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U. S. S. NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP COLLECTION

Michael L. Horton Interview

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[Mike, do you remember when you came aboard the North Carolina?]

I sure do. I came aboard on Christmas Eve in 1941.

[And stayed aboard . . .]

Forty-one months.

[That is pretty near the whole ball game.]

Almost through the whole ball game.

[Do you remember what your job was when you first came aboard?]

I was assigned to bootcamp, and I really shouldn't have been on this ship. I was in bootcamp pre-war. I joined the Navy the twenty-first of November, 1941, which was my birthday. I was seventeen that day. I didn't have any idea that there was a war coming on. I was no hero or anything, I just wanted to travel, you know. So, I talked my mother into signing my papers. So, I came to bootcamp, and they told us we could get nine days boot leave. They were going to break us out of bootcamp early, and so they even sold us the bus tickets. This was when I called home, you see, and told them whether I'd be home on Christmas Day.

[Where was your home then?]

In Lynchburg, Virginia.

So, that evening at six o'clock we got new orders, the whole platoon, ninety of us. They said you are not going from boot training on leave. What you want to do is pack your sea bags and hammock, and you are going on ships. So, they marched us from bootcamp, which is about a quarter of a mile to fleet landing, and they split thirty on a tanker and thirty on the cruiser and thirty

on this. So, we went aboard Christmas Eve night; and, my folks were actually looking for me at home, see, the next morning. Anyway, the first time I saw this I didn't like it to start with. I was supposed to be on boot leave, and I had a girl friend at home, and I had a car that they were going to let me have, you know. So, this was a bad scene coming here. I got aboard on Christmas, and she got underway on Christmas Day. So, I was really sick, you know. We left and went down to the Keys and picked up some more men. The most thing I remember about this ship is that it was a good ship; I liked it in the end; but starting out, it was a bad start.

They made me first loader on the five inch. I weighed one hundred and sixty-five, and I had pretty good shoulders on me in those days and a narrow waist. No more. The thing that impressed me the most was that we were firing illumination starshells, and I was asleep in the mount. Of course, we were in automatic. We had a gunsmate named Shean, 1st class, from ^{Allen}~~Ala~~ntown, Pennsylvania. He was the mount captain. Everybody else was outside the mount but me asleep in between the gun, and it was training around. Actually, we weren't supposed to be asleep because the guns, if you moved your arm or something, you can get caught in there. The biggest scene I remember on here was when we were inside and we couldn't see the planes or anything, but this was practice. The mount was in automatic, and the point and trainer was in their position. There were only four of us in the mount. Well, out of this cold sleep, this guy grabs me in the shirt and starts screaming at me to load. I jump up; and he takes the powder and throws it in; and he had the phones on, you see. He got word to load. There was no gun crew, so he grabs the powder. He loads that, and I grab the shell and load it and rammed it. The gun was on a forty-five degree angle, and for some reason she jumped straight down again. I never heard as much confusion in your life. We fired into the U. S. S. Kidd, one of our own

ships, a starshell. These two little hands are the ones that loaded it; but I was only a seaman, so it wasn't my responsibility. This was the officers' and the directors' fault, I suppose. Anyway, there were no casualties on the Kidd. But she took a direct hit. This was one of our own destroyers. So anyway, I have never heard as many bells and sirens and people screaming in your life.

[When was this? Was this actually in the Pacific?]

In the Pacific.

[What battle was it?]

It was no battle at all. I think we was off Hawaii some place.

[Oh, just practice.]

Just practice with our own ships. We were supposed to illuminate her, you see, but we fired directly into her. Well, that night, all night, the cooks worked fixing a cake. The next morning, the U. S. S. Kidd came alongside; and they passed it over by guide wire this cake; and it had "U. S. S. North Carolina to U. S. S. Kidd." I think it said, "Is our face red." So, then we gave them a beer party on the beach after we got back to Pearl Harbor. You see, these starshell, as I understand it, you could see the hole where she went into. It went into the port side. It went into chiefs quarters where a few chiefs were, and I think it burned up a lot of clothes because this was phosphorus. A little parachute was supposed to drop out, and it never got a chance until she hit. Like I say, that was when it was good to be a seaman. You didn't have the responsibility. Even though I loaded it, I was under orders, you see.

[As first loader, what were your duties really? You talked about putting in the powder and then putting in the shell. Actually, don't you put in the shell and then the powder?]

No, the powder has to go first.

[It goes down below?]

No, the powder comes up in the chute. The powderman loads the powder.

[Where does he load the powder?]

In the tray. Well, I was a switchhitter, and luckily I could load the left or right gun. That is why I got shifted from mount five to mount nine a lot of times. So what took place, after you loaded it, then the shellman pulled his shell out, which weighed fifty-seven pounds, and dropped it in the tray. You had to hold it, if the ship was moving fast or rocking, and ram it. Once you rammed it, it went in and it fired if the key was open. Of course, everything was automatic. We didn't fire like the old timers where they had to train the guns around and pull the lighter. This was all automatic. We could get out some fast loads, but the Marines had two of the mounts; and the Marines always had more rounds than we did. We didn't have a gun crew to match the Marines. They had mount one and mount two. The reason for this, I've tried to figure it out, they were in top physical shape because the Marines were all pre-war Marines. They had to be around six foot [tall] for sea duty. They drilled every day on the loading drill. You'd see them up there every day. So naturally, they got it down to a fine art. We tried to beat them a lot of times, but no way. Everytime they tallied up mount one and mount two, five more rounds. It used to make us hot because we couldn't catch them, you know, but it was one of those things.

[I remember Gunpoint used to be a rate in the Marine Corps. It wasn't rank or anything, but you were allowed to wear a gun pointers insignia somewhere on your uniform when you were a Marine. But I haven't seen that in many years.]

They were in top shape, the Marines were. We had the best. I don't know what the capacity was. I think about a hundred and fifty?

[About a hundred.]

I figured something like that. It was almost the same size as our division. I was in the fifth, and we had four mounts and they had one.

[What was the highest rank you attained?]

Seaman first class. I've always said that we had five captains while I was aboard, and all of them made admiral, and I couldn't make third class.

[Did you ever get in office hours or captain's mast?]

Yes, I had some of those, too. I came back late an hour in Seattle, Washington; and I lost two days of my leave. See, we had twenty-five days leave and no travel time; and the captain took two of my days. I was on the second leave party, so I had to hustle there and hustle back. I got transferred after Iwo Jima. We got hit at Iwo Jima by one of our own ships, so I got transferred. I was the oldest seaman aboard in that division, so the gunnery officer came down and talked to me. And he says, "Maybe you figure you didn't have a fair shake, but if you turn this transfer down, I think I can get you a third." I said, "Yes, I appreciate it, but no thanks." So, I left the North Carolina. Right after Iwo Jima, we came back to Pearl, and I transferred. I put in for Norfolk, which was close to my home, and for some odd reason they sent me to San Diego. Everybody else went to Norfolk. So, it was kind of tough. Then I had no more contact with the North Carolina. I was transferred back to North Island, where I served in boat pool there, a speed boat there.

[A launcher?]

No, a speed boat. We had these Cris Craft. We had nine speed boats.

[What were they used for?]

They were used for officers and enlisted men, and we carried about four men in them for quick runs across the Bay.

[Official runs.]

Official, right.

[Not for liberty rides?]

No. Of course, we had friends that we'd run across once in awhile.

[Well, do you remember anything aboard ship? For instance, how about the chow? Was it always pretty good?]

There wasn't enough of it for me. There just wasn't enough of it. We stayed out a long time, see. I had a system. I had a friend that was in the commissary. He is aboard today. His name is Babcock. I used to always go down. This guy was pretty homesick, too, and I'd go down and talk to him. I would say, "Hey, Babcock, how you doing?" And we'd get to chatting, and he'd say, "You want a sandwich?" And I would say, "Yeh, man." So, I used to free-load a little bit. I had a system when we'd go to New Caledonia. I'd buy this French bread in big loaves. I'd stock up about four or five of those loaves. Sardines used to come in round cans, like number ten cans, and I'd get me eight or ten of those. Everybody carried a big sheath knife, and I'd saw that bread off. We could always get coffee. When I'd be on watch, I'd haul out that bread and pour those sardines in, and the guys would throw me out the mount. It was good.

[It does smell, doesn't it?]

Oh, yes. It was still good.

[It was good bread.]

It lasted, too, two or three weeks.

[You could either get it in a round loaf or a long loaf.]

The ones I always got were the long loaves where I could slice it off and put the sardines inside of it. It used to work out pretty good.

[You don't remember being actually hungry, do you? You know what I mean. Not like hungry from breakfast to supper, but I mean like for three days hand

running when you didn't get enough to eat.]

A lot of times we had general quarters, and we stayed in general quarters a lot. What would happen, the Japs were pretty smart. What they would do, they would have a plane fly by the task force, especially when we were in task force fifty-eight. They would have a single plane come down through the task force way off, and this is the word I got, of course, I'm pretty sure it is accurate, too. They would drop these streamers of tin foil, and it would run radar crazy. Every streamer would be a potential plane. They would keep us up two or three days like this. You'd be at general quarters because there was always bogies on the screen. And once you are really beat, you got your coffee and sandwiches. They didn't serve a regular meal. Once you let your guard down, that's when they really hit you, you see. So, they were pretty savvy, and the Japanese were tough. They were really tough; they believed in what they were fighting for. Actually, I believe if they could have replaced their ships that they lost, we'd have been in one bad spot because there was no getting away from them.

[Do you remember where you were when the torpedo hit?]

Yes, I was on the port side watching the carrier that had just got torpedoed. I ran down below, and I told the guys that were sorting clothes. I said, "The Wasp just got torpedoed." They said, "Get the hell out of here." Just about that time, the lights went out, and the lockers came over and everything, so I went to my battlestation.

[Which was in . . .]

Mount five. The only thing that frightened me there was we were hit in the port side, and the captain had ordered a real tight turn to the left, which was port, and it seemed like we were going to roll. It felt like it was that much drag. I knew she had been hit hard and being closed up in the mount made

it bad. Everybody was big-eyed. This was a bad scene, but then she switched back and came back to the right, which is starboard. But it was tight in there the first few minutes we were making that heavy turn.

[Do you remember which five inch mount it was that got hit, I think it was at Iwo or Okinawa.]

The five inch mount didn't get hit. The director got hit.

[Was that your director?]

Yes, that was our director. I think it was Sky Two. Anyway, I didn't know we had been hit, because of being inside. Anyway, when I opened the hatch, I looked and I saw them transporting all these guys that have been hit, you know. I got back in the mount, and I didn't get out again.

[When you were in the mount and battened down, you were pretty, that was your world, wasn't it?]

Right, that's it.

[You didn't know what was going on outside. You just load and that was it.]

The only thing that was tight in the mounts was when, it wasn't so bad when you just fired five inchers. But then you hear the forties break loose, then you start to train straight up, this is a bad scene. Then your twenties start rattling; then you can look at the other guys, they are all shook except one guy. We had one guy named Burrell. This guy was about I'd say forty-eight or forty-nine years old. He had pictures of him. I think he was from Rome, Georgia. He was the sight-center, so he sat directly facing us. This guy had put a hitch in the Navy in 1930 somewhere way back. After Pearl Harbor, he joined and they assigned him to the ship. His function was the sight-center; and once he matched up his points, he could put it in automatic and then turn around and he had nothing else to do. It was all automatic. But he had to

match the sights up real quick and then drop it in automatic. The only thing I remember about Burrell was that he was never afraid. He was a minister. He had a picture; he showed me a picture of him carrying the word through Georgia on a bicycle. So, this guy was really a believer. He carried a Bible with him all the time. So, when we would get in these fire fights, you know, when planes came in, this guy would have the most serene smile in the world. It would bug us, you know. We weren't mad at him, but when we would get through, he would say, "I watched you boys, and you were afraid. All of you were afraid, and if you were right with Jesus, you wouldn't have to worry about it." And we thought, gee, maybe we could get him transferred or something. It was tight with him in there. I really believe that if a plane came through that mount, this guy would still be smiling. He just wasn't afraid; he had that strong a belief. But he used to turn us off, sitting in there smiling.

[Do you ever remember anything where things got so bad that there was talk in the crew of mass going over the hill if you ever got to port? The Army used to have this Ohio Club. Do you remember the Ohio Club, over the hill on October? Remember all the draftees that got the one year? They said if they didn't let them out then, they got drafted in October for one year, and they said if they didn't let them out in one year they were--well, it was the Ohio Club. I understand this was a tight ship with a pretty happy crew, in other words, there was a lot of loyalty to the ship.]

There was. From what I can remember, about half of the crew was from the North, and about half was from the South, and we used to fight the Civil War all the time. This guy Sheen I mentioned before, he was the mount captain. He was 1st class. Me and him used to go at it all the time. I used to tell him my grandfather was Beauregard, and I used to make up some stuff. We used to always go at it about the Civil War. I went down to the ship's library one

time, and I found a book on the Civil War. So, I came back and I said, "Here you go." This book gave the casualties for the North and the South. For every Rebel soldier that was killed, there were three Yanks who bit the dust. And I had the real stuff on him then, see. So, I waited to get everybody around. I checked this book out in my name. We were tied up in port and of course, we had a torpedo net around us. It was anchored out. And I said, "Okay, you fellows come on over." I brought mount nine's crew over, and I said, "I want all of you to hear this." So, I got about twelve or fifteen guys there, and I read it out to them, and he grabbed the book and read it himself. Sheen took this book and threw it from the main deck over the side. And I put the library off as long as I could, but this book cost me \$7.50. I had to pay it back, but it was about three months before they finally pressured me into paying off. That was a bad scene. I won my argument, but I lost the book.

[Well, do you remember where you slept or anything?]

Yes, I slept right on the main deck, right below mount nine.

[Where is mount nine?]

That's on the stern on the starboard side, you know, just before you get to the sixteen inch.

[Oh, yes, there are some berthing spaces in there. As a matter of fact, the five inch handling room.]

I slept real close to the head, which was good. I slept four high, and we had to put fire proof covering over the mattress cover, you know. It was fire proof, like they treated it with some kind of stuff.

[Oh.]

Yes, all bedding had a fire proof cover which you were supposed to fold up over your bedding in case of fire.

[Was this all the bunks aboard ship?]

Yes, all the bunks were equipped with it. I mean, all on the main deck were, I know.

[Oh, but how about below deck, do you know?]

I know the Marines, all of theirs were, too. All the main decks. I guess below they had them, too, because it was fire proof.

[What was it, some sort of asbestos mattress cover?]

I think it was canvas treated with something, like sprayed.

[Was it a mattress, you remember the old mattress cover?]

No, this was something bigger which you could fold over the whole bunk itself.

[Oh, it was sort of like a bedspread, only canvas, water proof canvas.]

Right. It was over the bottom and over the top, too. This was in case of fire.

[Well, I guess you don't worry so much about fire from those mattresses as you do smoke, they would kill you with that smoke.]

That is true.

