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EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

RICHARD WALKER, OFFICER ON U. S. S. NORTH CAROLINA

My background is basically Hawaiian. My forebears went to the island about 1819. My great grandfather built the first sugar plantation on the island of Maui. I'm primarily of Scottish descent. Another great grandfather came to the islands by way of Canada and the United States. He was born in Aberdeen in 1800. He crossed the United States four different times; and finally on his fourth trip, he got Rocky Mountain tick fever at Green River. He rode into Salt Lake City, and the Mormons nursed him back to health. He became a great friend of Brigham Young. As he recovered they told him that he should go to a warm climate if he wanted to get over it completely. So Brigham Young suggested that he ride out to San Francisco, as they had a company of missionaries going out to the Sandwich Islands. If he wanted to go along, he could. He never became a member of the Mormon Church, but he did in fact ride to San Francisco, and he joined the Mormon group and went on to the islands and never came back. Both sides of my family were royalists, and I am of the first generation born American. The others were all born in the days of the kingdom. So we're actually Hawaiians of Scottish descent.

I was born in 1909, and of course the islands at that point were still quite primitive. It was a wonderful place to grow up. We had a little bit of everything. One thing that we had was the sea; and I spent a great deal of time in it, under it, and around it. We did a lot of boating and so on. So it was a love of mine. I always liked it. I went to school in the islands and spent two years in school in California and spent four years at Harvard. I was in the Class of 1931. After finishing college, I decided not to settle in Honolulu but to stay in California for a few years, because I had so many

relatives in Honolulu I thought it would be a great idea to get away from them a little bit. So I settled down in San Francisco.

Before long, things kicked up in Europe; and it was rather serious. War was declared in Europe. I was convinced that we were not going to be able to stay out of it. In December of 1940, having made an application to the Navy Department, I received a commission in the reserves. When I took my physical examination, I couldn't pass the eye test. So they suggested that I try the Supply Corps, which I did. I received a commission as a JG in the Supply Corps. They immediately ordered me, which I didn't expect, to active duty and sent me to the National University in Washington.

(Weren't you a little old to be receiving a commission at that time? Weren't you in your early thirties at that time?)

Well, just barely. I was born in 1909. So in 1940 I was just thirty-one. So I went through the school. This was only a three months course, but I completed the course. My first orders were to the Naval Air Station at Kaneohe Bay, which is just over the mountain from Pearl Harbor. I had passage from San Diego to the islands on the CURTIS, a seaplane tender and then on to Kaneohe Bay. To backtrack a little bit, while I was in Washington, I became very friendly with a man named Admiral Reeves. He was affectionately called "Bull" Reeves. I can't remember his first name; but he had been the commander and chief, and he had retired and was called back to active duty. He did play a part in my life later on. I had been at Kaneohe for probably two months or so when they gave me another annual physical. I passed the eye test this time. The doctor said that he thought my problem had been fatigue. So I immediately put in an application to transfer to line, because it was the thing I liked the best. When I was a youth, I had passed a test and gotten my license as a small boat pilot. I worked my summers on a tug

boat for the Hawaiian Dredging Company, taking people between the dredges and the beach. I also had a third class radio operator's license at that point. So these were the things that I was interested in, and I wanted to get into the line. The commanding officer of the air station, Harold Martin, a commander at that point, was sympathetic, fortunately; and he forwarded my request to Washington. Things were pretty hectic--this was now 1941--and nothing happened. The commander of the air station decided that it was just a question of time before I would in fact have a change in my designation. He relieved me of my supply officer duties and made me the head of all the crash boats and the fire department and the bomb disposal thing. Many of the things that should have actually come under a first lieutenant, he turned over to me.

The war finally started on December 7; and here I was, still a supply officer, doing all of these line duties. It was at that point that they sent the Roberts' Commission to Pearl Harbor to investigate. One of the members of the Roberts' Commission was my friend "Bull" Reeves. After they had been there for a few days or so, I heard from a friend that the Admiral was in Pearl Harbor Naval Hospital, suffering from a bad cold or pneumonia. I waited about a week, and then I went over to see him and took him a present. We had a nice visit; and as I left, he said, "I may not see you again, as I'm going on back to Washington in a few days. Is there anything I can do for you?"

I said, "No, not a thing Admiral. It was just wonderful to see you and to see you are getting well." As I started out, I said, "Well on second thought, perhaps there is something you can do for me. I have made an application to transfer from supply to line, and if there is anything that you can do to hurry that along, I'd be very grateful."

He thought a minute and he said, "Well, I'll tell you, that chap Nimitz has an office right across the hall from me; and he is the head of the Bureau of Personnel; so I'll speak to him and see what we can do."

Within two days a communication came through transferring me from supply to line.

I continued on at the Naval Air Station at Kaneohe Bay for another month, and then I couldn't stand it any more. I decided that I wanted to go to sea, so I again put in for sea duty. After a couple of months, I was given orders to DD-66, which was the U. S. S. ALLEN. She was a four stacker, broken deck and the oldest destroyer on active duty. Our primary job was escorting submarines in and out of Pearl Harbor and convoying ships to Midway and picket duty around Pearl Harbor. It was not very exciting, and it was fairly rugged.

(Was this one of the old World War I vintage destroyers?)

She predated the four stack, flush deck destroyer of World War I, but she was very fast; and as long as we were traveling at high speeds, it was fine. But on picket duty at ten knots in the trough of the sea, she was miserable.

At that point I knew something was wrong with me. I didn't know what it was, but finally we discovered that what I had was a perforated ulcer that was bleeding. So I was transferred to the Naval Hospital at Pearl where I spent about three weeks getting this thing patched up. Towards the end of my stay, I asked one of my friends what the future held for me--the chances of going back to sea. They said they were very slim, that there would be no more destroyer duty and no submarine duty and that I would probably just get a shore job somewhere. I didn't like that very much, so I went over to call on Admiral English, who was at that time commander SUBPAC. He had a chief

of staff named Admiral Brown. Babe Brown was famous I think as a football player at the Academy, and I had met him. I went into see him, and I asked him what they would do with an officer who reported for duty and they found in his medical record that he had ulcers. He said, "Well, that's very easy. See that desk over there? They would probably put him right over there."

I confessed that I was the one and that I had, in fact, received orders from the bureau to report to Submarine Squadron Four. I wondered if that meant I could go back to sea or whether I was going to be stuck on the beach. He said, "You'll be stuck on the beach."

I said, "Will you hold it against me if I attempt to have these orders changed, because I want to go back to sea?"

He said, "I wouldn't blame you a damned bit."

So I went up to SINCPAC and Tom Hill, who had been the gunnery officer on the NORTH CAROLINA and was at that point Admiral Nimitz's staff gunnery officer was very sympathetic. So was the chief of staff. They said that they would change my orders--hold them in abeyance until such time as they could find a job that would be suitable for me. In the meantime I had some time to kill, so I went to the anti-aircraft training center at Watanae and went through the school. The training center there was primarily for twenty-millimeter and forty-millimeter guns, because these were new guns to the Navy. They had been using 1.1's and fifty caliber. So I thought this would be a good field for me to get into. I knew something about it. I had previously gone through the aircraft free gunnery school and come out with a diploma. So I went there and took the course, which was a two week course. At the end of that time I still had no further orders, so I took the course over again. I went through it twice.

At that point the NORTH CAROLINA came in, my orders were written, and I reported aboard. I relieved the Fourth Division officer. That was my job from the time I went aboard until the time I left a year later. All of this training I had had up to that time put me in pretty good stead for my duties aboard. My battle station was in sky control. I was known as the machine gun officer, although during battle John Kirkpatrick and I would share the duties of controlling all of the anti-aircraft guns.

(When did you come aboard?)

It was--I don't remember the date--but it was just after the first battle of the Solomon Islands. We went immediately back to the Coral Sea. So that would be in October or November of 1943. From then on we based at Noumea for quite some time. This was not too long before Captain Frank Thomas relieved Wilder Baker. From then on, they had us running all over hell's half acre trying to convince the Japanese that we had more than we did have. I can remember when they scraped everything together that would float, and we had less than forty ships in that entire area. We had one carrier. The SARATOGA was the only one that was left at one point. Then, if I'm not mistaken, it was the VICTORIOUS, the English carrier, that was loaned to us along with her crew. We supplied the F4-F's for them to fly. We were chasing around that place like mad. We would go in one direction until the Japanese would pick us up at dusk, and then as soon as it was dark we would turn around and head off in another direction at flank speed so that when the dawn patrol picked us up we would be far enough away. We would change our formation so that it wouldn't look the same, so that when the Japanese picked us up they didn't know whether this was another task force or what it was. This cat and mouse playing went on for a long time.

(This was just an effort to show a show of force to them.)

Exactly, and we were doing the best we could to keep them back. On two or three occasions they did try to get a force through and to my knowledge without any success at all, if so with very little success. Then the day came when we began to move.

Then the next operation of course was the Gilberts, and we went to the Gilberts. That was a memorable time for us, because this was our first move back into Mandate Islands. We would use this as a shield. We didn't bombard in the Gilberts, but we acted as a shield to block any Japanese effort to send a force down from the Kwajaleins. We had some long air attacks, and this was the first time we used night fighters. It was the first night air attack we had that Butch O'Hare was lost. He was shot down that night. Finally when the Battle of the Gilberts came to an end, we moved down to Nauru and bombarded that. The Japanese had taken it over from the British, and they were using the nitrate. We wanted to bust up their shipping facilities as best we could. That was one of our primary targets.

We continued on south from there and of course the next thing that happened was that we went from the South Pacific to a group of islands called the Ellice Islands. The particular lagoon we went to was the island of Funa Futi. We sat there until we had everything assembled and ready to go, and then we started north.

Our particular task force went to Roi and Namur which is the northwestern end of the Kwajalein lagoon. The other half of the force went to the southern end of the island of Kwajalein. The lagoon at Kwajalein is a beautiful lagoon. It's a hundred miles long. The Japanese had these installations at both ends, but at Roi and Namur they had one island that consisted of nothing but an air strip. The other was where they had revetments with stores, torpedo warheads, bombs and so on and also their living quarters.

John Kirkpatrick and I finally persuaded Captain Frank Thomas to request from the carrier that they take photographs of these islands after the first strike from as low an altitude as possible. They did. They sent a fighter out taking oblique pictures, circling the islands at high speed. They came back with these things, took them back to the carrier, and they were developed. Then they flew them over and dropped them on to the NORTH CAROLINA. The reason was that we didn't have any accurate charts of any of those islands, because we had not been allowed to get in there for so long. We had maps that were drawn up by school children and things like that. We had nothing modern, and we didn't know what we were doing. With these blowups that we had taken on the morning of the first strike, we could see everything perfectly on the island. We could see the revetments; we could see the hangers; we could see the fuel supply; we could see the personnel quarters; we could see everything. We took these pictures and sat down and numbered the targets--one, two, three, four, five, and so on. Then we put them on a board and gave one to each of the director operators, and the other two we took to sky control. So we were able to designate those targets by numbering and to assign a target to sky one or sky three or whatever it happened to be. They could look at this board with the picture on it and look over to the island and see exactly which end of the island it was and actually see these targets. It worked absolutely perfectly.

A very interesting thing I think was that the NORTH CAROLINA and two destroyers were sent in the afternoon before the rest of the fleet. First the aerial bombardment, and then the NORTH CAROLINA and two destroyers went in. We reached our target range late in the afternoon. I'm not sure just what time, but it was quite late in the afternoon and we started to fire on the island, picking out these targets as we went along. During the course

of the afternoon and the night, we sank a supply ship. We also destroyed the air field, because we were firing from such a close range that our sixteen-inch guns were laying furrows down the air strip. They were flying almost flat out and they were just plowing furrows down the air strip. Sometimes they would skip off the field and burst. The five-inch secondary battery had a dual purpose. It turned on all of these other things. Everytime we hit one of these revetments loaded with warheads or bombs, they would go off like an atomic bomb. A column of heat and smoke would rise then break into a mushroom. We have some wonderful pictures of that. There was one target that we fired on and we tried and tried, but we didn't get it. We finally came to the conclusion that it was empty--that we were probably hitting this thing; but it had no explosives in it, hence no mushroom. The sad thing was that when the marines landed there was almost nothing left. The few Japanese that were left were out of their heads. They really didn't have any problems. A marine went up to this revetment and threw a hand grenade or something over the top of the thing, and it went off. It killed a whole raft of guys.

(So it had been loaded.)

It was, and we were missing it for some reason or other. Yet we had hit every other one with no problem at all; but that one for some reason or other, we just didn't happen to put a shell in the right place. This thing went off. I don't know if that is a matter of record or not, but it was told to me later on by a quite good authority that that was what happened. I was particularly interested and I talked to a lot of the marines about it, because that was the other side of the picture. He said that we had gotten them all but one. He said that it was fantastic, but this one. Fortunately it didn't kill too many people, but it did kill some when it went off.

During this all night bombardment it really was funny, because the Japanese kept sending in flights of bombers trying to catch us. They were coming from I believe one of the nearby islands, Bikini I think it was. These bombers were coming in intermittently to try to stop us bombarding all night. Whenever they appeared, we picked up the bogies and we would head for the nearest rain squall. There were lots of them, and we would hide in there until they would give up and go away. Then we would go back to bombarding again. The following morning, we were joined by cruisers and destroyers and continued the bombardment all that day. I have always felt that this was the result of the failure in the Gilberts. They thought that they could go in there and bomb it by air and wipe it out, but the Japanese just went underground. They had coconut logs which are fantastic protection for anything underground. They are rather pulpy and soft. When the marines went ashore there, they took a terrible shellacking. I think that this activity at Roi and Namur was a direct result of that failure in Tarawa. Hence we not only had the aerial bombardment, but we had a ship bombardment that went on all night long from three ships and the following day all day long again. The day after that the marines made their landing. The Japanese that were left were so shell shocked that they didn't really present much of a problem.

(Those aerial photos helped a great deal in setting that up.)

They did. It was the first time it had been used. Our skipper was a little reluctant to ask this favor of the carrier, but we finally talked him into doing it. It was a fantastic thing for us. At that point we had the marines ashore.

We were suddenly called to the southern end of the island, because the WASHINGTON and the INDIANA were involved in a collision. What apparently

happened was that at 4:45 a.m. the INDIANA requested permission--she was on the starboard side of the formation--to leave the formation and prepare to refuel a destroyer. Instead of making a right turn out of the formation, she made a left turn into the formation. Then realizing her problem, she turned again to the right and then again to the right and was coming straight back into the formation on a collision course, dead on with the WASHINGTON. At the last minute she turned left, and the WASHINGTON hit her just abaft of the beam. The WASHINGTON, as the NORTH CAROLINA, has a high bow; and the bow rode up over the main deck and it stripped off her forty-millimeter mount. It flattened it out completely. The splinter shield was taken off. It cut off the catapult and carried away the plane and everything. It just stripped the whole starboard side from abaft the beam. The WASHINGTON suffered bow damage. It folded her bow around so the deck at the bow dropped down. It was as though you had taken a knife and cut it off. It's the kind of thing that to me is surprising that those things didn't happen more than they did. You can't believe that it could happen, but it did. They called the NORTH CAROLINA down to it. I remember it well, because it was that day that I had the misfortune of having a shell burst back of me, and I was laid up with about eight pieces of shell fragments in my legs. I was laid up for several days or more.

(Was that one of our shells that exploded?)

It was one of ours. It was a twenty-millimeter shell that hit a halliard, and it burst and hit me from the back. It cut all of the nerves in one leg and so on. It wasn't that bad, and in a matter of days I was back in action again.

We went on down. The operation came to an end, and we were in the lagoon at Kwajalein. Then a short time after that--I can't remember exact times or

dates but it was at that point that I believe they created Tast Force Fifty-Eight. Our objective was to sneak into Saipan and surprise the Japanese and also Guam. This was the first time we had ventured that far. So we started off and everything went along fine until dusk the evening before we were prepared to launch the planes for this attack on Saipan. One lone patrol plane spotted us, and before our cover could shoot it down, it got a message off. Of course we knew what was going to happen then, and it did. It was shortly after dark that the planes started in. It was divided into two groups, Task Force 58.1 and 58.2; and they were exactly ten miles apart. The NORTH CAROLINA, to the best of my memory, was in Task Force 58.1. The first attack was on our group, and there were quite a few of them. We just let fly with everything. It just lit up the sky. We were fairly successful--the task group--in knocking down quite a few of them. From that time on every attack was on the other group, Task Force 58.2. I distinctly remember--as a matter of fact I had a copy of a dispatch that was sent to the NORTH CAROLINA by the admiral sometime later that evening, and he said, "It appears that the excellence of your marksmanship has driven the fleas to the other dog's back." That pleased our skipper. It was one of the few things that had pleased him. At that point the following day we retired to Truk. There we engaged in the first attack. We went to Guam. Whether we went to Kwajalein before we went to Guam, I don't remember. Then we went to Guam for the first strike on Guam.

You always remember that unless we were actually bombarding, our primary mission was to protect the carriers. The carriers were usually kept a hundred miles or so away from whatever the target was. Frequently when we would go on a mission such as this, we would never see land. We would be out a hundred miles there, standing by to protect the carrier while the carrier planes went in and did the damage. That's exactly what happened on the first

strike at Truk. We were well off shore. The carrier planes went in and did all the damage. We had our OS-2U's up in the air, and that was when Burns saw these pilots who had been shot down in the water just outside the reef. He landed and he got so many guys together that he couldn't take off, so they all hung on to the pontoon. He taxied back out to get them out from under the shore batteries. Once he got them out there, a submarine surfaced. They went aboard the submarine and then they sank the OS-2U. He had nine or ten people clinging on to that thing.

It was shortly after that that I left the ship. I went back then from Kwajalein back to Pearl Harbor on the ESSEX and then reported into CINCPAC. CINCPAC sent me back to the anti-aircraft training center at Waianae as the executive officer. About three weeks after that, John Kirkpatrick was assigned as the commanding officer, so there we were back again together. That was our duty for several months. During that time, I had been given the job of planning two additional anti-aircraft training centers by CINCPAC. One was to be built on Saipan to train the amphibious force for the invasion of Iwo Jima. Then I was to leave there and go back to Guam and build a permanent fleet anti-aircraft training center.

Prior to the time I went there, the anti-aircraft center was given the job of putting some forty-millimeter guns on submarines. Submarines had run out of targets. Their targets were mostly coastwise sampans that were hauling freight. They were planked hull, not steel vessels, and they weren't worth a torpedo. Their five-inch/forty-fives that they were using were much too slow and ineffective. So they called on us to ask us if we thought that the forty-millimeter would do the job. Our answer was, "Give us a target, and we will show you what we can do with the forty-millimeter." So they did. They built targets far sturdier than any sampan ever was. They were

laminated four by six's with steel bands on them. We shot these things with both armour piercing forty-millimeter shells, as well as the type we used for aircraft. Nobody thought that that would do the job. They thought that it would take armour piercing. But to the contrary the armour piercing wasn't that good at all, because it just punched it full of holes like a piece of Swiss cheese; whereas the high explosive was just shattering the whole thing. Based on the result of this I spent a great deal of time with the submarine force putting the first forty-millimeters on a submarine. We put two twins on. We put one on the bow and one on the stern. When this submarine finally did go to sea on a cruise, she went off the coast of Hokkaido and surfaced on a foggy morning in the middle of a convoy of a hundred sampans. They destroyed practically all of them by making a figure eight course in the middle of these sampans and just with the high rate of fire and devastating power.

(What did they use sampans for?)

Freight. They were freighting along the coast. After she returned, Admiral Brown invited me to come back in a conference with the commanding officer. They had his chart blown up on the wall and all the targets indicated and so on. It was a huge success and it was a very worthwhile job. When I went to Guam and built this training center, pictures of which you have, we also put in a section for the submarine people. We had a five-inch/forty-five, but we also trained a great many of them with the forty-millimeter.

At that point--that was about three months after I had completed the job--I was given orders to report to Admiral Forrest Sherman as a member of his staff. He was leaving Admiral Nimitz'e staff and going back to new construction as commander Air Division I. I left Guam in August. I don't remember the exact date, but I was halfway back to Pearl Harbor when they

capitulated. That was the end of the war for me. I laid over in Honolulu or Pearl Harbor for a week and then was sent on back to San Diego.

(Do you have any further thoughts regarding your service on the NORTH CAROLINA?)

I would say that if it were possible to have a wonderful experience, if not always a happy one, that has to be one of the best years of my life for a number of reasons. But I think the main reason was that the friends that I made then were perhaps and will always remain the best friends I have. I can't think of a ship being any better or having a better spirit than the NORTH CAROLINA did. I really mean every word of that. Men like Kirkpatrick. We can go years without seeing one another and I know he's always there, and I know he's my best friend. It's a strange thing that happens to you. I think under certain stresses and strains, you find out what people are like and you seek out those that suit you the best; and I've found many of them. So I would say that it was certainly the best part of the war for me. There were many other interesting things that I did that I liked, but somehow or other a lot of those things were lonely jobs. There were jobs without this great teamwork we had, the companionship that we had. Almost to a man I would include in my remarks.

(John Kirkpatrick.) There was enough of a depth of people with this personality on the ship that I don't believe that any one person was especially essential--that could either hurt it or help it. I think that it had a kind of basic strength that went on down to the seaman second class. We naturally had a bunch that we sure as hell could get along without. By the time we were together a year, I think that you had a kind of basic structure of strength of personality. I think captains, commanders and gunnery officers could come and go, and there was this intwined strength that is hard to build

up. In my company it took fifteen years to achieve; but in this ship's company, it got pretty well established. It certainly takes a long time to get it perfected; but it got started out on the right track. I think you see companies like the Philips Petroleum Company or Texaco. I think that they got started out as a bunch of sons of bitches and they will always be sons of bitches no matter what your executives can do to change it.

(John Walker) On the cruise from Honolulu to Noumea the first time, the Lieutenant Commander Kirkpatrick and I had the pleasure of having Artie Shaw visit us in sky control. We taught him a note or two didn't we?

(Kirkpatrick.) I remember old Resen, I think it was, came up and said, "Get your ass out of the road, we're busy." He didn't know who he was. We were trying to work and move around, and he was standing up there. I practically kicked his ass out of there.

(Celustka.) You know Shaw was banished from Pearl. Do you know the story of why we took him down to Noumea? I'll tell you why. John Best, the trumpet man, who played with Miller and Shaw--I ran into him and played at the "O" Club for four years with him. He played with Shaw in New York and then came in the Navy and as a seaman was on board at the time with the band. Shaw was very tempermental. He was an s.o.b. first class; and when all the brass would come up and ask him to play this or that, he would tell them to kiss his ass; and this didn't go to well. Commander Hickey was a P.I.O. and he had the Armed Forces broadcast out of Pearl. He sent for Shaw, who was a chief at this point--Chief Bandmaster. Hickey was a commander and he sent for Shaw. He said, "We're doing a broadcast worldwide, an armed services broadcast, Saturday morning. I want your band there, and we're going to do it."

Shaw said, "Well o.k., what's the deal?"

Hickey said, "Well I'm going to get on the air and I'll say 'This is Commander Hickey from Pearl Harbor . . . .'"

Shaw said, "Wait a minute. What was that deal?"

He said, "This is Commander Hickey from Pearl Harbor introducing . . . ."

Shaw said, "I won't play. He said, "Shaw is the name. What's this Commander Hickey and P.I.O. routine."

Hickey got really belligerent, and he said, "You'll play or else."

Shaw said, "I won't be here."

He didn't show up. He faked sickness, and his band broadcasted; but Shaw did not appear. Then the next thing you know, he was aboard. They were trying to send him to China, Burma, India, but there was nobody going there. We took him to New Caledonia and he ricocheted all the way through the South Pacific. John, his trumpet man, can tell you stories that will curl your hair. He said that Shaw belligerized everyone, and as a result they were ordered every damned place. They would try to find him the remotest place.

(Walker.) I remember how Shaw ended up in sky control. It was Joe Stryker who said that we had to give everyone of those guys a battle station. That's how he ended up coming up there. He wanted to be the top dog.

(Celustka.) Well, he actually was very well appreciated on a ship. They didn't give a damn who he was.

(Walker.) A guy who made that sort of music was in. I remember when they had the concert on the fantail, and they invited guys from all the ships around the place. I've never heard such a racket in my life. You could hear them for ten miles.