

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPTS COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

Donald C. Rogers

USS NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP MEMORIAL

April 7, 1991

[This is Kim Sincox, curator, Battleship NORTH CAROLINA memorial. I am interviewing Donald C. Rogers of Tampa, Florida. Today is April 7, 1991. Mr. Rogers, you are a boatswain mate, second class. What does a boatswain mate do, what did you do?]

You just oversee the duties of the deck force. Keeping his area or the section of the ship that he is assigned to in shipshape condition. It involved a lot of painting the chipped and rough spots. Seeing that your area of the ship is kept up.

[What was your area of the ship?]

Sixth division. That is portside. The sixth division had the five-inch thirty-eights. That was our battle stations and everything, watch stations and all. Five-inch thirty-eights on the portside.

[Your battle station . . .]

My battle station was mount ten. I started out as a seaman when I came aboard. I was assigned to the lower handling rooms, which is lower ammunition on five-inch thirty eights. Then I progressed up and got up to the upper handling room. I went into the mounts

and I was a sight-setter and a trainer. After I made third class, I was promoted. I made gun captain. I was gun captain on the right gun on mount ten. That was my battle station. A watch station was different. My watch station was the left gun at mount two. If they sounded general quarters or anything, we just automatically went to our battle stations.

[What did you do up on your own watch station?]

The mount was manned as such in case of an emergency. It was fully manned, but this was just a watch station. You pulled so many hours watch and so many hours off.

Also, they have watch even at one of these stations there were people there at all the different guns at all times. The guns were actually manned around the clock. In other words, if you come off watch at 14 hundred. The other watch would relieve you. Those guns were manned all the time.

[How long was a watch?]

Four hours, I think. It has been so many years ago I don't remember really.

[Your watches tended to be different from your battle stations?]

Right. It wasn't that far apart, because mount two and mount ten were right there together. But your watch station was usually different from your battle station. Some of the crew in the sixth division, their watch station was the same as their battle station. It just so happened that I was assigned to the left gun on mount two. That was my watch station. You had to stay right around that area all of the time. You couldn't wander off.

[Did they bring food to you while you were on watch?]

No. You ate afterwards. The only time we had food brought to us was if we were at general quarters and we couldn't get into the mess halls, they would bring sandwiches and coffee and stuff like that. Normally, if you had a morning watch, you would have breakfast

and go on your watch and then you would go tend to your other duties. The seaman did the work, the boatswain mates oversee it. We taught seamanship because it was deck division. Boatswain mates taught seamanship.

[Meaning what?]

We tried to teach the rules of the road out of the Blue Jackets manual. It was just a lot of things to teach, you know.

[Taking readings, or . . .]

Most of it was just overseeing that the things got done. We were the overseers.

[Did you decide when things needed painting or did somebody tell you?]

Well, we had a chain of command come down. We knew what had to be done. We saw things coming up and rusting and things like that. It had to be painted. We had first class boatswain mates, second class, cox'ns, seamen, and seamen in apprenticing. Just a chain of command. I like second class.

[Why?]

First class would tell the second class, and the second class would tell the cox'n. The cox'n and the seamen would do the work. First class had the division. He had a lot of responsibilities. We all chipped in and did it. Whatever had to be done, we all chipped in and did it. It didn't matter what it was.

[Where did you sleep aboard ship? Do you remember?]

Yes. Our division, the sixth division, you slept in your division. Like the turrets and all that kind of slept forward. We slept about mid-ship portside. My first bunk was on the second deck. I went up to the first deck. I went up to the second deck. I had two bunks. I never will forget it. Do you know where the incinerator is on here? That was our

division. That was sixth division quarters. Where the incinerator and all that used to be. We had to keep up that whole area. I never will forget this. I had been on leave in 1944. My first leave. I came back off of leave and we were in Bremerton (?) and the yardbirds were working on the ship. This guy was going to put this big ventilation duct going right through the armor deck. That deck is about six or seven inches thick. My bunk was the lower bunk and he was going to start drilling through that deck. He asked me, "Sailor, you are not going to sleep there tonight are you?" I had just gotten off of leave. I said, "Yes. Why?" He said, "I am going to be working right here all night drilling this whole through this deck." I said, "Well, it don't bother me, just keep on working." I woke up the next morning and he said, "My god, how did you sleep through all this." They have big drills and two by fours going up to the overhead where they could put pressure on that drill. He said, "We were beating and clanging around here all night long and you just laid there and snored." It didn't bother me a bit. I was tired.

[You said you slept on the lower bunk. Did everybody just climb up over you to get up to their bunk?]

Yes. That is the way you had to do. Just step on one and get right up to yours. Sometimes if you had your hands laying out they would step on your hand. No. Guys were pretty careful when they got in their bunks. We have guys come in off of watches.

[How comfortable was the ship? It gets hot, doesn't it?]

I was seventeen or eighteen years old. I don't remember. Yes, it was hot. I was from Florida, so it didn't bother me. I was born and raised in Florida so heat didn't bother me.

[How about noise. Was it noisy?]

Was the ship noisy? No. Not really. If they cranked her up to full speed, she would get pretty noisy. Normally, it wasn't that noisy. I guess it is something that you learn to live with. You don't notice it. Just like an air conditioner in your room. It gets to running and you notice it and if it shut off, you would notice it more than you would if it wasn't there. You learn to live with it.

[How about life aboard ship? What was it like? People are often interested in eating.]

I think as a whole, life aboard ship wasn't bad. It wasn't bad, we had good food and we had plenty of it. We kept regular hours. I don't ever remember us getting bored or anything like that. I missed home or liberty or whatever. It didn't bother me that much.

[It is a pretty good place to be?]

I had rather been on this one than some of the other ones. I think as you get older and you look back over it. I just thank the good Lord that I was on this ship, because I could have drawn a different duty assignment somewhere else or whatever. I didn't think that much about it at the time. I was just a kid. I had twenty-five days in boot camp. When the war was declared, they busted up our companies and sent us to sea. I drew the NORTH CAROLINA, which was just fate, I guess. War, I don't know. I wasn't like the generation today. This generation and future generations, there is so much more mass communications. People are so more well-informed of what is going on. Back then you would read the headlines and maybe you would hear something on the radio. At the time I went to the Navy, I went in November of 1941. I was going back to the Navy at Korea. After serving all the time in the Pacific and everywhere else, I was ready to come home. I wanted to go home so I did. I knew what war was. I knew we were at war fighting for our

country. People are so much more well-informed today than what they were.

[You actually sign up before the war actually started.]

Yes. I joined the navy Nov 25, 1941.

[Did you somehow feel that war was inevitable?]

I guess, I did, in a way. I read the paper. I am an avid reader. I love to read. And then again, it has been so long, I don't remember. Some people can remember things that happened fifty years ago, certain days and certain hours. I can't.

[Do you remember being in any of the battles that took place and what that was like?]

Oh yes. I was in every one of them that we went through. I remember years ago, I was up here at a reunion. I don't remember whether it was one of the radio stations or the T.V. stations, they came up and asked me was I scared at the time. I said, "No. I never did get scared at the time because we were well-trained. We knew our jobs and we did them." It was just automatic. You didn't question. You didn't have time to get scared. You were doing a job. After it was over and you could think about it a little bit, you could say, "Man. What could have happened?" This could have happened or that could have happened. At the time you were actually engaged in action, you didn't think about things like that. You just did what your job was to do and done it. That is what I told him, "No. I was never scared at the time the action was taking place." I knew I had good shipmates. They were trained and they knew what to do and they did it.

[Do you remember any close calls?]

This was when I hadn't been in the Navy long. Maybe about a year. I was in the lower handling. In fact, I was in the lower handling room. We were at general quarters

early in the morning. We always went to general quarters early in the morning because the Japs like to come out of the sun and come in like this. We were always prepared early in the morning. I think we went to general quarters at night, too. I forgot, but I know we went early in the morning. Everybody manned their battle station. Mine was in the lower handling room on mount ten. What the lower handling room did was supply the upper handling room. It would come out of the lower handling room or magazine storage area. It went up to the upper handling room. I forgot how many we had down there. They had the powder magazine and they had the shell magazine. I forgot whether they were combined or not. I was handling the five-inch shells. I was sitting down on the deck and I leaned my head back against the hoist (?) that sent the shells up. One of the battens, the shells were stacked in rolls and up six or eight feet high and as you would use them, you would take these battens out before you could get to the shells. A shell had some way worked itself over and it fell about six feet. It hit me right across the top of my right eyebrow and it just crushed the whole right side of my head in. I still got a scar here. Thank the Lord, it didn't affect my vision. They took me to sick bay. I think it was commander or captain Brown. He was the doctor. They patched me up and they sent me back to my quarters and put me in my bunk. The division officer came by and he talked to me and he said, "You mean to tell me, they didn't admit you to sick bay." I said, "No." He looked at me and it wasn't long before they were up there and took me back to sick bay. I stayed in there thirty days. My whole face swoll up where you couldn't even see my nose. It hit me just above my right eyebrow. Went down and it was the base of it. Thank God. If it had been the nose, it would have _____. Anyway, it just crushed then in, all this down here and laid this nose over. A doctor came in and after about a week or so, my face just swoll up like a football.

He stood there and laughed at me. He said, "By god, when are you going to get out of here." But I came out of it. I had no problem with my vision. They straightened up my nose, they straightened it all up and I never had any problems whatsoever. I was very, very lucky. I understand this Dr. Brown is supposed to be one of the best doctors around. They took care of me. They really took care of me. It was funny. I learned a lesson from that. A friend of mine was in the same division, Elic Spivey, was on watch at mount 10. It depressed the gun and it caught his thigh. It damaged his leg so he went to sick bay. I went down to see and I was standing there talking with him. I said, "You lucky rascal." Down there laying up doing nothing. Having a good time. I think it was the next morning or the morning after that, I was in the bunk right across from him. I found out, don't make fun. It don't pay. You think of things. Things just come back to you sometimes.

[What were holidays like on the ship? We have menus and things. What did you all do with the holidays.]

If we were at a combat zone, or in port or something like that, even out in the islands, they would always try to make it like you would at home. We had Thanksgiving. We always had the turkeys and at Christmas and things like that. They always tried to make it as pleasant as they could for us.

[Do you remember if they ever had any special entertainment or carol singing or anything like that.]

The only special entertainment I can remember is, I think we were in Noumea, New Caledonia. Joe E. Brown and Jerry Colona was with him. They came on board and put on a show and this was only about a couple weeks after Joe E. Brown had found his son had been killed in action. It wasn't long after that. He came on there and put on his show for us.

I can't remember any other incidents when we had USO shows. We might have, I just don't remember.

[Did you entertain each other?]

Yes. We did a lot of that. You always have a clown in a division or anywhere. We had a few. Mostly joke telling or something like that or stories. I can't remember the younger kid's name. This guy was a little fellow and just to hear him talk, the way he could express himself in telling a story. Some people can tell a story and it is just blah. Other can tell a story and you just laugh your guts out. The same story. This guy was just a master at it. I think he was from Minnesota. He would tell stories on his family, on himself, and things that happened on the farms and things like that. That was one way and playing checkers, cards and reading. That was about the main thing.

[People send you things from home, like books and things?]

I never could find enough to read. Especially, God's Little Acre.

[They didn't have that in the library here, did they?]

No. That was about the roughest thing they had around to read. Not like today, you know. It is really not that bad a book. They made a movie out of it, so I guess it is alright. I think I finally got a copy of it and it was so worn out. I had to turn the pages real cautiously. Things like that. We entertained ourselves. Cards, movies. I think I saw that movie with Marlene Dietrich and Jimmy Stewart, "Destry Rides Again." I think that thing must have rode all over the South Pacific. They would show, "Destry Rides Again," tomorrow night and the next night.

[Did they have movies right often?]

Yes. Pretty often. If we were out of combat zone. If we were at a combat zone, we

didn't have them as much. But if we were down out of combat zones, where we were maybe taking on fuel, ammunition, stores and stuff like that, then we would have movies.

[Where did they show them?]

Down in the mess hall. You were talking about hot. That is where you got hot. You would sit there and sweat and it don't matter how many times they would show the movie, you would always go back and see it again. If they showed it every night, you would go every night.

[I know the press put out the *TARHEEL* and various kinds of news things. How did you all get those?]

They would put out so many and they would assign so many to each division. Some were you could go down by the print shop and pick them up. I forgot how that was done really. I know the print shop would print all that stuff up and I guess they knew that there were so many men aboard ship and that is how many they would print. I don't know whether it was someone in the division was assigned to the print ship and pick up X amount for sixth division. I forgot. I really don't know. But I would assume that is the way it was done. You would have to get a printer to tell you. In fact, I have a friend who worked in the print shop. I will talk to him about that.

[Some of the kids comment on the ice cream?]

The gedunk.

[Did they have ice cream often?]

Yes. Pretty often. In fact, I was on here the other day and I was back in the mess, back in the stern back there--where the post office and all is. Standing there talking to this young couple. They were asking me about life aboard ship and all that. I was explaining to

them where we were and what area and about the old mechanical cow. The small ship stores where we bought our cigarettes and things. I said this is the gedunk stand over here. They looked at me. The lady said, "Gedunk stand, what is that?" I had to go and explain to her that that was the navy slang for ice cream. I said, "We bought our pogeey bait, over there at the stores." She looked at me, "What is pogeey bait?" I said, "That is candy bars."

[Pogeey bait.]

You haven't heard of that slang. "Hey, you going down to that store, get me a bar of that pogeey bait."

[Did they ever give out ice cream at dinner or did you have to buy it?]

I think at special occasion. Maybe at holidays, they might have given us ice cream. You would go by there and they would give it to you. I don't think they delivered it to your table. I forgot really. I think most of the time you bought it.

[Do you remember what flavors they had?]

I guess vanilla and chocolate maybe. I don't know.

[They have that old Pepsi dispenser down there. Did they have Pepsi on the ship?]

That is your modern Navy for you. You have McDonald's and all them kinds of things on the ships now. What we had was what we needed and that was all. We didn't have any excess baggage. No, we didn't have Pepsi's on ships, no way.

[To the press shop. Did they iron your clothes for you or did you have to pay them?]

No. We didn't have anything that you would iron. Dress blues, did they. I don't remember whether they press our dress blues or not. I don't think so. I know they never washed them. They were washed and then we folded them. A lot of times we would put

them under our mattress and sleep on them to press them. That is the way I remember it. Blues, I think we did the same way. Undress blues and I guess our dress blues, too. It wasn't pressed. Seems like we did have.

[They had an ironing board and all that down there?]

No, they had one of those big old press machines or something like this. They had to press the officers' uniforms. Maybe they did press our dress blues. I don't remember. Because most of the time when we were in the Pacific, we wore whites. I don't remember.

[I know the pictures we have the laundry, all the guys around had on their skivvies because it must have been so hot. Were you allowed to do that in your station?]

Yes. As long as we were in our station and everything. It set out what the uniform of the day was going to be. Most of the time we wore a t-shirt and dungarees. We didn't have to wear a chambray shirt. The work uniform was dungarees and a chambray shirt, blue. If we were in an area where it was really hot, we could take them off. Whatever the plan of the day came out was, they usually put out on the plan the uniform of the day. I forgot now. I had some old plan of the days. I left them at home.

[I know we have a picture of them call abandon ship call and you could go swimming. Did they allow you to got swim very often?]

If we were in port, the Euripides and down there where we go and they put the torpedo nets around, you know. They have let us go overboard and go swimming. In fact, we had a marine guard usually standing up on deck, to spot if there was any shark or anything like that. Or give us warning if there was any danger. After we got into port and they had the torpedo nets around, we could go swimming.

[Did you take advantage of that?]

I presume I did. I think once or twice or two or three times, I did.

[Do you remember any of the shore leaves? I know sometimes you would go to these little islands and stuff.]

I never did get off. We went into Noumea, New Caledonia. That is one place where we had a shangrilata (?), while we had recreation. I think we were allowed two beers or something like that. We played softball or whatever. I think I went over a year, one time, that I never got off the ship. These little islands over there, they didn't hold any thrill for me. I went ashore at Okinawa, and in the Fijis. Some of those little islands, I didn't . . . there wasn't anything but coconut trees and coral rock, I just as soon stay on the ship.

[What did you do for exercise?]

You stayed pretty active running up and down those ladders and all that kind of stuff.

[Did they have any exercise; did they do calisthenics and all that stuff?]

They did. We did calisthenics. We stayed pretty active. Usually with what spare time we did have, we were usually in our sack resting, getting some Z's. Especially if you were in a combat zone, when you were at general quarters, you didn't know how long you were going to be there expecting combat. You rested up most of the time when you could.

[Where did you get your training for the five-inch thirty-eight?]

On the ship.

[Did they have regular hours set up so that everybody got trained?]

They were set up so you would have to man the whole gun mount to get it trained. We had dummy ammunition that was used. We got all our training right here on the ship after I came aboard. In my case, I was only in boot training twenty-five days. After the war

was declared they pushed us through real fast. I think during peace time, you had about six to eight weeks of boot training. They give you so many days on gunnery, seamanship, and all that kind of stuff. I didn't. They showed me a .30-06 Springfield rifle and they said, "Do you know that is?" I said, "Yes. It looks like a gun." They didn't have time. Ninety-nine to one hundred percent of the training I got was right here on this ship. I learned how to march and things like that, got all my shots while I was in boot training. All the training I got was right here on this ship.

[Did you train during early general morning general quarters?]

No. They had certain hours set up for training. During gunnery practice, we did a lot of training right after I came aboard. We went down in 1942 in the Caribbean, off the coast of Florida, doing a lot of training. Firing at drones and targets and things like that. That is most of it. Periodically, you would always have training to keep up on your proficiency. We had a good crew.

[That training was before you went to the Pacific?]

Yes. We had a lot of gunnery training before that. Even after we got in the Pacific, we still had gunnery practice. You would have new people coming in all the time. They would have to be trained. We still had quite a bit of training going on. In fact, there was training going on all the time. That is just like you were talking about, what did we do in the sixth division. I couldn't even start it. We rigged if we were taking on fuel, ammunition, stores. We would rig to receive the supply ships or fueler or oilers alongside. I think one time, we were stealing (?) on portside and taking on stores on the starboard side. It was up to the deck division. Each division had a certain area and a certain position that they had to take care of when we were doing this. This was part of the training. I learned it

as I came up through seaman, then cox'n and it was up to the petty officers to oversee the rigging of all this stuff. That was something that was ongoing all the time. A lot of fun.

[I know there was a lot of refueling, did that happen a lot?]

Oh, yes. A lot, I guess. Your capital ships would take on major--all the fuel they could take. Then I understand, we had about four destroyers that were assigned to us or that we took care of, or whatever, that we fueled. They would get their fuel from us. Naturally, they couldn't run as long as we could. We had to take care of them as far as supplying them with fuel. At times, we probably supplied them with ammunition or whatever they needed, the stores, off of our ship. In turn, they always brought us the mail and movies. That is the way we got all our stuff. We in turn took care of them. That is the way it was set up. When we would go back out a combat zone and meet the oilers, we would take on every bit of the fuel or oil that we could get aboard. With the destroyers, when we got back in combat zone, we would take care of some destroyers, or whatever.

[How long would it take, if you run into an oil tanker and it was refueling, how long did it take?]

I don't remember how long it took. It wasn't long. It depended on if you had a good seed (?), not rubber or anything like that, you could cruise right along at 8 or 10 knots. I don't know really how fast they were going. I imagine 8, 10, or 12 knots. That is moving along pretty good. If you had good luck and the oiler stayed alongside, most of the time they did. The oilers were pretty heavy. They didn't move about too much, veer off course. The hardest thing was fueling destroyers. It wasn't hard, but I was just talking to some of the guys out on the deck. When we met up with the British Fleet. You had always heard about what great sailors and everything the British were. When we were operating with

them. I think we tried to fuel a few British destroyers. When you are running along 8 to 12 knots and you have this seed (?) running right in between you. That water is rushing right through there between the two ships. Them daggum(?) British couldn't hold to that darn destroyers alongside. They would come in on you and then the first thing they would do is take out ____ and bust your fuel lines. You would have to pull it all back in and rig in another section of fuel line and get it back over. They were pitiful. They couldn't hold them alongside. Our destroyers would come along side. Once in a while very seldom, they would pop a fuel line. They would bring it alongside and just sit them there and refuel them and off they would go. Them ____, they could not do nothing.

[Was it part of the duty of your division to repair the hose, pipes and stuff when they bust them?]

Yes. Your fueling hose were set up in 20- or 25-foot links. They would run from a capstan (?). That is where they took the big boat cranes off of these things. The boat cranes would swing out. You had saddles to run through there. The fuel lines went from the outlet through the saddles and over to the destroyers. The capstan on the back, you could control.

When they started going out, you could let your line out, see. If they started coming in, turn it in and pull them in. But if they popped one, you would have to pull it back in and put in a new section of hose and then go back again. You had to watch yourself. The ship started coming together, you didn't want all that fuel line down in the water, so you had to start taking it all up or if they started going up, you had so much of it laying on the deck, but you could ____ it out and let it go. You can only go so far with it, then it's gone. Our destroyers, they would come alongside, and we had no problem. Them British destroyers broke more fuel hoses. I don't know whether they weren't used to fueling at sea or what.

That is where we had the Japs all fouled up. We would take on ammunition, fuel, stores and everything else right at sea. It didn't bother us. We just kept going.

[Could you see the other ships around you in your task force, or whatever? Was it easy?]

Yes. You could see them. It would be four or five thousand yards off or something like that. All your carriers were set in a certain way and they were surrounded by destroyers and things, and your battle wagons. It is just the way the fleet was set up. You could see them. Sometimes you couldn't make out which one was which, except by the silhouette. The destroyers, some were hulled down, just over the horizon. You couldn't see them really. For the most part, you could see the task force and realize how big it was.