

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #24.039

USS *NORTH CAROLINA* Battleship Collection

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World War II

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Interviewer is Kim Sincox

[Mr. DeFoe, I will let you just go on if you want to talk about what your duties were on the ship or when you came aboard.]

I went aboard the *NORTH CAROLINA* in Pearl Harbor. I was transferred from the destroyer escort, the *USS WYOMING* (?) DE-22. That was quite a transition from a main battery with three-inch fifties on it to sixteen-inch fifties. When I came aboard, I was assigned to the first Lieutenant's department. I was the assistant first Lieutenant. Among some of my duties were on the anchor detail. I also during battle stations was on repair one forward. I was responsible for the supervision of the chief master at arms group. I also was related to the cleaning and this type of detail. I supervised back in the crews messing quarters. Quite frequently had to make trips back to the quarters. This was an interesting experience was above the location where the torpedo hit, although it was after the ship had been repaired and I was a late comer, so to speak as far as the crew was concerned. One of my favorite people was chief boatswain mate Dillingham. Many is the day that I have sat on the foc'sle with him, with him counseling with me and teaching me more about the Navy than I had gained at any other time.

One other interesting aspect with Dillingham was that he joined the Navy the day I was born. This was a closer tie with us. Many memories of this great man; Commander Stryker was the executive officer at that time. I think Captain Thomas was still aboard as far as the commanding officer was concerned. Whitey Baker was a Lieutenant commander and was the first lieutenant. I had some wonderful experiences with him. I happened to run into him while I was on active duty during the Korean unpleasantness. He happened to be the commanding officer of the Naval Reserve Training Center in Omaha, Nebraska, at that time. Some of the interesting and wild tales about things going on aboard the *NORTH CAROLINA* were serious as well as quite frivolous. I am sure that those of us that had the experience will never forget them. One of the experiences that brings back memories, fortunately, I have met a couple of fellows that were in the second division at the time that this incident occurred. It was in 1945 as we were getting ready to come back to the states. The executive officer at that time was going over all of the paper work at which he was particularly good at. He found that we were missing a pair of seven fifty binoculars and a forty five-caliber pistol. He decided that there should be complete inspection of the whole ship to see if they could locate the missing equipment. He assigned the division officers to inspect the crew's quarters and those quarters. He had the department heads inspect the officer's quarters and their various departments. Well, it seemed that in spite of the Navy rules there was liquor aboard in the officers' quarters. When the inspection started, some of the ensigns and JG's decided that maybe it was a better part of valor to get rid of the liquor that they had in their state room. They then began to take the liquor up to the forward officer's head and put it in the trash cans. It didn't take long for the fellows from the second division, who normally cleaned that station, to see what was going on. It was quite interesting to watch the number of people that had to come up to that head to clean it up and disappear, carrying

equipment. We had one lieutenant commander, and I won't mention his name or what tour he was, but he was a corpsman rather than a line officer, decided that maybe he better get rid of his liquor too. So he deposited it in the trash can. All of it disappeared. From talking to a couple of crew men that were in the second division, they had a great party becoming caretakers of the liquor. It was decided by the group of officers that had seen this thing happen, we would not let the lieutenant commander have any of our liquor that we had stolen. This was quite a detain (?) as for things that occurred. They never did find the binoculars nor the forty-five-caliber pistol. Second division crew members enjoyed the inspection.

[They couldn't write them up either. If they had written them up then everybody would know the officers had all this liquor.]

That's right

[Those deep dark secrets, can you think of any other interesting?]

I will have to tell the story that I refused to turn myself in as far as a purple heart was concerned. My battle station was repair on forward. I maintained my office during that period of time in the paymaster's office. They were so long and drawn out that the crew, the repair crew, forward happened to be the band. I was related to them in that respect. I stayed in the office and as the war began to wear down I also took a blanket and kept the supply or paymaster's officer. I would stretch out on one of the desks while we were at battle stations. We secured from one battle, general quarters, I took my blanket, folded it, and stepped on a swivel chair to put it back up on top of the cabinets. As I reached up to put it on top of the cabinets, the chair spun around and I fell and cut an L-shaped one inch slash on the back of my thigh. That was my only battle casualty, but I refused to go report it to get a purple heart.

[What did you all do in repair one forward?]

We were responsible in case of damage. This was the crew that were there to start the first proceedings as far as battle damage was concerned. I had a lot of interesting lunches down in damage control. This is where the first lieutenant's department was. Among the things that I had happen to me, Mick Garmin and Joe Baptista were very good friends and both of them artists. I have some instinct pictures that were drawn by Joe Baptista and, of course, I have all of the cartoons that Garman drew. These were quite exciting.

Another exciting experience was while we were in the typhoon in the East China Sea; it was one of those things that you can't believe it unless you have seen it. The seas were so high and the wind so strong, left standing watch on the bridge, it threw green water clear up over the navigating bridge. It raked the foc'sle and ripped off many of the ammunition storage tanks up the storage of the twenty-millimeter. You tore them loose and you could hear the rattle down the deck as the water washed them down the decks. This is to be second only to the experience I had coming out of Russia on a liberty ship. We were returning to the states after we had been in Russia for quite a period of time. I happened to be in what was known as a PQAT which was the returning convoy. The storm was so heavy up there that the convoy dispersed because there was no way they could stay together. I have stood on the flying bridge on a liberty ship, and we were in the trough (?) and you could look up to the crest of the waves. Fortunately, we were not one of those liberties that broke up. I had a safe return. It was one of those things that you say your prayers and mean them.

[The typhoon that you were on in the *NORTH CAROLINA* was that one where we talk about films of the destroyers capsized.]

There were four destroyers capsized, yes. One of the things that I remember also was the kamikaze hit the *BEN FRANKLIN*. We had a gunnery officer on board by the name of Tom

Morton at that time. He was a super person. One of the finest officers I knew in the military. If they had have let us open fire, we were all set. We could have knocked down that kamikaze, but we were not given the orders to open fire. I never saw a man more devastated after that incident. We could have saved headaches there, but it didn't happen that way.

[Who was responsible for giving the orders to open fire? Would it have been him?]

Well, we were open, but it would have been the task group commander because they were quite a distance off. The order just didn't come through as a result. Another interesting experience was when we were in full shore bombardment at Iwo Jima. We were only about five thousand yards off the beach and were doing ten point bombarding. There was a Lieutenant Burns flying the OS2u. He was doing spotting for us and the ship was given a commendation because of the accuracy of the gunfire. It was also interesting because you could stand on the decks and actually look at the activities that were going on on the beach almost like it was a moving picture. You could see the tanks move up with their flame throwers. You could see them open up when they were apparently trying to engage some of the places that the Japanese were dug in. You could even see the troops moving out. Those are some of the high lights and experiences. It was fun to be a part of the fleet going into Tokyo Harbor. I was flighted as one of the officers to go on the beach, but apparently after they found out how peaceful the Japanese were going to be as far as the landing, they didn't take nearly all of the landing parties in. Although, we did have some crew members that went on to the beach and they brought back all kind of souvenirs.

[Could you tell me about Iwo Jima? Did everyone still man your battle stations?]

No. At that distance they were not returning fire. We went usual sea going details and standing regular watches. As I recall, I don't remember any attacks on the ships. We pretty much destroyed the Japanese Air Force by that time.

[Which crews were involved in the bombardment—the sixteen-inch?]

Yes. They used the five-inch, but it was primarily the sixteen-inch.

[I hear tell that there was a lot of off-load of the AP projectile and you all spent a long time and you didn't know why.]

These are some of the things that even the officers don't hear about. This is top level. It was none of our business really. It was also interesting at the Saipan Turkey Shoots because while we were in the task groups that were in close to the area, we had the communications and the air craft radios on and could hear the pilots actually in flight and shooting down the engagements that were going on. One of the other interesting things that I would have like to have brought back with me, some of the record companies had made about fourteen inch discs with all of the popular music on them. Those were the things with all of the interesting music—our music—I have to talk about our generation, with most of the stars. This was some of the major music that we had. Another side light that was interesting, I don't think you would have ever thought of it at the time, while we were there we got orders from the commanding officers, the top leadership. Earlier in the war, we had little AC/DC radios in our state rooms and could use them. They found those types of radios were giving RF signals off that could be picked up on the radar. They put out the order that none of those could be used aboard ship. Anytime they then set it up so that we had the ban radio system which was tuned to Tokyo Rose and all of the popular stations at that time. We had to turn in our radios because of misuse of them. These are little things that come back to you as you think about some of those things.

[Could you go into more detail about some of your duties? You had so many duties.]

I am a man of all trades. In damage control, this is one of our primary jobs, was down in the damage control officer. We had charts all around the walls showing all compartments, every compartment on the ship. There was one officer and about four or five enlisted personnel on duty every four hours. It was our job to be down there in case of an emergency that we immediately began to control whatever areas. I assume when they had the torpedo attack that they immediately localized it and would give information to the captain or the executive officer who would have been on the bridge, what tanks you needed flooded and this type of thing. We also, during normal cruising operations, the engineering officer, when they would shift fuel tanks or they would shift water to various compartments would do that. If there was any damage inside the ship, anytime we got the information and then it was passed on to those departments that needed to have that information. On the repair party, this was while we were actually at battle stations; we were there in our area to take care of water integrity basically. In case there was damage or anything this crew was there immediately in that area to do any of the repair work that we could. If we needed other areas as far as other skills were concerned, we would call in those people to come in to do that additional repair.

[What part of the ship were you responsible for?]

It was primarily from the after side of the forward gun turret clear up to the foc'sle and all the way from the first deck clear on down to the bottom. Then there was repair two, repair three and repair four. As far as the rest of the ship, it was divided into four sections like that. As I recall. There are signs. One of the signs said, "Repair two." That apparently was the dividing line between the two. Also we had an assignment when we were refueling and also refurbishing as far as food was concerned. I was on the starboard side at the mid ship. I don't know how the

crew that was actually running those lines could do it. I don't ever remember nothing coming over on our supply line. Those kids could drop that stuff some way so we never got it over our lines connecting the two ships. When destroyers and cruisers came along side, I was there to observe the refueling in case any problems occurred. That was a part of the assignment. The interesting part, too, was having the orchestra and band as my group that I worked on this repair one forward. They did a tremendous job. They were a great gang. One of the fellows that I remembered had been an instructor in a school for the blind. We had some interesting conversations at various times. One of the things that he used to tell me about were these blind people that they had all of their clothing marked so that they could tell what it was. They also had their glass eyes that they could interchange to have their eyes their eyes the color of their dress that day. It was also interesting that on Sunday services they have a fellow that is a band leader and a pianist played the organ for the services. What was interesting, the music before the service, he was playing light classical numbers to the hymn music beat. It was real interesting; I would always run down early because he was such an excellent organist to enjoy the music before the church service.

[How often did they practice?]

They practiced. Theirs was an assignment just like everybody else's. As an example, these pictures that I have got to give to you, they were in the wardroom for one of the activities. It may have been this fourth anniversary celebration. They had the band up or the orchestra and they played background music while we were enjoying the meals. One of the other interesting things, going into the wardroom, we used to have the Indian dish of chutney and curried lamb and all of the condiments. We also had baked Alaska as the dessert for that particular meal. I have tried for years to get my wife to make the curried lamb and the condiments. I never could

do it. But in 1958, I was out doing assignment on a job the job I was on. It had become a standing joke in the family. She would say, "What do you want for dessert?" and I always said, "Baked Alaska." I went in one night that I was home for supper and she said, "What do you want for supper?" I said, "Baked Alaska." She came out of the kitchen and she was carrying the baked Alaska with her. It took that many years to get it at home. Now that she sees how easy it is, it has been one of those family traditions that we have baked Alaska on occasion.

[Did you all, as officers, did you request what foods you wanted?]

No. It was done on a menu. We had one standing joke on the wardroom that we think that the original pot of coffee that was made in the wardroom was never poured out. I think after I came aboard in 1944, there was still some of the original commissioning coffee in the coffee that was being served in the wardroom.

[Tell me about your napkin ring. Did everyone have one?]

Well, I assume on commissioning, I think it is probably stainless steel, everyone on their specific assignment had a napkin ring of this type. The best cooks had them fixed for us in the napkin holder at our plates. If there were officers transferred, or this type of thing, as you moved up, then you received the napkin ring for your particular assignment.

[Is this how you knew where you sit?]

That is right. It is easy to get transfers or people were on duty or this type of thing, you fit it in at the tables.

[Did they use cloth napkins?]

Oh, yes. We had cloth napkins and tablecloths. Also see, the *NORTH CAROLINA* and the *WASHINGTON* were the last battleships to have wooden decks on them. The later battleships did not have it. They found that with the older battleships that they could leave, they

found that with the older battleships that they could leave, but the time she was commissioned, they could leave the protection on for the heat insulation as opposed to the damage that was caused to the ships during any battle casualty. Our crews got out and holystoned the decks at regular intervals, just like we did in the old peacetime navy. This was some of those work, work jobs that were carried on to keep people busy. The crews quite frequently got out and sand holystones, canvas and sand.

[What happened in the ward room in between meals?]

It became the recreation room. If there were meetings for the officers, they would hold them in the wardrooms. There were both chief warrant officers were assigned because they were considered commission or commission officers and then the ensigns right on through and the executive officer presided at the dining room activities. One of the pictures that you have is when Captain Fahrion was down in the wardroom as our guest. Commander Hordly (?) was the executive officer at the time.

[The captain normally didn't eat in the ward room?]

No. He ate in his own quarters. He had his own steward's mate and in most instances when they got up to the rank, their people went with them, transferred from one ship to another. Pretty much their personal steward's mate.

[Then the exec was—presided over...?]

Yes. He sat at the head of the table. I think the job that I disliked the most of any job that I had on board, I had said earlier, that my job was to check the cleanliness of the ship. We were on one activity in the battleship division Admiral came on board with his crew. The executive officer at the time was so concerned with cleanliness that every night before movie, I personally as a lieutenant had to make the path that the admiral came down from his quarters

down to the wardroom to see the movie, that there were no dirt, dust or cigarette butts on that passageway. I made the trip one evening and the commander was not happy that I might be doing my job and he found a cigarette butt on that passageway. It was not reserved for just the admiral; it was one of those areas, and I did get a chewing out for that. He found a cigarette butt in the cart. I made a trip earlier and there was one there. I think probably one of the most devastating things that I had happen, we were in Bremerton for overhaul. Part of my duties was inspection of the ship with crews on board and the people from the yard doing maintenance and upkeep, I made frequent inspections. I went in one day, and went down by one of the five-inch ammunition storage departments and found where they had cut with a welding torch a bracket off of the ammunition. Another time I inspected and found out where some of the crews were hanging out to smoke because I was actually in the ammunition storage compartment and found cigarette butts had been put out on the deck. Those guys had no respect for any area.

[That was risky.]

It was as far as I was concerned. For some reason or another, and I guess because the crews yard people were interested they would not lock those compartments. They weren't actually locked up. Another interesting incident that happened up at the Navy yard, one of the officer personnel from the shipyard apparently was a spy officer. He was responsible for the collection of garbage and trash. I got the instructions that we were not to put coffee grounds in the trash that we took off the ship because the people who picked up the garbage were feeding it to the pigs and hogs. With coffee grounds in it the people wouldn't pick it up. While we were in the Navy yard, we had another interesting experience. At that time, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt was on the West Coast and he came into the Navy yard and made a presentation to all of the people who were there. It was interesting, in order to give him protection and not let the

people get too close to him, he and his entourage, he had a beautiful cape that thrown over him with a beautiful lining in it. He was sitting on the foc'sle. It must have been staged like a movie presentation. The destroyer brought him in... Experience as an armed guard officer, this was Navy personnel aboard merchant ships to man the defensive ordinance. There were after the war was over, there had been a hundred and fifty nine thousand officers of listed personnel assigned to navy vessels. We went, in many instances, depending on the areas that we went to and upon the speed of the ship. Many of the ships travelled independently, the higher speed ships. Other traveled in convoy. At the beginning of the war and the first instructions we had as far as armed guard was concerned. There were a hundred and eighty six officers sent back after we graduated as reserve midshipman from the Naval Academy to await future assignments because they didn't have assignments. Of the group of a hundred and eighty-six, eighty-six of them were assigned to regular Navy assignments. The hundred of us that were left were assigned to arm guard duty. Fifty went to the East Coast. On the East Coast was the first training. On the West Coast, part of us went to Seattle and part went to San Francisco. We lived aboard the *SS DELTA QUEEN* as the steam ship which is now operating on the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri Rivers as a cruise boat. We operated with in first training, from July until October, we trained gun crews aboard DesDiv-80, which was in Seattle and DesDiv-83 that was in San Francisco. In October, they transferred both groups to San Diego where they opened the first armed guard school for training out there. We had in charge of us, a Lieutenant Commander F.P. Brewer. He was a regular Navy commander. Then after that training was over, we went back to San Francisco in November and then, of course, the war broke out in December. At that time, here was pool of enlisted and officer personnel and they grabbed us off and sent us to all kinds of assignments. I happened to go to the harbor patrol, patrol office. One of our assignments was to get incoming messages

about potential attack from aircraft or submarine. One of the most beautiful sights I think that I have ever seen was to have given the command and seen the open side and the San Francisco side black-out completely and then after the alert was over, which were mostly false alerts, the city to go back on. I was there from December to January and was shipped back to the East Coast distribution center. I had two ships out of there. The first one, the *SS ROBIN TUSKFORD* (?), I went aboard her in Norfolk and had the fortune of circumnavigating the first trip that I had made to see other than the training cruises. Then came back to the states and was then assigned to the *SS ESSEX HOPKINS*. Made the trip over in convoy to England and then up around Greenland in PQ-18 to arch angle Russia and came back in PQ-18. Then we were reassigned, a group of us who had been armed guards, by that time we were ready for our lieutenant stripes then were assigned to go to Miami, Florida, to go through training for destroyer escorts and then after we finished that course, we went back to Norfolk and from there we went to the various Des that we were to be assigned to. I was shipped in to the West Coast in the Navy yard, Mare Island Navy yard, put the *USS WILDMAN DE-22* in commission and served aboard her for a couple of years and then in 1944 was transferred to the *NORTH CAROLINA*, and finished the war. It was quite an experience. I may have said this before, to go from a three-inch fifty main battery to a sixteen-inch main battery.

[All this time you were still in the reserves?]

Yes. I retired as a reserve. I spent thirty-two years in active duty and in reserve time, as a reserve officer.

[You said there were a number of people aboard who were reservists.]

Yes. We were intermixed. It didn't make any difference once we came aboard, that order didn't make any difference. You were assigned the same duties that the regular crew were.

There were many of us aboard that had to go back through and see how money was_____. I think the first I think many of the officers who were plank officers, most of them at that time, because they really hadn't distributed the reservists too hard at that time. A lot of those fellows want to Reserves and Auxiliary and this type of ship. There were a lot of them. The people that I had the most admiration for were the Mustangs. I had difficulty in serving with fellows, being a college boy and find myself senior to some of those Mustangs that came up through the ranks. I had some good friends aboard the *NORTH CAROLINA* that I buddied with while I was aboard.

[What is a mustang?]

A Mustang is a man that enlisted in the regular Navy as an enlisted man and came up through the ranks and then was commissioned during the war.

[A warrant officer.]

No. Most of them were warrant officers. Some of them were chief petty officers, but they had qualifications then they could be in the officer's rank than just warrant officers. They were commissioned to line officers. The great experience, but you asked about the wardroom. It was drink coffee, off lunch, and play acey-deucey, bridge and what have you or just relax and listen to the music.

[You all had a piano, didn't you?]

Oh yes, a piano and an organ. They had the organ down in the chaplains' quarters where they held the services. At that time, the senior chaplain was a Lutheran minister and the assistant Chaplain was Catholic. He had been a boxer prior to the time that he had gone into the priesthood. An interesting story about him was that when he would go over on the beach with the officers for recreation, he took off the cross and put another rank device on. He was a honey and when it came time, and we had problems, he was a Johnnie on the spot. Although I am not

Catholic, I admired and loved the man. He was just great. There was a couple of incidence. We almost lost some people in one of the five inch turrets when the destroyer that was running alongside of us fired and was low enough to destruct that turret. I don't remember how many casualties, but we had some deaths from it. One of the fellows that was in there had his orders to return to the states at the time it happened. This was one of the things that all of us had a feeling about, was getting orders to go home and then having casualty happen. These are some of those things that are always in the back of your mind. We saw it many number of times. We lost a crew member when we lost one of the OS2us coming back from a mission. The plane turned over, I think he had orders, the enlisted man that was with pilot. The pilot saw him when they got out and the plane turned around with an obstructed view and disappeared. It was heartbreak as well as joys among the ship.

[How many planes aboard the ship, when you were?]

There were two. There was one on each rand (?). Lieutenant Burns was given commendation for his activity. There also is a picture some place of him where he picked up I don't know how many downed pilots and drug them on board until a submarine came and picked them up there. He couldn't possible have gotten in the air, but he was that kind of person. He stayed right with them.

[Since you were in officers' country, do you remember any sort of animosity between the rivalries or some sort of feeling between the rest of the crew and the officers?]

There wasn't anything that was disturbing as far as real moral. There was bound to be. We were personalities. There were personality clashed but I never remember any of it. Of course, one of the things that happened, this ship was fortunate, while commander Stryker was the executive officer, this man was top. Generally, what happened, in my opinion, the captains

that came on board were smart enough to rely on Commander Stryker to know the ship and get it before they started changing to what they want. I felt that there was always harmony. The only incident that I remember as far as problem as far as the crew was concerned is there was a feeling at one time about the supply officer that was on board. Some of the crew was pretty unhappy about him giving them lunch meat. There is another name for it. That really was the only time that I could recall that there was anything that was of major nature. Somebody threatened to throw him overboard. There was a problem with Lulu, the dog, but I don't know why. The dog's picture is in there. He or she, I don't remember whether male or female, there was a little jealousy there. Somebody threw her over the side unfortunately.

[Who did she belong to?]

I think she belonged to the first division gang. They brought her. I don't know where we were with her. We brought her out of Bremerton or was it one time we were back at Pearl. She was a friendly dog and got along with everybody, but I guess there was a little feeling that one division had her and somebody else didn't. This wasn't major.

[I hear a lot of good things about Stryker. What was his duties as executive officer?]

He was second in command. The crew—this is the man between the captain—he was actually responsible for personnel. This is what you would call it as far as the total ship was concerned.

[Do you remember why he was so special to people?]

Well, because he was such a great man. It didn't seem to me that there was any difference in his attitude towards the enlisted personnel than there was toward the officers as far as I am concerned. I have heard that if there were any courts-martial, or this type of thing that he was just as fair with the enlisted personnel as with the officers. He was just one of the great

officers that I served under. I don't know what happened to him. He and Dillingham, as far as I am concerned I didn't know the man personally, other than executive officer personality as the ship was concerned. He wasn't one of those people that got around too frequently and the fact that I was down deep in the bows rather than on the bridge where he spent most of his time. I didn't have that relationship with him. He was great and everybody loved him.

[That is neat. Do you have anything else?]

Basically, I have said an awful lot.