EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Theron T. Nichols

USS NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP MEMORIAL

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Interview #1

[Theron Nichols from Pooler, Georgia. Where is that?]

It is where I-95 and US-80 cross, just before you get into Savannah. It is nine miles from Savannah. You look familiar to me. You didn't work down in that area, did you?

[I am a North Carolinian and pretty much stayed in the state. Where were you from originally? Are you a native of Georgia?]

Same area. Native of Georgia.

[Tell me something about your background. How you came to be in the Navy and how you came to be on board the NORTH CAROLINA.]

Well, I looked to military life for a long time before I was old enough to enlist. I tried to lie and enlist. I didn't make it. They caught me. They could look at me and tell that I was too young. Then along comes the draft of 1941. I was just seventeen and they wouldn't take me without a guardian's signature. Finally, I talked my mother into signing the papers to let me go. I told her that I didn't want any part of the Army. If the draft got me, I wanted to get what I wanted and not what they wanted me to have. I wanted to come

into the Navy, so that is how I got to come into the Navy.

[So, you enlisted in September of 1941 before the war? You had a chance to change the outlook on things.]

Yes. Before they could tell me where I wanted to go instead of choosing where I wanted to go.

[Where did you take your basic?]

Norfolk, NOB.

[Once you got through basic?]

Never got what is known as a boot leave. We went straight from Norfolk aboard the NORTH CAROLINA. The WASHINGTON was there and another ship. I don't even remember the name. The three ships were there.

[When did you finish boot camp?]

We had a short boot camp. We went in November. We didn't have the three months like normal.

[It ended in November, and you were assigned immediately to the NORTH CAROLINA from boot camp.]

My first meal aboard was Thanksgiving dinner.

[It was in the process of doing its shakedown cruises at that time. Was it not?]

Absolutely. We went on and left Norfolk and went to New York and from New York to Casco Bay in Portland, Maine. We ran some patrol duty up in the North Atlantic.

[You went on board in Norfolk?]

Yes. Right there in Norfolk. Much to my sorrow. In the end I thought it was great.

[You said you always wanted to be in the Navy, in your imagination what kind of ship had you preferred to be assigned to? Had you envisioned being aboard a battleship?]

Not really. It never mattered to me which kind of ship I was going to be assigned. That old saying, "Join the Navy and see the world," more or less filled what my wants were at that time. I wasn't going to college. College money was hard to come by in those days, so I decided to join the Navy and see what was happening. We left there and we didn't get back home for twenty-nine months. We came back to Seattle, Washington, to the shipyard for repairs in 1944. Two months later we headed back out to the South Pacific. I was in the first wave that made the occupation of Yokosuka Suicide Naval Base. We were supposed to brought (?) the battleship and the gato (?) back to for demonstrations or whatever. Mr. Halsey and Mr. MacArthur decided that was a bad move. Just like it was a bad move when they sent him that saddle with silver laden from Colorado for Bull Halsey to ride that white horse of Nero down the streets. They decided that was a bad move and didn't do it.

[Describe for us if you will your duty assignment here on the NORTH CAROLINA?]

Well, I was one of the fortunate ones. I never pulled any deck force time. They needed firemen down in the fire room. That is what I did somewhat before I came in. In the short period of time that I was out of school. I fired boilers so the chief engineer was up board. He interviewed me and said, "I want you down in the fire room." He chose me. You went through this line in each division and selected. If he hadn't wanted me, he would have put me on over to another one. I went down in the fire room and that is where I stayed from then on.

[Did you consider that the good duty station?]

Yes. Very good. We slept in whenever the deck force was up scrubbing decks and doing all that thing. We stood our watch, came up and ate, we got in our bunks and slept, went back. We didn't even have the same liberty, really.

[The boiler room--was your engineer in charge of that? What officer?]

Chief engineer. He was commander Maxwell. He came up through the ranks, from apprentice seaman and went right on to become a rear admiral. He died about two or three years ago.

[I am familiar with him. I don't know if I ever met him.]

I did. He saved my neck aboard ship many a time when I'd get in trouble.

[For example . . . ]

Well, for example, I got in a little scuffle over in Honolulu. I was rather abusive to shore patrol officers. To the chief of police and would have gotten severe punishment except he happened to see me coming across deck. Took papers and removed all of them except for disorderly conduct and out of uniform. I come out alright with that. There were several instances where I wanted to leave the ship. I would put in chips to request a transfer. He would call me up there and he would tear them up like that and drop them in the trash can. "When I leave the ship, you will." ____ ___, well stay here. That is true.

[Why did you want to leave the ship?]

That young idea that you have done your thing here and you want to go to another ship, another crew. This type thing.

[He was a good man to work for, I take it.]

Excellent. You could call him Maxxy if there were no other officers around. If there were other officers around, he expected you to respect him and call him commander.

We did. If he happened to be out on a USO dance somewhere or something and he had a little nip, he would share it with you. This type of man. But he was tough. When it came to business down in that area, the machinery spaces, he was tough. It paid off in the long run because you could do your work blindfolded.

[Describe your duty down there specifically. Sometimes the people with memorial like to recreate.]

Our job in the fire room was to generate steam to run the turbine to furnish electricity and the steam to run the main engines to propel the ship through the water. That is as brief as I can cut it. That was our job. What was entailed was that you had boilers down there that had five burners, what we called the saturated side and five burners on what they called the super-heated side. There were two boilers in each space back to back. You could almost reach him from one another. You kept the burners burning in that boiler to generate the steam to run the engines and to run the turbo generators to generate electricity for the ship.

[The fuel came automatically to the boilers?]

They were in pumps, the fuel was in each side of the ship and the port starboard. Oil came used it to keep the ship in trim. As we would pull it out, he would trim it up to keep the ship in trim, the balance of the oil that was in the outer tank.

[Were the boiler rooms well air-conditioned or pretty hot down there?]

There was no air conditioning on this ship back then, none. The sick bay had a little cool.

[Probably the radio room would have, wouldn't it?]

Radio might have, I can't remember that. The wardroom had it. Other than that,

that is the only air conditioning there was. There were ventilators that came down from top side into your berthing compartments and down into the engine rooms and into the fire rooms. Which was three decks down. It was terribly, terribly hot down there when you were operating on equipment. We had a gasket to blow out of a main steam line right on that equator. I had guys, I was first class in charge then, I had guys dropping out all around me. Sweating so much water was actually running out of their shoes. What we had to do was keep the ship moving.

[Any idea how hot it did get in there?]

It got above a hundred and thirty-five a time or two. It was hot. The handrails would almost burn your hand to pull them down.

[How long, in conditions like that, were you expected to be on duty, without being able to go topside for a break or anything?]

The longest we went were seventy-two hours. We were in general quarters for seventy-two hours. That is the only time you have to stay down there without your own watch. There were four-hour watches. You were on four and off eight.

[You were down there for seventy-two hours at one time in the South Pacific?]

Yes. Seventy-two hours we were down there.

[Do you remember which battle that was?]

I can't. It was a 58th task force. I believe Admiral Spruance or Mitchell were aboard ship with us at that time. One of them were aboard ship at that time. We were chasing the last of the Japanese Navy. We steamed as hard as we could steam for seventy-two hours. We caught part of them and part of them we didn't. Part of them went in and wouldn't come out. That was the last major surface battle we were engaged in.

[What other recollections do you have of duty aboard ship whether in connection with a shore duty or camaraderie with others?]

The thing that stands out most in my mind was the camaraderie. This boy, his daddy were in the same fire room. He was a plank owner, and I wasn't. There was about seven couples of us that kept in touch ever since. We have a little reunion of our own somewhere. In the past two years, we have lost two of our members. One of them has cancer now and couldn't be here for this. Our little group is cut down now to four. The respect and the concern that each man had for one another. My sister-in-law went with us on a reunion once. On the way back, she said, "I can understand now why there is no country in the world that could ever beat America. The guys that don't see each other no more than you all do still have the respect for one another that you have, no one can beat you." I thought that kind of summed up what you felt aboard ship. It is the type of thing that you feel. It is just something that is there that you experience. I don't have words to express it totally, but it is a tremendous feeling.

[When you were down in the boiler room, three decks below, you had no way of knowing what was really going on with the ship in the way of battle action or what have you?]

We had four JV and three JV phones down in the fire room. Four JV was connected to the bridge. Three JV was connected to the bridge and to wherever the quartermasters' offices were. Wherever he was. We stayed in touch with what was going on topside by sound power phone going up wherever they were topside.

[They reported down to the engine room what was going on in the boiler rooms, what was going on in the way of battle.]

We had what they called was a smoke watch. Smoke was a dead giveaway for submarines. They could plot it a minute later and they got you nailed. They didn't want any smoke coming out of those stacks, so they had a man sitting way up in the conning tower that could look down in those stacks and tell you which boiler was smoking. So that you could clear it up immediately.

[What kind of action did you have to take to clear it up?]

You would have to look in your boiler, the boilers get dirty. Fuel oil boilers get dirty. When they get dirty, they won't have a complete combustion which will cause smoke. You clean them up or you might have too big a sprayer plate in it. Somebody might have put the wrong sprayer plate in.

[Could you clean those with the burner?]

Oh yes. You could cut the burner off and close it and pull the burner barrel out and clean it and put in a new plate and slide it back in and then light her up again.

[So, turning off one burner wouldn't affect the operation of the ship at all?]

No. There were twenty burners in one fire room.

[So, you were constantly working.]

You had to clean them each shift. You would take one out at the time, steam clean it and put it back in, pull another one out, clean it, put it back in. You got two complete sets of burners that you could put in and out.

[You never got any claustrophobia down there, not being able to see.]

I never talked to anybody who did. It was pretty open down there. Machines were pretty close together, but you get accustomed to it, and it doesn't bother you. I had a young fellow, we were cleaning one of the water sides on one of boilers. I didn't know he had

claustrophobia. I playingly closed the man away while we were in there. He almost killed me coming over me to get out of there.

[Were you down in the boiler room at the time the NORTH CAROLINA took its hit?]

No. I was sitting on a ready body back aft and I saw the WASP get hit and like you could get close you get up and run over that side. It was just nature. About that time, I went down on my knees. We had been trained to go to our battle stations when something like that happens.

[So, you headed down.]

So, I headed down.

[Didn't you have kind of an uncomfortable feeling going down into the ship knowing she was hit?]

Yes, I did have kind of a woozy feeling like, Hey, am I dumb. But you were trained to do that, so you do it. Sometimes one person can make the difference. That is what we did.

[Any other recollections before we part, any particular incidence?]

That was one of the major ones and coming back into ports for repairs, spending a lot of time in Honolulu and in the South Pacific Island.

[When did you leave the NORTH CAROLINA?]

I left it in November of 1945.

[So, you stayed with it all the way, then?]

All the way to Boston.

[All those requests for transfers that Commander Maxwell tore up kept you there.]

The only time I was off was for a month, I went over on this APD, when we were going in to occupy Japan on this suicide Naval base. I was over there for about four weeks. Then I came back a board and it headed home. I got off of it in Boston.

[So, your entire experience of the was with the NORTH CAROLINA?]

Primarily it was. I was tired of that old rascal, too. It took us through and helped us.