

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #24.027

Ralph Swift

USS NORTH CAROLINA Battleship Collection

June 3, 1976

Interview #1

[Interview by Captain Ben Blee]

[Ralph, tell me when you reported aboard?]

Well, we were assigned to the *NORTH CAROLINA* from Newport, Rhode Island, in March of 1941. I reported into the Brooklyn Navy Yard aboard a Navy truck. The first impression I got when I got into that navy yard was this big, monstrous bow all red lettered.

[You didn't expect to see a ship of that color I suppose, huh?]

The biggest thing I ever saw in my life and what an impression that meant!
Great!

[You were surprised at the size of that monster, I guess.]

I was a small town boy, and it shook me up. It was so big.

[Was that the first ship you served in while in the Navy?]

Yes, sir.

[Well, then you reported aboard as a member of the preconditioning detail?]

Yes.

[You're a plank owner?]

I'm a plank owner.

[You were there for her commissioning. How long did you serve in her? That is, when did you finally leave her?]

I left her in December of 1944 out near (?)?

[Okay, well, I want to try to get your feeling about some of the things that happened while you were in the ship. You've already brought out to me that your battle station was usually below decks. Exactly where was your battle station?]

I was assigned to the forward turbo switchboard.

[Were you a first class electrician mate at that time? Tell me about your ratings then.]

Well, I was first assigned to the aft division which was fire control. Then, I later applied and went down below decks to the E Division. I worked my way up as we all did.

[Then, you were in the E division most of the time?]

Most of the time.

[You'd made third class, second class and first class while serving in the *NORTH CAROLINA*?]

Yes.

[Well, now back to your battle station. You were below decks, of course, in all of the action of the ship, or I guess of most of it. Can you tell us anything of your recollection of what it felt like to be down there when things were happening?]

Well, if we had an air raid, and planes were spotted on radar screen, we went to general quarters. We start firing our 5 [inch] 38 [caliber] anti-aircraft battery, and they'd cut in. We'd listen and hear them blasting away. Then went into the 40 mm, and once you'd drop back into the 40 mm, you'd start to get all shook up. Then, you'd go into the 20 mm sound, and you knew them darn planes were getting darn close, and it wouldn't be long before they passed overhead.

[I guess when you heard the 20 mm, you knew they were getting close.]

We'd start to scream, "Get that Son of a B****. Hit him."

[I can remember that when you started to then hear the 20 mm, that's when you started to pray.]

We were kind of rooting for the guys up on the topside to knock them down. They were the guys that we depended on. We'd give them the electricity, but they had to hit them.

[Now, do you remember the night that the ship was in the vicinity of the Gilbert Islands, and I believe it was the 26th of November in 1943? There was a night attack and you were below the decks. Tell us a little bit about that.]

Well, I was on the forward turbo switchboard. We were at general quarters, because we had reports of Japanese aircraft were all in the vicinity. We'd been picking them up for some time. We had been at general quarters for quite a while. We got reports down through our sound power telephone system that they were dropping floats which illuminated all the task forces. There were, oh, maybe eleven, twelve, or possibly more lighted floats, maybe more, silhouetting the whole task force. These Japanese Betties they were; they were two engine bombers. They were on the outside of that area. It was now just an eerie feeling. You just felt like you were trapped like possibly the

pioneers in the wagon train where the Indians would circle around you waiting to go in for the kill. It was the funniest feeling I ever had in my life.

[I guess what you're trying to say is that it is pretty damn scary to be down there and know that the ship is just lit up like a Christmas tree, right?]

We were just sitting ducks in the water, we felt, or I know I did. Not knowing what was going to transpire. What do we do? It's night, and they're out in the dark. We couldn't see them. Radar could pick them up, but they were out of range of our 5 38's, so we didn't know just what type of attack they were going to give us. It was shaky.

[Yes.]

To me, that shook me up more than when we got hit with a torpedo.

[Then that is perhaps the most vivid memory that you have of your stay on the ship?]

Yep. That one shook me up more than any of the others.

[Now you mentioned the torpedoing. I think you said that this was kind of a unique experience for you. Tell them why that was.]

The unique experience is because it happened to be my twentieth birthday, that day. It was a heck of a way to receive any type of a . . . I can't call it a gift, because we lost some of our own personnel. This was an awful way to celebrate any type of a birthday.

[You think of that every time you have a birthday now?]

It does reoccur many, many times. I've always told my wife and she says, "Well, every birthday, something happens to me." And it does. I walk on eggs all the time.

[You ought to stay in bed on your birthday.]

That's right. I would do better that way.

[Okay, can you give us your impressions of any of the captains or officers aboard while you served in the ship?]

Well, the only one that impressed me the most . . . and I'm not taking away from any skipper we had on board. I think they were all fine, but with Captain Badger . . . he later was an Admiral. He impressed me the most because he wanted to take this ship. He was so proud of the "Carolina" that he wanted to take this ship into action and tangle up with the German Battleship (?) Oh! He was just so proud of this ship, and he knew we could take it. He was all prepared for it. I remember one other time with Captain Badger. We were heading down to Norfolk, Va. I think Captain Badger was an old destroyer skipper, if I'm not mistaken. He had the word passed over the loudspeaker system. We were heading from New York to Norfolk. He said, "Prepare for high speed and heavy seas." That's when we ripped the plane right off the catapults. He impressed me so much.

[He was a hard charger wasn't he?]

Oh, when he had this ship, we had such a great crew. We were off the Florida Keys training in 1942. We washed a plane over the side, and it flipped over. He was so shook up, he said, "The hell with it. Sink the damn thing." He didn't want to pull it up on board. He didn't want to waste the time, because the submarine threat was still there. We couldn't be floating around.

[Right.]

This is just after the war had started. I think we were down there in January or something like that.

[Did you serve in other ships after the *NORTH CAROLINA*?]

No. I put time in small craft after that. The biggest regret in my whole life, and as they say none of us have the hind sight to see, but was when my mother wrote me a letter. I was on the West Coast after the war was over. I found out that the “Carolina” went all the way to Boston.

[And you weren’t there?]

Oh! I cried tears for a week.

[Well, you apparently had pretty fond memories of the ship. Tell us a little bit of how you feel about it?]

I tell you, I even make my wife salute the picture when she goes out of the house to go to work in the morning. I got her framed right by the door. She said, “That’s all I have heard of ever since I’ve married this guy.”

[So, you really took great pride in this ship?]

Yes. I love this ship. It’s a second home to me. I had a great big lump in my throat when I looked at her tied up here. I said, “Oh my God!”

[I don’t think I’ve ever met a former crew member of the ship that didn’t feel pretty much as you do.]

I have a few tears in my eyes still from her. Something that you can almost call this your second home. I grew up with this ship. I am very proud of this ship.

[Why, in your opinion, was there such great affection for this ship?]

We just grew up with it, everybody. We just loved this ship. Everybody . . . crew member on here, the lowest to the highest rating on here, was in love with this ship. We would have done anything for this ship. We were representing our country. We were proud of the Navy. We were proud of our families. We were tremendously proud of this

ship. No one could ever say anything wrong about this ship, any crewmember, I don't care . . .

[What happened ashore, you'd risk . . .]

Oh! We'd defend this ship anywhere. No one would ever bother us ashore because we were so proud of this ship. When we were in New York City all that time right after commissioning, and everybody was proud of this ship. The Brooklyn Navy Yard ship workers were proud of this ship. Everybody was proud of this ship--the first battleship in twenty-one years.

[Yeah]

Beautiful. I can remember one. I think the fellow's name was Moynihan; he was in the engineering branch. We were down in Norfolk, Va. *WASHINGTON* was tied up on our port side or starboard side, I can't remember. Who came over on a liberty watch in the morning was Moynihan. I said, "What are you doing?"

He said, "You know Swifty, what happened?"

I said, "What?"

He said, "I went aboard the *WASHINGTON* and thought it was the *NORTH CAROLINA*. I went down in the same compartment and went to sleep on a bunk down there. It was the cook's quarters and they woke me up early." Of course, the engineering guys could sleep till six o'clock in the morning. They woke him up at four-thirty in the morning. He told them, "Buzz off!" He then heard them mumbling, "The *NORTH CAROLINA* is over there." He said, "God! I'm on the wrong ship." That was because we're sister ships. Some of the fellows down at work; they'll sing for me now, "Here comes the Showboat." That's the way they usually will talk to me.

[Sparky was just talking about the nickname, the “Showboat,” which this ship has always had. I think it is worth putting on the tape his recollections of how it got that name. So, take her from there Ralph.]

Sure. I know that we had so much publicity. We were built up in the Brooklyn Navy Yard in New York. New York gave us all types of spread when we fired the nineteen gun salute on our test firing. We were down in Norfolk, Va when we went by the *WASHINGTON*, which happened to be our sister ship. By our having so much publicity and they being a little jealous of that, their band happened to be on deck. I don’t know why. They played the song, “Here Comes the Showboat.” I am pretty sure that that is where we picked up the nickname “The Showboat,” right there.

[Sounds just like they could be the reason for that.]

Oh yes! It’s funny. I was telling you about the nineteen gun salute test firing we had. I happened to be on the boat deck on the port side. It was early in the evening. It was dark. I had my white hat on and dungarees. When they fired that nineteen gun salvo, that white hat disappeared. I don’t know where ever it went to. I thought the world came to an end.

[Were you in the “F” Division at that time?]

At that time, yes. I can remember in the “F” Division how well trained our crew was. I used to have to go back when they would practice loading the sixteen inch turrets. I was assigned to time from the time we would load and be ready to fire and come back and load again. It was amazing to see those great big huge guns with the projectiles being rammed in, and the powder bags being rammed in, in an equivalent time of about twenty seconds, the whole cycle. That showed you how well-trained our crew was. Everyone knew what they were doing all the time.

[What can you say about the discipline that prevailed on the ship?]

We had no problem. Well, when we were on the Pacific, we used to store our beer in the brig. You didn't have any prisoners. Everybody towed their mark. You would have a good ship.

[The *NORTH CAROLINA* served, of course, with a whole lot of other ships off and on during the war. Do you remember anyone in particular?]

Well, the one ship that we used to like to operate with and work in conjunction with frequently was the Big "E," the *ENTERPRISE*. With her around, and she loved us--the crew did--and we loved her, because her planes protected us, and we protected her with our secondary battery. She always seemed to have good luck with us and we always seemed to have good luck with her. She was a great ship.

[The *NORTH CAROLINA* was with her many times during the war wasn't she?]

Constantly; we loved to have her in the task force. We used to like to operate with her.

[You know very few of the WWII ships have been saved. This is one of them, and the *ENTERPRISE* is not. How do you feel about that?]

I felt very bad, because it had a tremendous amount of history attached to it, the Big "E" did. She was involved in every operation in the Pacific. The "Carolina" was similar. Thank the good Lord they saved--the people of North Carolina saved--the "Carolina."

It was always a shame of a great ship with a great history being sold for scrap. Through the graciousness of the people of North Carolina they saved this ship for history.

[End of interview]