burns. He was a very fine gentlemen and he had received his training from the seminary. He never swore, drank or smoked. I understand, until after he made the rescue. I was with him when he profaned out his first cuss words. We were towing targets for the destroyers for target practice down around the equator headed for the Fiji Islands from Hawaii. I could see this one gun on the stern of this destroyer pointed much more forward than all the other guns and I saw "baker two block" which is "commence firing." They commenced firing; and before I could reach down and get a varies pistol to fire a red signal to cease fire to the ship, their own gun boss had corrected it. I counted nine tracer bullets coming over the canopy under the float aforeward of the engine. And remember there were two that you didn't see in between them. That was the first time I ever heard Lt. John Burns swear. He said, "What the hell are they doing down there, don't those damn fools know what they are doing." But I never heard him swearing after that.

[Were you ever under the enemy fire?]

Not while I was aboard. We did conduct patrols inter-air patrols in other words, within about a ten mile of the screen, the ships screen for anti-submarine protection. You want to remember in those days the Japanese were sending up two Kalasaki or Emily bombers just outside of our screen which we could have fallen to. Then we had the CAP or the Carrier Air Patrol protecting the force, usually four plane units, for protection above us. I can remember Lt. de Camp asking Captain Fort's permission to take one of the OS2U's up and shoot down one of these bombers and I think that the response was "are you crazy or something?"

[Did they refer to the aviation unit as Airdale.]

Yes, Airdale is a general term that is utilized for all aviation personnel, it is not limited just to that, but yes, it is for General Airdale.

[Did the aviation unit fit in with the ships company, was it considered part of the ships company?]

Yes. Basically you are a ships company. V division on a battleship and a cruiser is specifically a ships company. It has a unit organization which means that the battle division, the battleship division like we were, Battle Division Six, the Washington and the North Carolina at that time. Then our planes when another ship joined us, our planes were up to twelve, made a squadran. The squadran was referred to as V06, Aviation Unit Observation Scout Six. The unit is your flight or your division, and it is ships company.

[Just some general things about the conditions on board ship, how would you describe the food?]

The food was very very well prepared. Of course it was a long time in storage and this certainly degenerated its quality. But this is normal. The cooks and the bakers we had were excellent in those days and what they had to work with was good; except to this day I can not eat an egg unless it is hard boiled, fried dry, or scrambled dry because of the age of the eggs in those days.

[Was it considered to be a strict ship? In other words were you required to wear the uniform of the day or even in war time you had certain shifts inspected? It had the reputation of being a strict ship that's why I asked.]

We'd have to go back to the term "A man of Warsmen." Now remembering Captain Hustvedt was relieved by Oscar C. Badger who came from a long family of old sea bitten officers. Oscar C. Badger did something

on this ship that I think reflects the basic foundation of regulation. A regulation to the pre World War II man was the perfectly everyday normal way of following his assignments and duties. I didn't bother him. If they told us to wear a pink ribbon in our hair, we'd wear one; it didn't bother us. He did not have the time element, and it takes approximately a year to get a ship like this into commission with all the bugs work down and the crew click, click, click. We did not have that time in those days. The war hit us in December. He took and he kept us at general quarters and he had us every seaman every officer trained to a combat perfection within six months. Sure practice we needed, and actual shooting a little more yes, but I mean getting there, being assigned and being relied upon. So that you found this in all of the earlier months of this ship. We didn't mind a Saturday inspection in the old fleet. This was normal before you even went on liberty, standing an inspection and your locker was perfect and your bunks and all that. So as a "Man of Warsman" at this time, yes, we did very very much have a good foundation and a pride in our looks, our being in the ship, and our duties.

[You considered it a good ship. In terms of the ships crew, did they really indentify with the ship?]

Absolutely, as you know, I'm retired Navy; I did twenty-seven and a half years. It stems right from the top. A Captain that instills or his officers or his petty officers that takes upon their shoulders the personal installation into the individual of correctness, and the understanding of some of the man's problem so that he feels that he is a personality instead of a number or a uniform. You can't cut it off at any certain place; it has to come all the way down to the individual.

Whether he is an officer or a seaman, it makes no difference.

[Do you remember any thing about you mentioned Badger, you mentioned a couple of others, do you remember anything about them that is worth putting down from the point of view of enlisted personnel?]

Well, any man that is wearing a Congressional Medal of Honor brings an automatic type of proudness into them; and if I understand my Naval history, he won his as an ensign at Veracruz in 1914. Oscar C. Badger, was a professional by the highest standards and terms. I remember over the PA system, if I also remember correctly, he came aboard with a set of unprecedented orders. He had the authorization to get this ship ready for combat as rapidly as possible; and at his discretion, he was permitted to transfer any officer, and this is almost unparalleled in BUPERS orders, and any officer or any enlisted man that he deemed was not capably carrying on his assigned duties. And he got rid of some people.

[In other words you are saying he was a very capable.]

Absolutely.

[Do you remember any of the others?]

Hustvedt. I of course being a seaman, I didn't know him. I was way down in the ranks and personal inspections and so forth. I didn't have any individual conversations with him except maybe a greeting. Fort, yes I had words with him back on the stern. He was proud of his aviation unit and so forth, and at one time I was the only man on the ship to hold my rating, aviation ordnanceman. For a period of time there were none and we only rated two and I didn't have an assistant and I was training some at the time. I was given the job of explosive ordnance disposal officer. If we were to be struck by a bomb that did not ignite. We had no drawings and no intelligence on their types of equipment and

so forth, but in those days we disassembled the bomb fuses and cleaned them and reassembled and placed them back in the bomb. I didn't appreciate it. I couldn't refuse it of course because I was delegated. Later on Captain Thomas, who I have seen since he retired, another fine officer, all the captains of the North Carolina were professionals. It was a major command. They had to be carefully selected.