

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #24.038

USS *NORTH CAROLINA* Battleship Collection

Edwin L. Calder (Cohn)

World War II

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Interviewer is Donald R. Lennon

[Edwin Calder, formerly Edwin Cohn of Brooklyn, NY, who served as a radioman aboard the *USS NORTH CAROLINA*. Just informally talk about your recollections of your service. Where were you from originally?]

Brooklyn, NY. I had just graduated from high school in January of 1941. I was walking downtown on Fulton Street. I saw the sign, "Join the Navy and see the world." This was in the beginning of March before my eighteenth birthday. I went upstairs and spoke to the person in charge. He said, "How are your eyes? Can you read this?" I said, "Fine." He said, "Why don't you go in and see the doctor." I went in and saw the doctor. Everything was fine except he said, "I see you bite your nails. We can't take you in because you bite your nails. Here are a pair of gloves, put them on and come back next week. If your nails are not bitten, we will take you in."

[What was the rational for not taking you in?]

I guess it was nervousness, I don't know. I went back the following week, and they

took me in and that is when I enlisted. I went up to boot camp up in Providence, Rhode Island. I was just about to get through with boot camp when I became very unpatriotic. I caught the German measles. They put me in sick bay. I was in sick bay, and I was looking out of the window in the back of me and saw all of these guys raising their rifles and exercising. I said, "Boy this is a pleasure being here." The pharmacist comes around and puts a thermometer in my mouth and goes around and puts a thermometer in all the other mouths. As soon as he left-- I wanted to stay in sick bay for another couple of days so-- I take my thermometer and I put it on the radiator in back of me. I see him coming back; I put it back in my mouth. He comes over and takes the thermometer out of my mouth, looks at it and folds his arms. He looks at me and takes the thermometer and shoves it back in my mouth and stands there. He takes it out and looks at it. I said, "What is the matter?" He said, "If you had a hundred- and seven-degree temperature, you would be dead. I ought to put you on report, but you can go." I got out and I went on my boot leave. I lived in Brooklyn all my life. I went back on boot leave and got out of boot leave and went and kissed everybody goodbye. "I don't know when I will see you again, I don't know where I will be assigned." I get back up to Providence and look on the list and there I am assigned to the *USS NORTH CAROLINA*, Brooklyn Navy Yard. That evening I called my mother, she said, "Where are you?" I said, "Mom, you can't believe it, I am on the *USS NORTH CAROLINA* in Brooklyn Navy Yard. I will see you in a couple of days."

[You, before enlisting, had not been aware that they had been constructing battleships?]

No. I didn't even know about it. I got on her about a month after the commissioning. I was on there in April of 1941. Believe me, I imagined this for many

times, but when I got on that dock and looked at that ship, from the starboard bow where she was docked, I just shook my head in disbelief and said, "Boy this is going to be beautiful. This is where I am going to spend the rest of my life for the next few years." It was beautiful. It was gorgeous. I loved it.

[You participated in all the shakedown cruises that were going on at the time.]

Sure. Back when I was living in Brooklyn on December 1, 1941, I had a standby duty. I paid somebody to stand-by for me, which was common. I went ashore and I came back Saturday night and the officer said, "Where were you?" I told him what happened. They said, "When they called muster, nobody answered for you. Report to the Captain--the captain's mess--Monday morning." I went down to the captain's mess, and I got ten days restriction. The following Sunday, I heard my name called, "Report to the officer of the deck." I go up to the officer of the deck and I said, "What did I do wrong now?" He said, "Nothing, we just got a call from your mother, she is down at the Cumberland Street Gate and she would like to take you out to lunch." I said, "I am restricted, sir." He said, "That's alright. Go ashore and when you finish with lunch come on back." So I had lunch with mom and dad and some friends. I said goodbye to them and kissed them goodbye. I came back to the gate. At the gate, the Marine said, "Get back to your ship, Pearl Harbor has been bombed and we are at war." Running back to the ship, I saw guns going up on the buildings and in the Brooklyn Navy Yard boats going out into the East River. Nobody knew what was happening. I got back on-board ship and that was it.

[Security increased immediately.]

Yes. Realized what was there. It was just a solemn feeling. We knew it. It was beautiful.

[Once you were assigned to the *NORTH CAROLINA* and were on board there, what were your duties?]

I came in as an apprentice seaman, seaman first class. Then I went to radio school and became a radioman third class and got promoted to second class. All during that time, I was on the *NORTH CAROLINA* baseball team. I pitched for them. Up in Casco Bay, Maine, we played the Portland, Maine high school team, and we won. We had nice write-ups in the *Tar Heel* and newspapers from the town. We played down in Norfolk, and in Pearl Harbor on Fort Island.

[In the few times that you were in at Pearl, I take it.]

Oh, yes. We were in Pearl in 1942, 1943, 1944. I have quite a few recollections of those times.

[What was your secondary duty other than radioman, your battle station?]

In the radio shack.

[A lot of people had two specific duties.]

No. I was just assigned to the radio shack, a few times up on the bridge--communications.

[Once they finished the shakedown cruises and you headed toward the war zone, what kind of feelings do you remember?]

Yes, very, very vividly, due to the shakedown cruises, we felt that nothing could ever happen to that ship. We know that we could not be hit; our anti-aircraft was so wonderful that we just felt that nothing could ever happen to us.

[You were invincible.]

Yes, we were going to get through it. August 24th of '42, our first air attack-- we

did get through it. We got through it beautifully. We always had that feeling that we were just invincible.

[What about at the time of the torpedoing?]

I was in the radio shack, which is on the third deck, which is on the starboard side. The torpedo hit on the port side. If that torpedo would have hit about two or three feet further aft, it would have hit the powder magazine. I wouldn't be here today. Thank God we listed to port after we were hit, counter-flooded, straightened out. I think we were doing about 18 knots at the time we were torpedoed. We took off at about 28 knots.

[Did you lose any of that feeling of invincibility after you had taken such a major hit?]

Not really. This is just one of the things that you have no defense against it. Talking about the aircraft or whatever. The amount of time that was put into working with different crews which was beautiful. I stayed on it... usually when you were on ships for a number of years and you got a transfer that came up, it was usually back to new construction. Our communication officer was on leave. Lieutenant Commander Maxwell, who was the athletic officer, who I knew very well because of being on the baseball team, was not there. A transfer came into the SincPac communications pool, which is the commander in chief Pacific. I got assigned to that and went out to a little rock in the middle of the Pacific which was Funafuti, which was just below Tarawa, in the Ellice group. I was on this island and I was the only enlisted man that was allowed in the coding room. In fact, it is on my records. I was in the coding room with the officers coding and uncoding messages. I don't know if I should say this or not, but the lieutenant who was in charge of communication at that time was Lieutenant Junior Grade Brown. He was the one who had

me transferred. When we got to Funafuti and we had to code messages, we had one for the *NORTH CAROLINA*. When you are coding a message, you have to use a little format before the message. I did. I don't know if this should be on tape, but I said, "You dirty brown bastard" and then the message. I don't know if he ever got it or not, but I got a big kick out of that.

[Knowing that you were beyond his realm of control.]

Yes. It was funny.

[He was a communications officer?]

He was in charge of communications when the communications officer was out. He was the one responsible for my being transferred, sent to new construction to the Sinc Pac communication pool which kept me out there for another eight months. I was in Funafuti. Then I got transferred back to the States and when I got back, I went down to the Brooklyn Navy Yard, because Commander Maxwell was not a captain, and he was on the *BONHOMME RICHARD*. I went to the *BONHOMME RICHARD*, and I saw him. He said, "Ed, what are you going to do?" I said, "I have to go back to the West Coast to see where I am going to be sent." He said, "The commander of the Western Sea Frontier is a very good friend of mine, let me write you a note and maybe he will get something good for you." So I headed back to San Francisco, I was assigned to an LTD or something and I took it. I went up to the commander of the Western Sea Frontier. He said, "Oh, you know Captain Maxwell (Admiral Maxwell at the time)?" I said, "Yes. I pitched for his team." He said, "Where would you like to go?" I said, "Anything on the East Coast, like the *BONHOMME RICHARD*." He said, "You don't want that. That is going out soon. What about the USS *SHANGRI-LA*? That is not going to be commissioned for about another two or three

months." I said, "Fine I will take it. By the way, where is it?" He said, "Norfolk, Virginia." I said, "Great." I went down and got on the *SHANGRI-LA*, and we put her in commission and went around through the canal and back out and wound up the war on her. It was beautiful.

[She didn't get there until the closing days of the war, did she?]

We were there about six or seven months before the war was over.

[Taking part in the mopping up operations.]

Yes, we went to the Philippines, right straight through on up with the task force.

[Looking back at the *NORTH CAROLINA*. When you reported aboard, Captain Hustvedt was CO. He was only there through part of the shakedown before he was transferred off. During the two years you were there, you had several officers that you served under. Any observations in regard to any of them?]

I was too young to really make any observations. I really didn't realize what their capacity was and what they were supposed to do. I can remember one time during a shakedown cruise we made a wrong turn, and almost had a little accident. I don't remember who the captain was or anything else. It is a good thing I was on the bridge at that time. I can't remember any reverse.

[You didn't have that much direct contact with the captain, himself?]

No.

[In talking with crew members in the past, one officer that constantly comes up as most popular officer is Joe Stryker. Did you have any contact with Joe Stryker?]

Not really. The name is familiar. Unfortunately, my memory is gone for names that were associated with me at that time. I remember maybe one or two. It is a shame. Even

looking up the baseball team, I still have records and I can't remember people who were on the baseball team with me. It's very funny.

[It is almost fifty years and that is to be expected.]

Fifty years ago. Thank God to see some of those guys now. It is so nice remembering. It's a good feeling.

[Thinking back to those days, on the day-to-day routine, what types of things stand out in your mind from that period?]

I can remember when we were on board and right across the dock were two British destroyers, the *DIDO* and the *DELHI*. They used to talk and downturn the USS *NORTH CAROLINA* compared to their battleships and degrade ours and rave about theirs. A couple of guys and I got together one day and said, "Hey, we have to stop this." We got a hold of one of the guys and said, "Hey, let's go after a couple of drinks." We did. We went down the street and we stopped in at the bar. We got one of these guys so polluted, and we took him into a tattoo shop and had a picture of the American flag tattooed on his chest with "God Bless America." We never heard another word from any of those guys.

[That's pretty mean.]

We got so infuriated when they started downgrading the USS *NORTH CAROLINA*. Nobody could do that.

[Not only did you have competition from some of the British warships but the *SOUTH DAKOTA*?]

Yes. She was in at that time. I am talking about at the very beginning.

[There was a lot of competition, strong feelings between the crew of the *NORTH CAROLINA* and it was the *SOUTH DAKOTA* that later on in the war was some strained

feelings?]

I had left the *NORTH CAROLINA* at that time, so I didn't get that reaction. It was after 1943 when all the competition was going on. I didn't find out about the *NORTH CAROLINA* until I saw a reunion notice in the American Legion with Bob Palomaris and that is when I became acquainted. Even now, I am very infuriated when I look through the American Legion magazines: *Veterans of Foreign Wars*, *Guadalcanal Echoes* with the reunion announcements--nothing is in there about the *NORTH CAROLINA*. I get it every issue and I check every issue. It is just a shame.

[Is that primarily because]

The person in charge is not doing it. It is wrong. The funniest part is—it wasn't funny--but the last reunion they had when they started in October, I had called for reservation. I checked my calendar and it was on a Jewish holiday. I had to call back and say I was sorry, I can't make it, it was Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur. Then they had the West Coast reunion. Same thing was either on the other Jewish holiday the following year. I couldn't make either of them. I called a couple of people and couldn't do anything about it.

[That is really poor planning.]

I can mention some names but I won't. It's a shame.

[Back to life aboard ship. Any particular events stand out, in terms of the entertainment, or the food, or just the length of being on board ship without any shore leave?]

You know being an old sailor and a young guy, yes, we missed the shore leave, but that we understood. A real funny story, which was a nice one was when we were at war in

Noumea, New Caledonia. My name was called, "Report to the officer of the deck." I went up to the officer of the deck and I said, "What did I do wrong now?" He said, "You didn't do anything wrong. You have a visitor." He points. I look over and there is my brother who was in the Marines, who was stationed at Guadalcanal and had heard that the USS *NORTH CAROLINA* was coming into port. I hadn't seen my brother in about two years. He came aboard and we had the greatest time. In fact, he had lunch on board. He said, "I haven't had a meal like this in I don't know how long."

[I think the ship was pretty well-known for having good food.]

Never complained about the food or the people.

[Did the quality deteriorate to any depreciable degree when you had been at sea for a long time without supplies?]

No. You know what infuriates me. I don't know if you know about California with the water shortage. Being a Navy man, you knew that when you went into a shower you knew enough to turn the water off when you are soaping down. Back in the gyms where I go to now . . . I had told the Holiday Spa, "Put this on the walls." "Please turn off the water while soaping down to conserve water." They won't. They wouldn't do it. They have a sign up there, "Please limit your shower to three minutes." You don't know when three minutes is up. It doesn't say anything. I just get infuriated when I see things. That is my old Navy upbringing. It is just funny.

[It stays with you, too, doesn't it.]

Oh, yes. You learn a lot that you don't forget. It is beautiful. I always refer to the head instead of the toilet. Down below, not downstairs. Up above, not upstairs. Just force of habit.

[Thinking in terms of the radio room and everything, any recollections specifically about your duties there in communications.]

One I can really remember was off of Japan, not on board the *NORTH CAROLINA*, it was on the *SHANGRI-LA*. I was sitting at the radio listening to the different voices and codes of the different ships of the task force. I was sitting next to one of the sailors in the radio gang by the name of Jesse Marley. We were both listening over the radio, a voice comes on, "We have kamikazes coming in." It was a destroyer. "We are hit. We are sinking." That was the end. Jesse looks up the code name of the destroyer and his brother was on that destroyer. Memories--I will never forget his face, what he looked like. I never heard what happened, but I can remember Jesse's face just like it was yesterday, the expression. That is one of my old memories. I never knew what happened to Jesse. It's something. But what are you going to do.

[It's all part of warfare.]

All part of warfare. When we had the filming of real people. That was about five of six years ago. I got a copy of it. My voice was the last one that was heard on there. The question was, "How do you feel about the war?" I said at that time, "I wouldn't give a million dollars to have the memories of what we went through at that time." I was heard about three times on that one with Bob Palomaris.

[Any other thoughts concerning the *NORTH CAROLINA*, any aspects of the ship or your experiences while you were on it?]

Not really. I was too young to remember. One of my favorite guys were killed, Palm (?). He used to watch out for me. I was a little thin guy at that time. If anybody picked on me, he would let them know. One of the few guys. That is about it. It was

pleasant years even though it was during the war. Mostly fond memories, not bad ones.

[Ones that prepared you for the years ahead.]

That is right. I loved it. Thank God, we are out of it. Unfortunately, even though we won the war, what is happening today, I just wonder what would have happened to Japan if we had lost the war. With what is going on economically, financially, unbelievable.