

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #24.021

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U.S.S. *NORTH CAROLINA* BATTLESHIP COLLECTION

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Interview #2

Interviewers are Captain Ben Blee and Donald R. Lennon

[What are the dates that you actually served on the ship?]

On the *NORTH CAROLINA*, I served from May 24, 1941 to December 15, 1946.

[Did you ever cross the equator and go through that ritual?]

We crossed the equator, but we had a chief master at arms that was kind of tough. He was a shell back and we were all poly wags. Our day was before we crossed the equator, the executive officer thought things were going to get a little bit out of control. That the poly wags were going to take it out on that shell back, cause it was our time to take a shot at him because he was going to get us tomorrow. Our initiation was canceled. We did not have any initiation on the *NORTH CAROLINA*, crossing the equator.

[You never got the opportunity to go through that?]

We crossed the equator many times, but we didn't have the ceremony.

[What was your battle station while you were on the *USS NORTH CAROLINA*?]

My battle station was in the five-inch gun, in the gun crew. Up in the gun itself. I started out seaman. I was the powder man, with semi-fixed ammunition. When we got the

word to commence firing, I put the powder charge in on the tray, the projector man would take his projectile. We were shooting air craft, he left the dare to ready to go because the fuse was being set to burst at a certain distance. When we got the word to commence firing, I would put the powder charge in and he would put the projectile in. All the time we are shooting the fuse is being set or closing the range as the plane is coming in. Bombarding was a different story. We just put the ammunition in. We were trying to bust it over the island to get some casualties. I stayed powder man for a while. Then I made coxswain, I got to be the gun captain on that gun. I stayed in that, that was my only battle station on the ship. I stayed right at mount seven. Who actually set the timing on those shoots while you were in there.

[The range finder who would take control of our gun. He would send the ranges down to plot, a plotting area where all the information that was received was computerized as to the drift of the wind, speed of the target, speed of our ship, to calculate when to bust this projectile and put up shrapnel in the front of them so you would tear up his air plane.

[What was your ____ and rank?]

When I left the NORTH CAROLINA, I was boatswain mate first class.

[You went on the USS NORTH CAROLINA as a first-class officer?]

No. I came aboard as seaman second class. Make seaman first, coxswain, boatswain mate second class, then boatswain mate first class.

[What were some of your duties as a boatswain mate, other than being in charge of the gunnery?]

The gun was maintained by the guns mates, but he had to have a crew to fire it, so the deck force, which the boatswain mate would be in charge of. We had the boats. We

had to take care of our boats. We hoist the stores aboard. We took care of the stores. We hoisted ammunition. We were in charge of rigging for fueling. We were in charge of tying the ship up. We were in charge of anything that happened on top side, your lines that may support the rigging. Anything in the super structure, more or less. Just general up keep of the ship.

[Did they have any names other than boatswain mate that they called people that worked on the deck of the ship?]

Yes. Deck hands, swabbies, deck apes. We called the engineers snipes. Anybody that was in the engineering was a snipe. We were deck apes up on deck.

[How did you feel about being called those different names?]

If you were a deck ape, you accepted it because a snipe was worse than you. He thought he was better than the deck ape.

[Under what circumstances did you become a member of the United States Navy?]

When I was in high school, I thought the greatest thing in the world was to be a soldier. At that time, back in the late 1930s. The government had a program called CMTC, Citizens Military Training Corp. As a high school student, you would go for a month to be trained by the Army. I went to what is now know as Fort Dix, was Camp Dix. I went there for a month. I said, "You know what you can do with this Army. I ain't going out there to lay in that wet grass and march all day in that sand and get sand in my shoes." I said, "No." I was kind of military minded. My father was an immigrant. He came from Austria. He was proud of the fact that he served in the Austrian Army in Europe. He was kind of proud, I know the first day that the NORTH CAROLINA left Brooklyn on our sea trial, they had a picture of the ship in the paper. That is how it got its nickname, "Showboat". Walter

Winchel said, "It's not worth the taxpayers' money, it is nothing but a showboat, cruising in and out of New York." We were going out on sea trials. We had to test the ship out. He cut that picture out of the paper and he hung it up. He was proud of the fact that I got military minded as he was. Had to be. They were forced to be in the Army when he was in Austria. There wasn't a war at the time he was there, because he came to this country in 1898.

[Actually you voluntarily enlisted in the Navy as opposed to the US Army?]

I got a feel of what it was. I still felt like military was good. I just couldn't see doing scrimmages out there in the wet grass and all those kinds--living bibwak out in the woods--I just didn't enjoy that too much.

[What did you do for fun or recreation while you were on the USS NORTH CAROLINA?]

That was a tough thing. Recreation seemed like it didn't have a place until we came into a port. Again there we didn't come into no big seas where you could go over and say, "Let's have a ball game." You got nine guys together and you went out on the island and you made a couple of coconut trees the bases and you played ball. There were no facilities aboard for us to have any recreation. We had a library, you could read, but I got kind of fidgety. I guess I was a little tense at times. Sitting down to read was a problem. I just couldn't do it. Writing, I did very well. My son who is a teach in Phoenix, AR. He doesn't teach anymore, he is head of the history department. He used to collect Navy covers, first day covers of a ship being launched or a ship doing something important. He collected them. The letter that I had written to my wife from Tokyo Bay is over on the ship in the collection of first day covers when the ship was launched, the sea trials, or whatever was

important, they made a cover for. Depicting some sort of picture on the cover. On the envelop there is a number 493. This was the 493rd letter that I had written to my wife. She numbered them and tied them in a blue ribbon and were saving them. We had a captain aboard, when he was aboard ship, he was a JG with combat information center. He eventually retired out of the Navy as captain. He was part of the commission. I was talking one time and had told him about me having all my love letters at home. He wanted them. They are somewhere in the Eastern Carolina Archives.

[What particular battle experience stems out in your mind? From all the ones that you experienced as a member of the crew of the USS NORTH CAROLINA.]

The battles, one was just like the other. You had your job to do, or something go wrong, but the thing that sticks out in my mind is the last battle when the Japanese had surrendered. We had received word that admiral Halsey, we had gotten word that the Japanese were surrendering. We stayed out at sea, and the kamikaze was still coming out. He said to shoot them down in a friendly fashion. When we went to general quarters, we got word over the PA system that the Japanese surrendered. The War is over and you probably could have heard us over in New York City screaming out there in the middle of the Pacific. We were still shooting after they surrendered. The kamikaze was coming in. I figured, I have gone through all this mess and one of those guys has got my number. That was the one that stands out. The rest of them were all just as we went to practice. What we did at practice, we did in the gun. It just was a practice routine.

[What was your favorite liberty port?]

Favorite liberty port was New York City which we didn't see too often. We left and we didn't come back for three years. Bremerton, Washington, I guess can rank among the

top ones, too, but New York was our home port. We enjoyed that the most. Why I say Bremerton, the letters I was just telling you about, I was writing to my high school sweet heart. We came back to the states for a general overhaul in 1944, we hadn't been home in two years, so I brought her back, I went home on my leave, got married and brought her back to the West Coast with me, so Bremerton Washington would stand out as quite an important port to me.

[In regards to liberty port, can you express for yourself and your ship mates, what is important about a liberty port?]

The important thing about a liberty port is getting away from the ship. To live it and sleep it and work it 26 hours a day, it got to be a little boring.

[What were holidays like?]

Holidays were special in the mess hall. If we were at port, we would hold what we called holiday routine. We wouldn't do the normal things, we would be doing chipping paint and painting or do the extra cleaning up work that we had to do. If it wasn't necessary, we didn't do it. We would have a large dinner. We would have an extra large dinner aboard. Special food that we normally wouldn't get, it wouldn't be something that you would know. Wednesday and Saturday, if you went into the mess hall in the morning, you knew it was Wednesday or Saturday because you were going to get beans for breakfast. This special dinner was nothing like you would receive for lunch on any other day.

[Did you ever have chipped cream beef on toast?]

Yes. Some of those guys who had eaten early said, "What do we have for chow if you had forgotten what day it was?" He would say, "Chipped beef on toast." He would say, "Well, I don't think I am going down today."

[What did you like or dislike about the ship?]

I don't know. There is nothing too much that I disliked about it or I wouldn't be here today. I stayed with her for fifty-one years. I stayed six aboard, when I left it, she was parked in my back yard. Seven miles from where I lived in Bayo, New Jersey. It sat there for fourteen years until the state boarder. I had seen an advertisement in the paper, battleship for sale. I had the sad sight of seeing the ENTERPRISE being cut up prior to the notice of the battleship for sale. I had gone over to the yard and this Southern gentleman was there. I said, "How do I ride the NORTH CAROLINA over here before she gets cut up. I would like to take the last ride?" He said, "NORTH CAROLINA is not coming over. The WASHINGTON is coming over." I said, "Why? We were number one and they were number two." He said, "The state had bought it." I just completely went out of my mind. I came back and I wrote a letter to Raleigh wanting to know. They said, "Yes. We are still collecting money for it." So I stayed in contact with it. I was present in Bayo Navy Yard when the state come up to accept it. I was notified when they dedicated it here in 1961. I think they dedicated it in 1962, but it was here in Oct. of 1961.

[Did any of the former crew members ride her back down here from New Jersey to North Carolina?]

Yes. Admiral Maxwell did. He was from the area. He was the first officer as a Polish refugee. Joined the Navy in 1916 and made admiral. Retired out of the Navy as admiral. He was the first officer assigned to the ship when it was being constructed. He stayed with it. He left us as full commander and he put the MISSOURI in commission. But he was contacted somehow and he rode the ship from New York to Wilmington.

[Who are your favorite officers? or ones that you disliked?]

I didn't have any hatred for any of them. I liked them all. They were all real gentlemen, except the fact that when the war was over I got a lieutenant J.G., who I like we called a ninety-day wonder. When you went to college and they handed you a commission, you were a ninety-day wonder. He was a ninety-day wonder. He rode my kind of hard. He kind of wanted to change our routine around and I just wouldn't accept him trying to do the things that he wanted to do to me. Changing our routine about fueling and things like that. I had been doing it for over five years now and he just ruffled my feathers. That is about the only guy.

[He was one of your regular division officers?]

Yes. This was after the war. We had picked him up in the Panama Canal on the way back to Boston. He was miserable.

[Can you describe any funny incidents that happened to you while you were on the ship.]

We had many things that we would keep from going out of our minds. We didn't have recreation as I said before, but we did things. Guys created crafts with their hands and some of the raw material that they would find. Guys will make rings out of quarters. You would take a quarter and you beat it with a spoon. It flares it over. It makes like a wedding band, but you got it out of silver. The date of it rolls in there. It turns out beautiful. These are the kinds of things we did. We did play tricks on each other. If a guy though he was kind of a wise guy and we kind of knew that he wasn't going to accept. We would send him on kind of a joke. We would say to him, send him for things that didn't exist. We would be in our division, we would say, "You go to the division up forward and you ask those guys for the swab comb." There is no such thing as a swab comb. He would go and they knew

that they was a trick. They would say, "No. We just gave it to such and such division." He would go and ask them for the swab comb. They would say, "No. We gave it to this other division." We had twenty-three divisions aboard ship, including your hospital, corpsman, your storekeepers, your butchers, boatswain mates, gunners mates, quartermasters.

[Can you describe the relationship between officer and troop?]

At that time, it was kind of a separation. It definitely was. Our ship was even painted white for the crew, and when you went to the officer's country it was green. When you stepped out of the white into the green, if you weren't on official duty, you immediately took off your hat. They wanted to let you know that this was their part of the ship. There was no fooling around up in there. Strictly business. When he told you something, he wanted to impress on you, that when he said, "Jump." You jumped. It was always impress on you that they were superior and they were the officers and they knew the book inside and out. There should be no questions asked.

[Can you tell us anything about black sailors that were on the ship?]

When I was aboard, the only thing that black sailors did was wait on officers. They had their special compartment and they lived right in the officers' country, just below it. They maintained their area and they served them their food, those who were to serve the food. Others had their living quarters to take care of. Their clothing, they would take it back to the laundry for them. I believe they took it back. I am almost certain they took it back for laundry. It was stamped. Whatever their routine was, when it was time to go pick up their laundry and would go pick it up and put it back in their room.

[So there wasn't any contact between these black sailors that served the officers and the rest of the crew?]

Not really. Only in combat, they were eventually assigned to . . . I really don't know what they did prior to it, but they were assigned to twenty-millimeter guns.

[During general quarters, they would go to twenty-millimeter guns?]

Yes.

[That still would be in officers' country, would it not?]

In that area. You didn't take a bus to work. All they had to do was come up out of officer's country and be on topside and the gun would be there.

[You just said, "You don't take a bus to work." Can you explain that statement please.]

You worked and slept and played in that area. You did not leave that area of your ship. If you were a certain division, you stayed there. You would at times wonder into another division. I say wonder. They possibility of you going into another part of the ship, like every Monday was breakout day. You had to go up to the forward part of the ship and bring back . . . this is under the officers' country, bring back the canned food that they would use for the week. Then the ship would be secured. That end of the ship to keep it as watertight as possible. Now you would be wondering through the ship. You had authority to be in that part of the ship. You were now carrying supplies. If you were in some sort of working party, or detail. Like I said, if you had to go to one of those storerooms in officers' country or the boatswain locker, sail locker, you would have to go through that part of the ship. You were on a detail. If you knew where you were going, eventually you would learn the part of the ship that you would have to go to.

[You mentioned that there were twenty-three divisions on this ship. Was there any competitiveness between the divisions?]

Yes. We did. The only thing that really that they put us against each other was the tug of war. We would have a large line that we would be allowed to put twenty of our best guys on that. The other divisions would too. The winner would get a large container of ice cream. The ice cream came in cans at the time. The winner would get that.

[What did you and your shipmates consider good luck and bad luck?]

Good luck was to take money out of your pocket and through it into the ocean to pay Davy Jones your dues, so you didn't have to be called down to Davy Jones' locker. That was kind of a superstition. Another thing was, there was a saying aboard ship, "there is only two people in the Navy that whistles, a boatswain mate and a damn fool." If you were whistling, you could almost imitate the boatswain mates call and create a problem. If he was trying to do something and the crane operator heard you whistle, he thinks it is the boatswain mate, he is going to create a problem.

[There was a possibility of an actual accident, caused by someone whistling.]

Definitely.

[This is not just a superstition. This is an actual problem with someone whistling.]

Yes. If you were hoisting a boat and you were giving command as to the operation, you are bringing your crane in, you have a heavy boat. You are sitting it down and this idiot comes along and he whistles. The possibility of you wanting him to stop or go ahead may have created a problem with the guy whistling and the crane operator getting the wrong information. Nobody being ready for it, we think we are going to lower it and put it in place. He comes along, gives a whistle and he thought he heard something, he is going to stop the procedure and someone might get hurt.

[Were there any superstitions that were particular to the USS NORTH

CAROLINA?]

Not that I can recall. I don't recall any. When I first came down here in 1983, I wanted to work for the ship. The boy that was breaking me in, your job was to go to work at 5:00 at night and then leave the ship at 8:00 the next morning. So you stayed aboard. Your job was to go through the ship and turn the lights out, conserve electricity. You had to go to these different places to turn it off. Being aboard ship alone is kind of eerie, it is a spooky feeling. In breaking me in, he told me that the ship was haunted. I didn't really believe it because these were my kind of guys and they weren't going to bother me. I was surprised one night, when I was working this one-night shift and at 2:30 in the morning, I heard this stomping up the starboard side. I said, "Who could be running up the starboard side at 2:30 in the morning." That was kind of eerie and strange to hear this. How did he get there. My job was to call the police. I said, "No." As you can probably see, I was thirty-one years as a fire fighter. I hated false alarms. I didn't want to bother the police. I decided to go out and investigate. Walking back to the gangway, I figured I would meet these gentlemen that were coming aboard. As I did, we had a gate and these two guys, just had jumped over the gate. So I asked them, "What do you guys want?" I am standing in the shadows where they don't see me. They answered me something, "This was not fair, two guys against one, and all I got is a flashlight." I said, "Why don't you wait five minutes the police are on their way." I swear this is true, the minute I said that a policeman started chasing someone through the city of Wilmington with the siren wide open. These two guys went back over the fence. They had their car by the parking lot. They knew that they had to get out to the highway before he came over the bridge. They were moving. But who was the guys that ran up the starboard side? I think somebody told me that you better get out

there something is going on. So superstitions and these things do exist, because this definitely was something there.