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U. S. S. NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP COLLECTION

Wilburn Thomas Interview

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I'm Wilburn Thomas, and I'm from Vienna, Illinois.

[Now, when did you join the ship?]

In February of 1942.

[And where was that?]

Norfolk, Virginia.

[At Norfolk then, okay, and which division were you in?]

Well, at that time, I was in L division lookout.

[And what were your tasks at that time?]

I was lookout. We manned the forward battle lookout and sky control and after battle lookout.

[Just visual, strictly binocular type.]

That is right. I stayed in that for about six or eight months. I finally made coxswain and went on a master at arms force and stayed there until the war was over.

[And what were your duties when you were with the master at arms force?]

Well, we were the law on the ship. We would prepare mess halls and, well, we looked after all the whole police work of the ship.

[Where was your battle station, do you recall?]

When I was on the master at arms force, it was in the mess hall, down there with damage control. And also when the ship was at general quarters, we would fix meals down there and see to them in the galley while the ship was at general quarters.

[When you were at general quarters during meal time, seems to me that I recall that each division or section sent a person to bring meals back.]

That's right. When they sent after them, we would prepare them.

[What sort of food did you prepare?]

More or less sandwiches. Cold cuts and cheese and of course coffee, that was one thing in the Navy, there was always coffee.

[Did you have thermal containers for the coffee?]

No, we just sent them off in pitchers, aluminum pitchers. No, we didn't have thermal things.

[I just thought maybe they'd have thermos . . .]

No, we just used the regular aluminum pitchers.

[So, you were a coxswain, so I guess you also had duties connected with some of the boats.]

No, when I went on the master at arms force I, actually my job didn't pertain to my rating anymore, I ended up first class boatsman. I made three ratings on there, but I never did do any of the ships. I mean my duties as master at arms, I never was away from that after the first time I was on the ship.

[When you were at battle stations and you made sandwiches, I guess this really made a run on the bakery. Did the bakers stay at their stations and bake bread during this period?]

No, they always kept enough on hand. We could serve a meal without them being there.

[Suppose you were on for two meals?]

Well, I imagine they had that kind of a stock on ship.

[You never were away from more than one meal that you can recall?]

Well, let's see, one day at Guadalcanal, we might have been there twenty-four hours at the station, but we sent out meals that were just sandwiches. It seems like to me we sent out sandwiches and soups, we'd send out soups.

[Were they some of those instant soups that you prepared?]

No, we would have a cook there.

[Oh, in other words, there were cooks. You helped the cooks.]

Some of the cooks would have that for their station, too, for their battle station. We were a repair party, that's what we actually were, a repair party. But we'd stay around the kitchen; and being there twenty-four hours, it made it a pretty good place to stay.

[Do you remember, for instance, what you were doing September the fifteenth, 1942?]

September 15. Let's see, we were at Guadalcanal on August 7.

[September 15 is the day you got torpedoed.]

The day we got torpedoed, I was on lookout, and after the battle warning, the lookout station.

[Oh, you were still a lookout then?]

Yes, I was still a lookout then.

[Did you see the torpedo?]

No, I didn't.

[No, you were aft, and the torpedo struck forward.]

My battle station at that time was in sky control; and I had to get relieved back here and get to sky control; and they had it all dogged out. I had to climb the outside of the tower, and I'll never forget that. I was scared to death all the way up there. I always was allergic to heights. But I had to go up the outside because they had all the hatches dogged down. You couldn't open any of them going up. I went up the outside of the tower to sky control. And I was in such a hurry I thought we had been hit back here. I was wanting to get away from there as fast as I could. Then I got in sky control and found out we had been hit up there.

[I guess you were right over it. When you were with the master at arms, did you just watch chow lines?]

Watch chow line and keep people in uniform. Then we finally got lax on that uniform deal where people could pretty well do what they wanted to do out there, and just general police work. I know one day there they called from the bridge on the master at arms to come up there. They had a man, and he was up on the radar above sky control. He was threatening to jump because he wanted a transfer from a deck division to the engine room. They called for a master at arms up there, and I didn't have any idea what it was, so I just sent somebody else. When I got up there, I knew who he was, and he, well, he wasn't getting along very well in the Navy. He said, "If you come up there, I am going to jump." And I said, "Well, go ahead." I said, "There is a whole crowd down there watching for you to jump." I said, "Go ahead," because the exec was down below me, he couldn't hear what I was saying. He was hollering, "I'll throw up a line," and I said, "I don't need it, he'll be down in a minute." So, I told him, "Are you coming down, or are you going to jump?" I kept kidding. I said, "I'll do what I can to help you get down to the engine room. But I won't promise you you'll get down there 'cause I don't have that authority to do anything like that. But I will talk for you." So, he came down, and I talked to them, and they transferred him down to the engine room.

[I guess that's one way to get a transfer, not recommended. While you were a member of the master at arms, do you recall any serious problems that the crew had that where you were called upon to say, to really perform a task that you were not really fond of?]

Oh, yes, you would have sexual problems then as you would have today as you probably still do, you know, the homosexual deal. Sometimes the exec would get teed off about some of the men being brought up too much about it, and he'd

make us patrol the ship twenty-four hours a day. We'd have an all night patrol, and there were eight of us on the force, and we'd take about four-hour shifts apiece.

[That's an awful big ship to patrol.]

Well, we'd make all the living quarters and the latrines, the heads.

[Well, most of the offenses took place in the heads, I guess.]

Well, I think at that time it was mostly guys sleeping topside. We'd patrol, mostly while in the South Pacific, we'd patrol the topside more than anywhere. That's where we found them where they weren't supposed to be.

[That's where you could hide.]

Yes, they would be around the gun mount and two guys sleeping side by side.

[How about with the crew, did more than one or two ever become so disgruntled that they required some watching or discipline?]

I don't ever remember anything over one or two. I remember one instance, we brought one man before the exec; we had caught him in the act, and we took him to the exec the next morning. The guy that he was with, we didn't get a look at his face. We thought we knew who he was, and we said he's got pimples all over his back. And I know the next day when we took him to the exec, and I said we think he's the man but we're not positive, the exec asked him if he was, and he said no. The exec said, "Pull off your shirt. Now, turn around." And as soon as he turned around, he said, "Now, we know you are the man. Are you going to admit it?" And he said, "Yes, I'm going to admit it." And the exec said, "Do you want an undesirable discharge, or do you want to face a court marshal?" He said, "I'll take a dishonorable discharge." And he said, "Take him down and lock him up 'til we can get him off the ship." I think a day or two later, the destroyer came along and picked him up, took him somewhere

to an island where he could get transportation back to the States.

[What I was talking about besides the sexual problem, how were problems about considerable discontent with the food, or where they were going to, say, a number of them were going to get together and make some sort of an appeal to the exec or the captain?]

No, I don't recall any of that.

[Good crew.]

Good crew. No, it wasn't like it is today. Back then we took whatever food we got and had to enjoy it. We would just make the best of what we had.

[Do you remember where you slept?]

Yes, when I was in the L division, we had the first room on this side of the kitchen on the port side is where I slept in the L division. We had our office back there near the kitchen, we had four bunks back there, and that is where we slept.

[Back of the galley?]

Yes. To me everything went along awful smooth for as many men as we had on here. We had about twenty-four hundred, I believe, was our full capacity.

[How did you get along with the Marines when you were master at arms?]

We ribbed at them and they at us, but we got along pretty good. Considering everything, it was no problem. We kidded one another a lot.

[Well, a lot of times their duties and yours overlapped.]

Yes, like we had somebody in the brig where the Marines stood guard over the brig. One of their duties was to, if we had someone locked up, well, they'd man the brig.

[Do you remember the worst spell of bad chow that you ran into; like you got low on rations? I've been on ships that, I don't know what the crew was getting, but the troops were getting pretty bad.]

Yes, once we stayed out to sea for eighty-seven days one time, so we were getting pretty low on food. I'll never forget, we went in to Noumea, I believe it was. Seabees came along with a barge, and they hollered up, "Is this the battleship North Carolina?" The officer of the deck said, "Aye, aye." They said, "Well, swing out your boom, we got stores for you." He said, "Stand by, I'll get some checkers up here out of the S division to check you." They said, "Check in, hell, it all belongs to the Navy. If you want it, get your boom out." The exec walked up about that time. It was Commander Stryker. I'll never forget him. And he said, "Those are seabees, and you'd better get the boom out. Don't think for a minute they won't pull out and give the food to someone else." He said, "They are the most non-military outfit there is, and they're not kidding. They don't care how many times you check it, but they're not checking it." And he said, "What difference does it make, it belongs to the Navy."

[When the chow got low, was it a kind of repetitious diet, or was it just smaller portions?]

No, I don't remember them ever cutting down on the proportions. Of course, you didn't go through for seconds, you went through whatever you had on your tray. Maybe a few times, maybe in those eighty-seven days, they might have cut down a little bit on our proportions, but it got pretty skant. We were eating the same thing quite a bit. We were fixing up the hamburger a lot of ways, and that old fish that had been down in the freezer. That was one thing that nobody could hardly eat. They might as well have kept it, that fish. It was almost impossible to eat it. I know we had a--I went home on leave in 1944, and I was telling everybody about a cow we had on the vessel with us. I think back then it cost about twenty-five hundred dollars. We'd take water and butter, and we'd make our own milk. We'd get it pretty cold, and you could drink it pretty good

with the real stuff, and then it wasn't bad at all. You could cook all day to make enough milk to make one meal. It could be done if you stayed with it.

[You'd take butter and water, right?]

Right. Butter and water, and it would help if you put some can milk or powdered milk in. I guess it was powdered milk we used. We'd use the powdered milk, but you'd get it real cold, and it would go down pretty good. Awful good substitute for the real thing.