

U. S. S. NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP COLLECTION

Paul Wieser Interview

June 25, 1975

[We are now talking to Paul Wieser, who lives at 532 Princeton Road in Linden, New Jersey 07036. Paul, do you remember when you came aboard the North Carolina?]

Yes, not the exact day, but it was in the middle of May shortly after commissioning. We had come down in a big draft from Newport. Quite a few of us had come down, brand new boots for a brand new ship. I think this is the thing I remember is, "This is terrific." When war was declared, we had been out and we had structurally fired the ship, but that was nothing compared to what we were going to face. The thing was, the day war was declared, we were in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In fact, I had the duty to sound that war had been declared. We got the word boggies, and we went to general quarters in the yard. We had ammunition up in the mount. We got the word to stand by.

[Where was your division?]

I was fifth division, five inch thirty-eights on the starboard side. I heard the captain ask the question out there, what side did you fire the broadside to? The answer is port because I was on the starboard side, and we didn't fire. We just sat there and took the ride. It was a one big jolt. I heard the captain asking the fellow what side did you fire the nineteen gun salvo to. It was to port. He didn't remember, but it was to port because I was inside. We were at our battlestations.

[And you didn't fire?]

No, we didn't fire.

[Well, was Michael Horton, was he?]

He was in the division with me. He was in fifth division with me.

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[He was on the number nine gun.]

Mount nine.

[And you were in mount seven?]

Right.

[So, you were right next to one another.]

In fact, mount nine and seven were controlled by sky three; and one, three and five were controlled by sky one.

[Do you know this guy Burrell that he is talking about?]

Burrell was his pointer, slightly, yes. We had Sheen. Sheen was a very good man, too. He was a gunner's mate.

[Yes, he said he and Sheen used to get into it all the time.]

Did he tell you the story about mount nine hitting the U. S. S. Kidd?

[Yes, he said he was blameless, and all he did was what he was told. He said, "All I did was put the shell in."]

See, the starboard mounts, the two end mounts were starshell mounts, and they fired to illuminate the target; and, the other two or three fired for effect. So, we came up and told them later on the word was illuminate not eliminate. I guess I started to say we were boots, and the fact that they had taken us down into the Gulf of Mexico and trained for forty days, we were right off them. We didn't know one end of the ship from the other. We had, I think in my division we had the best organization I have ever seen with division officers and our division officer, he was one of the best.

[Who was that?]

Kilpatrick, he was gunnery officer, and he made admiral after he left the ship. We had division petty officers that were out of this world. We had no problem whatsoever. Our division officer, I remember when I was a recruit, I eventually took the division as first classman. I waited my turn, though.

Eventually everybody had gone. But I remembered he was a lieutenant, and Kilpatrick came back and he says to my division boatswain mate, he said, "I'm going up front," a slang word aboard ship. He says, "I'm going up to the front." And he said, "If you have any problems, you take care of them; and if they are too big, you come see me. Otherwise, do not bother me." He said, "You take care of it the way you see fit." He had so much confidence in his man. And he did, he ran us beautiful. He had a well organized ship.

[Who was this that ran you beautifully?]

Debler, boatswain mate first class.

[Is he still living, do you know?]

Oh, I doubt it very much. He was quite elderly at that time. Our petty officers were the only guys who knew anything about the Navy. The rest of us were right out of boots. Brand new, all brand new. It was a treat for us to go down into the Gulf to train because after that, we got our word to go to Casco Bay, Maine. The word was around that we were supposed to be waiting for anything that came that way, like the Scharnhorst, the Gneisenau, the Tirpitz, either one of them. I said, "Boy, this would have been some shoot-out if we ever ran across them." But, we went out, and we were firing one day and the word came back the war was already on, and there were a couple of fishing boats out there, and the word they brought back was there was an engagement out there. They had brought a target out, and they were using sixteens, and they swore that there was an engagement out there. That is the word they brought back. We came back into port and there the word was that there was a Naval engagement off the shore, up off around the Maine coast.

[This was just scuttlebutt.]

Yes, this was scuttlebutt. We didn't see anything. We went back into Maine, Portland, Maine, and stayed there about a month.

[What was your job in the mount?]

I was a powderman. I was a powderman for awhile and then I made, well, as you got rate just seaman took the loading job. The petty officers took trainers and pointers and gun captains. When I made third class, my gun captain was transferred. He was a boatswain mate second class. He was transferred, and then I moved over to gun captain, which was to just observe the crew as they loaded the guns. If there were any malfunctions, I was to stop them from going any further and to clear the problem up. My job was to, when the shell, when the gun recoiled the outcase would go out, I'd have to drop the spade for another load and observe that nothing did go wrong in the process of firing. We had a little trick in there. We heard a lot about these cook officers, their guns blowing up, and we had a little light above the breech block. I told them, "The minute I see that thing go out, I'm going to lay you across that breech. Anything that goes in there, I want to come out the end of the gun. I don't want later on to drop that breech and see that thing in there. I want to get it out; and the minute I see that light go out, I'm going to stop you. Watch for me to stop you because I don't want no gun to ever to be backloaded out of this thing."

[Yes, it has happened.]

I remember well, it stayed in my mind the fact that I wasn't the bravest guy in the world. When we went out to structure fire, the gunnery officer climbed in the mount. We were all out of boots. He climbed in and heat dogged it, and I got claustrophobia. My buddies said, "Come on down in the engine room. What the hell do you want to work twenty-six hours a day for on deck?" And I said, "You see that hatch, you are not slamming that on my head." He came in and he started dogging that door down. He had been in every gun. It was almost night when he came into the gun mount to fire. He dogged it down.

His exact words were, "Load it, if it blows up we will all go to hell." And I had seen nothing but a cap gun before this. And this is beautiful; I had the boots, and he keeps telling me to load this thing and get blown up.

[We were talking about how when you are in the turret you really are oblivious to what is going on, and you are dogged down you are oblivious to whatever else is happening aboard ship. You can hear what?]

You can hear the other guns going off above you like mount seven down below, and five and nine were firing over the top of us continuously. We would get a blast through the hot case ports. The only other thing that I would be concerned about was the fact that I remembered that the Alabama one mount fired into the other mount. Somebody, the sight setter had tripped the cam out. He tripped the cam out, and the gun behind it was loaded and the two shells went right in and killed the crew. And that was the only time I was concerned. I could look out, outside you see, we did not know. I knew because I would look out on deck and I could see the planking on deck. I knew that if we were trained pretty much aft, I could see the planking of the deck running fore and aft. I knew that we were firing straight back, and I hoped that number three's cut out cams were working and that sight setter would leave his hands off of it. Because he was firing right down my back, how high I could tell by the angle of our guns, if sky one was on the same target we were. He might have been picked at a target that may have been diving. We may have had one at a higher altitude. I was just sweating out that "just keep your hands off that cut out cam because I don't want a visitor coming through this bulkhead." It was real exciting. It got a little smokey in there. It was enough noise to almost obscure other outside noises. You had your two rammer motors going. You had two hoist motors going. You had your pointer motor going. Your trainer motor going and the hoist motors from the--you had two hundred projectiles, you can run that indi-

vidually. There were two separate motors. The first load would start them right above his head right above the fuse pots, and the powder chutes were started by the mount captain who stood on a platform behind and watched me and the crew. He was the gunner's mate. He knew this thing from one end to the other. Our job was more or less, we were perfected in loading this thing. We had the loading machine. Every day we went over to the loading machine and tried to keep our timing down to get the round out every four seconds. The computer was set up to try to get a dead time on us, and we would try to keep it that way. I was talking to Mike last night. I had a first loader who was a muscle man and a sadast when he banged his hand. He was fast. He was fast and strong. One day they had come out with a new projectile, a BT projectile. It had a little radio in the nose. He stomped down on the pedal with the projectile setting in the pot with the fuse. The projectile stayed in the pot until we got the signal to commence firing because the fuse was being constantly changed as the range would change. The fuse was being set. They came out with this new projectile that if it came within a certain area of the target it would blow. He stomped down on that pedal to lift the projectile out of the pot, and he busted the pedal. He puts the thing up under his arm, and he starts pulling wires, and I say, "Let's get it out of here." We went to loading the machine, and he was fast. He would throw that projectile in there. He smacked his hand against the side of the gun, he would say, "That was meant to be." He wouldn't bellyache about it. He wouldn't bellyache about a thing. He was fast. I had to go like hell to keep up with him. I often hoped that I had followed in the footsteps of the guys that I had trained with.

[Did you stay in five inches all during the war then?]

Yes.

[Well, that was kind of an elite group, anyway, wasn't it, the gun crews?]

Yes. You had your specialty groups.

[Say, on a typical day, on a patrol day, what time was reveille?]

It would all depend on sunrise. We would go an hour before sunrise. You would rather try to keep from being surprised at dawn. We were under the impression that they would try to come out of the sun where you couldn't see them, lying low. So, we always went to general quarters in the morning. We used to gripe about the fact that we had to go to general quarters. Why didn't the sixteen inch we called the sky defense, the Turks, didn't go. When they sounded sky defense, only the five inch and the forties and the twenties were manned. This was the first.

[So, this was every day you were patrolling.]

Every day.

[I know that the sun comes up about five or five-thirty, so reveille actually was about four-thirty, four o'clock or something like that?]

An hour before sunrise when we were out at sea, but normally in port it was 5:45.

[Well, when you were out at sea, reveille went between four and four-thirty, and then would you have breakfast before you went on?]

No, we have breakfast after general quarters, after sky defense.

[Okay, so you then would stay at your battlestations. You would get up, ablute or whatever you had to do, and then you had an hour to get to your battlestations.]

No, they didn't give us that much time.

[So, you are on battlestation thirty minutes before sunrise.]

Right.

[And you sat there in the dark and waited until the sun came up. Then it is now about 6:30 because the sun is up pretty good at 6:30, then you came

down off of battlestations?]

Right.

[Okay, then what did you do?]

We normally would wash down the deck. We scrubbed it down every morning with water and scrub brushes and dried it down. Then we would go to chow.

[What was a typical breakfast?]

More often than not, scrambled eggs, bacon, potatoes, and you could always count on Wednesday was beans, pork and beans, Wednesday and Saturday.

[And no matter how you hid your tray, that guy with the cold ketchup would find it?]

Yes, right.

[Especially if the beans were barely warm.]

Mess cooks didn't enjoy their work. It was sort of a punishment, anyway, and they wanted to take it out on somebody, and your mess tray would be their release, their . . .

[Well then, Wednesdays and Saturdays it would be beans, and then the rest of the time it would be hotcakes or scrambled eggs or French toast or something like this, and coffee, coffee, coffee?]

Yes, right.

[Did you get hot coffee when you were at sky defense? Wouldn't they bring hot coffee to you?]

Right. The coffee pots were always in operation. Whenever the watch would go on. If you had the 12:00 to 4:00 you woke up at 12:00 o'clock; you could go down and get coffee; but you are talking to the wrong guy about coffee because I never touched it.

[Really? What did you drink?]

That is always the same question I get, what did you drink? Water. That



is all that was left. It always comes to the subject about me. You always picture the boatswain mate with a cup of coffee and chewing his guys to do this and griping, and I never did. I was greeted during one of my earlier reunions down here. I was greeted by my engineer when I was a 3rd class in the boat. He came up and he greeted me and said, "The quietest boatswain mate in the United States Navy." I never raised my voice. I said, "If you didn't want to do it, well, we will get somebody else to do it. Maybe some other time I'll find a better job for you." But I never touched coffee, and it griped me to see them dump it in the waterway because it was right off the main deck. We used to try to keep that as clean.

[Scuppers?]

Well, it was the waterway leading to the scuppers which drained off the side. I would come up at reveille and find that the mid watch had dumped their empty. They always had to bring back the big containers to the mess hall. Instead of dumping them over the side which was bad, that was a no no, too, because it would come back and spray the side of the ship, so, they dumped it into the waterways and it made a hell of a mess. But I never, never drank coffee.

[You were eating on stainless steel trays, right? And you were using stainless steel CRS knives, forks, and spoons. Were you still, do you remember the old mugs that you used to drink coffee or tea or whatever it was to drink and there was no handle on it? It was a thick ceramic mug with no handle. That is what you all started out with, wasn't it? You may have ended up with it for all I know. I never remember a handle on a cup or a glass. It was just a thick ceramic, and it held about six or seven ounces of fluid. Frequently with your meals, did you have beverages besides coffee?]

Iced tea already sugared. Toward the end there we would come up and say,

"What have we got for chow?" The guy would say, "Mechanical cow." We had gotten a machine. We had this powdered milk. Oh, man, it was just like drinking toothpaste and water. It was terrible. And we went back into Pearl for some repair, either the time we got torpedoed or one of the times we had some general overhauls done. We got this machine and it made milk. You couldn't tell the difference. We weren't drinking out of the cups, 'cause you said six ounces, we went to the bowls. We used the bowls as cups. We couldn't get enough of the stuff. We couldn't get enough of it. It was beautiful. It was cold. You could put ice in it and cool it down; it was beautiful.

[Did you ever pull mess duty?]

No. I, for some reason, I once volunteered for work that they wanted someone to go in a work party, and I always tried to do my job as best I could without griping about it. One of the boatswain mates assigned me to the crane and that was my cleaning station. If there was a working party, I would be the last one to go. Before they would strip that crane down, there were two of us, and we were left on that crane deck. I volunteered for a working party one time, and he came to me and took me aside, and he said, "You volunteered to come in the Navy?" I said, "Yes." He said, "You do not volunteer anymore because if you don't like it you aren't going to be able to refuse it. But if I send you, you may be able to say, 'I don't like it, I want to get off of it.' When you volunteer, don't come back to me and say you don't like the job. You ask for it, you are going to stay with it." So, I remembered that, and I never had mess duty. It was sort of a punishment. They would look for a guy . . .

[Who do you think was the most interesting guy, not one of the officers, one of the crew? Who do you think was the most interesting person you knew aboard ship?]

Interesting person other than Commander Stryker?

[Who was Commander Stryker?]

Commander Stryker was our executive officer. If he told any one of us to run through that bulkhead, the guy would try it. He was liked. He was liked well. In fact, when he got transferred, we all chipped in and bought his wife a car. We liked him.

[Bought his wife a car?]

Right. He couldn't accept the gift. We donated money, and his wife bought a car.

[During the war cars were hard to come by.]

Well, they chipped in, and she bought, this was our understanding that she bought a car. I slept outside. Everybody slept more or less near their battlestations, and I slept right outside. If the weather was fowl, I could go through the handle room to get to the gun. The chief master at arms slept in our compartment, and he heard the dice bouncing against the wall of the bulkhead. He went in there and there was quite a bit of money on the deck, and he says, "This is for Joe Stryker, right?" They says, "Beautiful." They didn't want to get wrote up. He picked it up.

[Stryker was good, was he?]

Oh, yes, he was. He made the ship. Starting from him and our captains, we had all good captains.

[Stryker was aboard how long? A long time?]

Yes. He was a lieutenant commander. He had relieved. I don't know if you have ever heard this story. We had Captain Badger, no Captain Hustvedt was captain. He asked the full commander Grissom, who was our navigator and it was still peace time, and he said, "Commander, what is our position?" And he said, "Right about here, Captain." And Captain said, "I want to know where

we are, not about where we are." Do you know, he was gone and Commander Stryker, who was a lieutenant commander at the time, relieved him. He made commander and he made captain and then he was transferred. But he ran a good ship. One time he heard that we had some griping about food, and he came back there personally to see what was going on. He straightened that out. There was very, my wife, her first husband was my friend. We got to know each other when we were kids in high school. And I joined the Navy, and I came back to the roller skating rink that night, and I had my uniform on, and he says, "How's the Navy?" I says, "Beautiful." Coming out of bootcamp, everything is beautiful. So, he goes and joins. He joined the Navy right behind me, and we got to be good friends. He didn't know his wife at the time. He met his wife through my wife's brother who was on the Washington, too. After the war we stayed together. My first wife, who had passed away, and this wife here and her husband, we got to be friends. We visited and he resembled me so much that at the roller skating rink they used to call us brothers. In fact, we had them kidded to the point that we were relatives. So, to get back to the point of how good Joe Stryker was, we had swimming in New Hebrides while the Washington, which was docked right alongside, would not authorize swimming.

[Apparently on account of the sharks? Stryker just had confidence his guys could fight off the sharks or what?]

I don't know what his theory was other than he figured that he had the opportunity to show that he would do anything for us, and probably more or less he wanted to know if we would do anything for him. Any probably this was more of it than anything. Other ships did have swimming in the harbor, but very few times, I can't remember that the Washington ever had swimming. But we had swimming. His theory, I think, was to prove that he would go out for us and anytime that he called for us, would we be there. And I don't think he ever had any doubt in his mind that anybody would do anything for him. He was that

kind of a person.

[Badger, pretty much the same way?]

Badger was the same way. The story came back one day that a lieutenant was on the bridge and had dropped his ashes while he was smoking, and Badger saw him do it, and he told him to get a dustpan, and this was the scuttlebutt that came back off the bridge, and this was supposed to be true. He made him. He got messed up every once in awhile. His name was Lt. De Metropolis, and he had either the first or second division, one of the turret divisions. It seemed that something went wrong up there with something, and I guess the Captain said, "This guy screws up too much, I am going to straighten him out." He dropped his cigarette ashes on the deck of the bridge, and the captain had him sweep it up. Well, low and behold, one day we were fueling destroyers. We would make a hit today, and tomorrow we would drop back to a tanker and pick up fuel and speed back to wherever we happened to be, and that night run the destroyers would burn up quite a bit of fuel. So, the next morning, we would top them off what they had burned up. Low and behold, we get a destroyer alongside and sure enough he was the skipper of it. The lieutenant who had to sweep the bridge. He was a lieutenant commander or a full commander at the time, and we were very much surprised that he had this ship whipped into such shape as he had. It had a band, and it was playing as it came alongside. So, we often wondered about the cigarette butt bit with Badger having him sweep it up.

[When was this he came alongside?]

Later, very much later. We hadn't seen him. I came aboard, and I guess they were afraid to let me go with the rest of the fleet. They just kept me here. I was one of the few who stayed. I put five and a half years on this ship and . . .

[Mike put almost four.]

Yes, there were a few of them in our division who just wanted to stay and that was it. I think I was one of them. I seemed to be pushed all of the time. Like I said, I never--they came up to me and said, "We are going to put you up for this or put you up for that." In fact, my division boatswain mate made chief, and that left an opening, one 1st class in the division. He runs the division, and he made chief. So, my division officer says, "You will have to take a test for 1st class," and I said, "I didn't want it." He says, "Well, operate at a 2nd class then." I operated and operated and one day they came along and they told me I had to go against the other second class in the division for the job. I says, "Oh, my God, if I have to listen to him I'd better go." So, I don't know if it was rigged or anything, but I happened to get the division. My second class just laid down on me. He quit. He quit completely on me. He eventually wound up in the forward hole but he . . .

[In the what?]

In the forward hole. In the boatswain locker. He took care of the lines and the canvas and everything that was up there, anything that had to do with working on deck. He was involved in, today with this dope problem I see it, but I think he was the first guy that introduced me to the idea that people are doing this stuff. He used to break in on our first aid boxes. We had first aid boxes all over the ship with stuff to deaden pain. He would break in there and take it. He was something out of this world. So, I was glad when there was an opening up there and he went. He was good. He was good. Like I said, he was trained well by the petty officer we had, but that was a bad thing for him when I had beaten him out and he just quit on me.

[Do you remember when the war was over, you all were steaming toward Japan, weren't you?]

In that area.

[You remember the reaction of the crew, was there a sense of . . . I don't know. I remember it very well. It took us about six hours to realize, you know, we had been living with it so long, we just couldn't believe it.]

I think it took us awhile to accept it. When I say awhile, it was days because we were operating in the area, and they were still sending planes out. Kamikaze were still coming out, and we got the word, a message came from Halsey, he was in charge of Task Force 38.2 whatever we were in. When Mitscher had it it was 58. When Halsey had it it was 38. We got the word, it was in the plan of the day "shot them down in a friendly manner." So, it took us awhile to . . . I says, "Boy, we went all through this damn thing, and this is a hell of a time to get it."

[None of them ever hit you, did they or even came close really?]

They came into the task force. We saw them. We were on deck a couple of times when they sneaked in on us and . . .

[After the war?]

After the war? No. We were pretty much on our toes at the time and anything that was moving, we had to watch them. Of course, they were sending them out.

[But you never saw one after the war?]

No. A lot of times we would go to general quarters before we even saw it, but there were times when we did actually see the planes. They sneaked in on us. We had this destroyer alongside refueling one of these topoff jobs. He was alongside and three of them, we actually saw them, three of them went into the carrier Antiqua and cracked up. One guy went into the afterelevator; one guy got came around and went right into the bridge; and a third guy turned around and went. He took off. I don't know if he brought those guys out there,

they couldn't navigate. He brought them out there. But he took off. Well, we had this destroyer alongside, and we had to get our hose back. A guy was killed on the destroyer in the process, in the excitement of getting it apart. He got caught in the vital line and got smacked up against the snatch block and it ruined him. It killed him.

[When your five inch director was hit at Okinawa, that was a friendly shell, they decided?]

Well.

[Were you all battened up and really didn't know anything about it?]

No, we didn't. The plane was probably diving, and he dove in between the formation, and whoever was on this side was following him, and he followed him down too far. He put the shell in.