

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

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U.S. NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP MEMORIAL

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[Mr. Wickham, would you like to tell me about being a musician. What were your duties as a musician?]

The question I am always asked when I mention I was a musician in the South Pacific on the NORTH CAROLINA, "What did you do when the battle happened?" Well, the musicians battle station was in damage control. Damage control is firefighting, maintaining the watertight integrity of the ship, in other words, maintaining the ability of the ship to fight battle during a fight.

[You said one of your duties was telephone talker?]

My specific duty was a telephone talker on the main damage control circuit of repair one unit. The damage control circuit was in continuous telephone communication with the bridge, damage control office, sky control, and with the damage control station throughout the ship. In other words, as the telephone talker, it was my duty to keep a log of everything that happened in our particular damage control sector.

[Is the telephone talker to relay messages back and forth?]

Primarily, that is what they are doing. You are relaying the information from your damage control station to damage control office and to the bridge and also orders from either bridge and damage control office to your individual sector.

[You still have part of the log or did you keep a copy of the log?]

Well, I don't have the original log, however, when I was aboard ship, I felt after some of our actions, speaking specifically of the campaign through the Gilbert Islands, which were primarily ____ Island in _____. I am not sure about the pronunciation. I was reading this stuff, and I thought, "Wow, someday this will be important to me if no one else. I want to have a copy of this." So I copied the exact log from three or four days during this campaign. It was particularly busy, shall I say scary(?). It got very personal. A lot of planes attacking. There were bombs, torpedoes, or anything they had being aimed at us and as far from the peer I sat on, there was no question in my mind who they were aiming at. Every bomb or torpedo was aimed at my precious butt. I am sure every other man aboard ship felt the same way.

I hope that some of this information in here might be of use to you. A few things that you might find significant in looking this over is the amount of time it took to secure the ship from the time general quarters sound. The average time it took us to have the conditions ____, which means full battle readiness set is five minutes. I don't know whether you appreciate how fast that is.

[Does that mean you are out of bed, you are dressed and all the hatches are dogged?]

Yes. You said general quarters sounds at 04:30. Four thirty in the morning. The entire ship except the people on watch are in their sacks. You have to get out. There are men everywhere. Put on your clothes, travel probably a city block. Up and down a ladder

or two, through hatches and then get your battle stations. Make sure all the hatches, the bells, the ready boxes, the gun crew, everything that you have to do when the ship is ready to fight. Fully ready to fight in five minutes. It is extremely fast.

[How did you know who was the person who was supposed to secure the hatch? How would you know when the last person was through and you could pull the hatches?]

The individual men on their battle stations, that is one of the reasons you better read. They knew which valves to close. They would leave doors and hatches open until every other thing, although ventilation, valves, water, valve drainage and a multitude of things they had to do. The last thing they would do is close the door. If somebody doesn't make it, he has got a problem. He is locked out of his battle station and has to get permission for the damage control personnel to open it.

[Would the same person always be the one to close the hatch?]

Yes.

[Would it be your assignment to make sure it was?]

Everybody had their job to do and you know what they did. The ammo better do it. They would go ____ _ ____?

[You were talking about the Thanksgiving?]

Thanksgiving Day, November 25, 1943. This was a typical day during the Gilbert Campaign, general quarters sounded at 05:15. We had battle readiness condition set at five minutes later at 05:20. Starting at 5:15 in the afternoon, we got air contact from the radar. As a matter of fact, that came right after we started to serve our big holiday chow. Holiday chow aboard one of these ships was unbelievable. There is nothing nearer and dearer to a sailor's heart than plenty to eat. Good food, pumpkin pie, roast turkey, ham, steaks, mashed

potatoes, potatoes and gravy.

[And they did a good job of cooking?]

Excellent. Everybody complained about the food, but it was fairly good. They ate plenty of it anyway. We ate plenty of it. Anyway, here comes our big Thanksgiving chow. About 5:00, they started serving. At 5:15, we got contact on the radar, "Hostile planes approaching." Sounded air defense. Everybody jumped up and leaves their beautiful chow sitting in front them, go to battle station. The cooks have to secure their area. All the food in the garbage. Fold up the tables, secure the area. A half hour later, secured from general quarters, the plane didn't come in. They got ready to serve chow again. As soon as they could, it probably took thirty minutes. The chow line was strung out for a half a mile maybe. A hundred men get into the chow hall to eat, more contact. More enemy planes coming in. They threw it out the second time. By this time they gave up on it. We stayed at general quarters until just short of 10:00 that night. This was five hours. By this time, the crew hadn't been fed. They hadn't had anything to eat since noon. They have already had their beautiful holiday chow thrown over the side or into the garbage, not great for morale but not only that, your stomach gets to hurting. Finally, we opened enough doors so that the mess cooks could get through the galley and prepare battle ration. Battle rations were buckets with a piece of bread, lunch meat, bread. Bread, lunch meat, bread. Bread, lunch meat, bread. No mayonnaise, no mustard, no tomato. Bread, lunch meat, bread. They would fill up buckets full of this and they would take a bucket of sandwiches and a bucket of coffee to every battle station and here is your battle ration. I don't know what we did for cups. They must have taken a bucket of cups, but most of us had a coffee cup around anyway. We would turn the bucket up and pour the coffee out of the bucket. You had dry

sandwiches you could hardly swallow and the coffee. Also we have heard about Butch O'Hare. Butch O'Hare is the man which the O'Hare Airport is named for. He was our leading navy ace fighter pilot during World War II. Then returning this campaign, he was shot. He was flying off a carrier, I am not sure which carrier, but one of our battle group. Just came over damage control at 8:08 or 20:08, it was reported that Butch O'Hare was just shot down. 8:12, O'Hare is reported to be in the water one mile south of the burning plane. We are sending a destroyer to pick him up. However, they never found him. That was part of this action. The Showboat was there. We were picking partners. I think that pretty basically . . .

[You said, you had notes in there. Did you have regular classes to teach you about damage control?]

As soon as I transferred to the ship from the Navy School of Music, I enlisted in the Navy. I was sent to the Navy. I was a musician before. Went to the Navy School of Music in Washington, DC and they organized band #35, which was assigned to the NORTH CAROLINA, which was in the South Pacific. We picked up the ship in the Nouméa, Caledonia. One of the first things we did when we got aboard ship, we had to be trained for our battle station. Our battle station was not playing "Anchors Away." Every man on the ship had to be good at something that would enhance the ability of the ship to defend itself or to fight. We took classes. We went to fire school when we were in Pearl Harbor. They had fire school on Majuro, that we attended. We had classes aboard ship, the damage control officers and chiefs. I'd taken college courses that were a lot easier. I have had many college courses that outlined what damage control is and what the responsibilities are.

[When you were in musician school, did all the musicians end up in damage control

or did different ones do different things?]

No. It depended on where they were. At the Navy School of Music in Washington, DC, we study music and band. Then some of the band might be sent to aircraft carriers. They would have different responsibilities. Some might go to the San Diego Naval training station, to Europe, to NATO. Your battle duties were learned after you got to your station.

[On the job?]

Yes. I have notes from that in here. I don't think there is anything too significant to add to all that.

Maybe one thing of interest. Playing with the Navy musicians at the Navy School of Music, I played at the White House. I played at Arlington National Cemetery. Referring to the NORTH CAROLINA, it wasn't all the ships that had bands, the shore stations, just the big ones. The Showboat was one of the big ones. When we would be at anchor in _____, _____, or Pearl Harbor, the band played a lot of outside engagements. We played at Marine Air Bases, carved out of the jungle back in the boonies, TV stations aboard some of the small carriers. For our purposes, a couple of the fleet tankers that would be in. They liked to hear real live Navy bands. We had a good one. Played at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel when we were at Pearl Harbor. They Navy happened to _____ the hotel over for a rest station for submarine crews. The submarine crews would go out and they wouldn't see daylight, sunlight for sixty days hardly. Those who survived, when they came into Pearl, they needed a couple of weeks on the beach. We played there. That are some of the things we did to earn our pay.

[You were telling me about a funny incident when you were playing on the beach and your encounters with the island inhabited children.]

We were playing on a marine air base for a marine landing crew. _____ knocking down the coconut trees, smooth out the rock, that is a landing strip, put up some tents. We went back in the hills to do this, we were sitting on a rough wooden platform that they had hammered together for the band to sit on, for the guys to listen to the band before the movie. We were playing along, I looked down between my feet. There was a bug about four inches long and shiny black. He looked as big as these alligators in the Cape Fear River. I am sure he was completely harmless, but I almost swallowed the trombone. My life wasn't in danger, but we couldn't have proven it. I wasn't sure.

[Did they ever fly the band off. I guess they couldn't. Did they ever take you all off somewhere, while the rest of the ship was doing something else?]

No.

[So you all stayed with them.]

We stayed with the ship. The only time we left the ship was when the ship was anchored in port. They might be _____ on a motor wheel boat. We would load up our instruments and go over to another ship. No. They didn't fly us anywhere.

[What sort of musical things did you do aboard the ship? Did you play for the chapel or what?]

Yes, the band would select or detail two or three men to play for church services every Sunday. It wouldn't take a full 20-piece band to play for church. But two or three of the men who got a _____ to play for the church. Many times a small combo, smallest group from the band might play for evening dinner . . . in the officers dining room. I don't think you would call it a mess. It wasn't a mess. We would play somewhere anchored on the fantail before the night movies for the crew. We also played two or three funerals aboard

ship. That is not a fun job. Basically, that is the kind of stuff we played for.

[Did you sometimes have concerts aboard ship?]

What the guys wanted to hear. They didn't want to hear marches. They wanted to hear a dance band. We had a very good, sharp dance band. Big band. Glenn Miller, Woody Hermon, Arty Shaw. That is the kind of music. Another thing, we played for physical drill. Every once in a while we would get some young _____ officer that is going to shape these guys up. The Navy had a thing they called physical drill. You would go prove your little stretches and bends. They figured the crew would do it better to music. By playing for the physical drill, we didn't have to endure the physical drill, so that was alright.

[You said, you played big band music. Did you ever get to play for dances?]

Yes. There weren't too many dances out in the South Pacific, but in Pearl Harbor, we played in two or three USO clubs. Dance at a couple of the chief petty officers' club. We would play at dances, USO clubs, and things like that.

[You said you were a musician before. Were you already earning a living as a musician?]

Yes. I was. As a matter of fact, before World War II, I invented my own 10-piece dance band. We played five from Colorado, Wyoming, _____, South Dakota, Kansas, New Mexico. In the summertime . . . most was for high school and college age. We had a good band. When World War II started, there was no question if we were going to the service. The only question was "where are we going?" When we applied for the Navy _____. We felt that if the Navy needed musicians, we could probably be of more use to them at something we knew very well what to do than something else.

[Did you and your friends enlist all at the same time together?]

As a matter of fact, myself, and my two brothers--one older and one younger--the three of us were all in this dance band I am talking about--10-piece band. We had our long droughts, we almost starved to death some of the time, occasionally we could afford to buy a meal. We enlisted in the Navy together. We were sworn in together in Washington, DC. As a matter of fact, we made the *Washington Post*, page two of the *Washington Post*. These three brothers from Colorado enlisted in the Navy.