

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #24.053

USS NORTH CAROLINA BATTLESHIP COLLECTION

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Interviewer is Captain Ben Blee

Interview #1

[What are the dates that you served on the ship?]

I can't give you the exact dates but I can give you the month. I went aboard the *NORTH CAROLINA* after boot camp in Newport, Rhode Island. I went aboard the ship in May of 1941 and served through October, just before the Marshals campaign in 1943. That is approximately two and a half years.

[Did you serve on any other ships?]

No. I left the ship and I went to diesel school. I went to diesel school for two months in Norfolk, Virginia. From there I went to advanced diesel school in Cleveland, Ohio. From there they shipped me into Miami, Florida, to wait for a sub-chaser to go into commission. I spent one winter living in the Everglades Hotel waiting for the sub-chaser to go into commission. It was really terrible duty. {Laughing} Believe me I suffered. While we were down there in Miami, they sent us aboard diesel schools to keep us proficient type diesels, mostly General Motors Diesels, Fairbanks Motors, Comics (?) Diesels. One night they got us all up on building on anchors, cleaned the entire hotel out of the cattle car. The ship is cross country in Coronado (?),

California. They threw me in the Amphibious Force. I had never even heard of the Amphibious Force before. My wife, being a sea going man, pulled into the Coronado and this will get you. There is a bog field, a bunch of men, grown men, mind you, pulling little toy boats behind them. There is a guy standing on a platform with a loudspeaker, "Hard right rudder." Everyone would turn right. "Hard turn left rudder." Everyone would turn left. I had wondered what the hell I had got myself into. From there they put us in the component. We went over to Iroquois Point, which is in Pearl Harbor, right across from the Naval Base, stayed there for a while and they shipped us from there. Saipan was already secured. I went up to Saipan. When they took part of the outfit from Pearl and sent up to Saipan. This was in the winter of 1944. The February of 1945, I was a dry land sailor. I was attached to the Fifth Marine Corp; I was on the beach with the fifth Marines on Iwo Jima. Before that we were in Pearl. They had some old retired gunnery sergeant come out. After you had been out in the field and you know what the latrines, you get latrines. You put and the date. Oh, God he would go along there and kick those damn things out and say, "Dig a fox hole here." Two guys dug a fox hole there. This is all at Pearl, mind you. Another group would spend a couple of nights in there. Other Marines come in there and infiltrate us. We were supposed to know what the hell we were doing. Swabbies, you understand. Well, anyway, we come through that. I wore Marine clothes and everything else. My job on that day was, a lot of times I would guide these landing crafts in the dark at night, flashing light on them. Then we set up the evaporators on the island. There is no fresh water at all on that island. It was the only place I knew where you have heard the explosion before, knee deep in mud with sand blowing in your eyes. So we set up evaporators, one good thing about it was we were down on the base of the cliffs. The Marines were fighting up the cliffs. So we were safe. There was a few snipers around, but we had hot food.

[Where was this?]

At Iwo Jima. This was after we had been there about two weeks. We got the evaporators going, fresh water for everyone to drink. The Marine Patrols used to come by. I will tell you this little story; Marine Patrols come by all the time. They had their dogs, and we would talk about the snipers we hadn't hit. They said, "We will take care of that." Before we even told them, we had our hot food, we would give them our mess gear, we got to clean up and boil the hot water. They eat with us. They didn't even carry no mess gear with them. We collided (?) with these different patrols, they would tell us, "Hey, we will go down, those guys will feed you a hot meal." These guys are still eating K-rations. We set up. We had our latrine set up there. We had a two-holer. There were a few nurses on the island that were taking care of the wounded. We had one piece of canvas that blocked off the back. Every time we sat out there, this one Jap sniper on the side of the cliff would open fire on us. You can imagine the guys. A lot of the time they were defecating, shot all of the kids out of there. We told the Marines about this. They said, "We will take care of him." They went up there, they found one of the holes, and they threw a phosphorous grenade down the hole. When you throw one of them down there, it comes out all the holes around there. Here comes this Marine. The chap comes out pouring down the side of the cliff. You talk about a Mary Anna streak of shooting. Everyone opened up with a gun. He got about a third of the way down and then he bounced all the way down. He was loaded with lead. We went over and grabbed his feet. Just prior to that, we dug a new latrine. But we didn't cover up the old one. We thought, well this guy loves it so much, we will let him keep it. So we threw him in the old latrine and buried him.

[This was still in Iwo Jima?]

Yes, Iwo Jima.

[On the USS *NORTH CAROLINA*, what was your battle station?]

When I first started out, there was shortage of men when I first went out there. The crew runs anywhere from 2,000 to 2,400. We had about sixteen hundred when we went aboard ship. We were out in the war zone. I was fireman third class, I think. So they put me as an ammunition passer for the fifty-caliber machine guns on a port sides number three turret. What I did was carry these big machine guns on top of number three turret at that time. You had the guys would throw a line down with a hook on it and I would hook it up. I took care of three different guns. Machines, where the sixth division used to sleep. I had the machine gun and supplies there. The bearer went out after forty-millimeter mount on the side port. I was second loader there, and I got to be first loader for a while. All you had to do was put the bullets in. Then they got more men, they put me back in the engine room. I worked on them after steering. That was way down on the bottom of the ship someplace. It was so far down, if they ever said, "Abandon Ship." You say, "Too late."

[Where and what was your duty station?]

I worked at the machine shop for a while when I first went into the engineering force. Then they put me on K.P. for three months. They put me back to machine shop. I didn't last too long there. They put me in the ice machine room. Before that they sent me to the evaporators. We made fresh water out of salt water aboard ship. From there I went to the ice machine rooms. We took care of all the air conditioning, cold drinking water and keeping the temperatures down for the magazines. There were several different jobs. From there I went to the aft diesel rooms. They generate electrically down there and they took care of the compressor. Some were three thousand pounds per square inch, you know. Blowing the stuff out of the guns when they got

done. All the residue from after they got done firing the guns, they would clean the barrels out so there would be no flashback.

[Oh, I understand. They would put a hose in there and blow that?]

Yes. This was what they told me. I had never seen all that. But I used to work on these compressors to make sure they maintained a three thousand pounds per inch deal. This is information that one of the seaman top side told me about.

[What was your rating and rank?]

When I left the ship I was second class aboard ship. Before I made first class, I got discharged out of the service. But aboard the *NORTH CAROLINA*, I was second class.

[Under what circumstances do you become a member of the United States Navy?]

Oh, I don't know. I was a young kid. I lived in Brooklyn New York. I was seventeen. I knew there was more to the world than a concrete jungle, you might say. I never cared for it too much, it was a toss-up as to whether I wanted to go into the Marine Corps or the Navy. I just happened to pick the Navy, that is all. That is probably one of the reasons I am still here talking.

[What did you do for fun or recreation?]

Aboard ship?

[Yes sir.]

You got manuals you study. You check your manuals over to see what you are doing aboard ship. Different parts to the components, the ice machine and all. The aft diesel room. Did a lot of reading and we played acey ducey. Slept most of the time. Get some sleep you know between dawn GQ and evening GQ and the watches you stood.

[Did you ever play any poker?]

Once in a while, I played poker. I learned my lesson. I played some of this nickel and dime stuff with other guys. I thought I was pretty good. So I went up with the big boys. I think I lasted a half an hour. That took care of my poker playing.

[What particular battle experience stands out in your mind?]

August 24, that was my wife's birthday, too. That was the first time we were under enemy air attack. They tell of these Jap planes were coming over. They said there was eighty of them. I couldn't see them. Pretty soon I looked over at the *ENTERPRISE* and the fantail of the *ENTERPRISE* was on flames. Big smoke was coming rolling up. The Japs planes had hit it first. Then all our guns started opening up. I am running around passing ammunition back and forth and one of those near misses, the ship swerved, the bomb come down and splashed me. So the good Lord was watching over little Willie Schack at that time. I was scared and yet in the same respect, I was not scared. I was more scared of not doing my job than I was of doing it. Well you know what I mean.

[What was your favorite liberty port and why?]

Oh you name them. I loved Cleveland. I went to diesel there. The gals used to light up the dance cars. Picking us up, we didn't have to walk into town. San Francisco was a beautiful port. Actually, I never run across a bad liberty port. I enjoyed them all.

[You enjoyed them all. What were holidays like?]

Sometimes, I was just seventeen and eighteen, I probably missed Christmas. I went in March of 1941 and I missed Christmas and Thanksgiving. This is being with the folks. After a while they were just another workday. They fed you as much as they possibly could. Your shipmates were there. They turned out to be your family. It wasn't like you were alone. You had your friends. Your shipmates. They were just as close as your brothers.

[What did you like or dislike about the ship?]

Well, some of your officers thought that they walked on water. But you had some good ones that talked to you and not at you. I think once in a while you get a guy who was made chief and he really thought he was something. The higher ranks that looked down on you. Didn't look at you, looked down on you. That peeved you off.

[Who were your favorite officers?]

There was Ensign Ryan. That is all I remember. You don't remember too much of your officers.

[Was he in your division?]

Yes. He was my division officer. He was an ensign. Then we had a couple of real good chiefs. It is hard to remember your division officers. That could be the impression I made on them.

[Can you describe any funny incidents?]

Well, I remember one incident that is kind of a stupid deal. It was on K.P. You got it for three months. We had to clean that galley up real good. There was never enough rags. So what we would do when the laundry come back, we used to grab the man's towels. Rip them. The man had his name stamped at the bottom of the towel. You would grab a towel, made sure it wasn't yours and you tore it up and used it for rags. This one time, I got a towel, I said, "Boy that looks good." I checked the name and I said, "It is not mine." I kept on talking. I ripped it and I turned around and I happened to look down on there and there was my name on the towel up. There had to be a lot of different ones, but off the top of my head I just can't think of any.

[You said you had KP . . .]

When you first come aboard ship you had a three month period. They put me in the spud locker; that is peeling potatoes. They had a big machine, you put the potatoes in there with water, you turned the machine on. It had abrasive stuff on the inside, like heavy sandpaper. It would clean the outside tissue of the potato off, then you dumped that out and all you had to do was take the eyes out of the potato and the potato was peeled. The thing is you had to watch and make sure the chief wasn't around because a lot of guys would let it run too much, instead of potatoes, you had marbles. Anything to get away without doing much work. Just the three month period of time and that was it.

[Describe the relationship between officers and the crew.]

Like I mentioned, some officers are real good, real close. You could kid. You liked them. Most of the time you didn't see them. Especially at sea. You didn't see too much of your officers. In port it was more so. They would stand around checking if your shoes were shined and this and that. Especially for liberty. They were real persnickity.

[Did you see officers at muster?]

That is at muster in the morning. See at sea, you didn't have too many musters, but at port you held musters, you had quarters for musters at eight o'clock in the morning.

[What can you tell us about the black sailors?]

We didn't see too many of them. What they were doing back in those days, this is before Truman threw everything in the pot. Whites were segregated from the blacks. The blacks were mostly taking care of the officers. They were ships cooks and they did all the cooking and serving the officers. I don't know whether they claimed country or not because that was nowhere close to that. I imagine they did the work. We seen quite a bit of them. A lot of times you would have the USO show, we would have entertainment. There was one black guy, he was



from the South somewhere. Every time he got up there he used to sing this song, "Shine." He would sing that and put his heart and soul into it. You would have thought he was Bing Crosby the way he brought the crowds down. He was real good. A few used to come down to get ice when I worked with the ice machine to take up to officer's country. Just talked like you and I are doing. "How are you doing? How is everything?" That is it. We never associated socially with them. They stood where they were, and I stood where I was.

[This fellow who was singing was a part of the crew?]

Yes. He was a black guy. He worked up there and he like to sing. He was a shore man, I think, because when you send blacks on to a bunch of white guys and the way he put it over, it was entertaining as hell. To me it was not degrading, it was just a man singing.

[What did you and your shipmates consider good luck or bad luck?]

I can't think of anything superstitious. Good luck was when you went back to port. Bad luck was when you got hit by a torpedo.

[I guess that says it all.]

