

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #24.025

Charles Gilbert

USS *NORTH CAROLINA* Battleship Oral History Collection

June 24, 1976

Interviewer is Donald R. Lennon

Interview #1

[Charlie, when did you enter in service?]

April 23, 1942.

[When were assigned to the *NORTH CAROLINA*?]

About October of 1942.

[This is immediately after basic training?]

The basic training and at that time the Marines had Sea School. Then, a little time in the Navy Yard at Pearl Harbor. I came to Pearl Harbor on a transport.

[Where did you have your Sea School and your Basic?]

San Diego. Recruit depot and Sea School.

[Once you arrived aboard the *NORTH CAROLINA*, what was your primary duty?]

Primary duty was light anti-aircraft. Well, at first they still had marines in the 5 inch mounts. They had eliminated the program where marines were...a mount was totally manned by marines. They had eliminated that. But, they were using some marines. I worked in a lower handling position that's a ammunition position. But, it wasn't long after that the marines were all eliminated in the 5 inch mount to put them on the 20MM which is their\_\_\_\_\_light weapons. As they put more of these on a ship. I

think they got up to as high as 90 20MM barrels on ship. That was the main thing and then of course, guard duty on the brigg. (Brow???) Duty in port . . . brow duty(?) We would put ashore and see the captain and the executive officer and an admiral when he was aboard sometimes, one time or twice I know.

[What particular experiences or events come to mind that you think would be of interest in looking back on the career of the *NORTH CAROLINA*?]

Well, I remember one that is probably in the records somewhere but I believe that it personally is quite a tragedy. A young fellow that had been trying hard to get into the "V" Division on the deck force finally made it. He'd only been in the "V" Division . . . which is aircraft for perhaps a month. He was up on the catapult standing on that by the propeller wiping down a propeller. He moved it and the 30 Caliber gun fired through the nose and got him right between the eyes. We were in the chow line back there. We were lined up going down the hatch and he just flopped on the deck. We heard the crack and he flopped down on the deck. He was dead by the time they got him down to sick bay. They hauled him down to sick bay. I remember they had some kind of hearing to try to determine who had left the gun on. I don't know whether they ever determined it or not.

[This is just a freak accident more or less.]

Yes. Apparently, because the gun is synchronized to fire through the propeller; then, if it is armed, at least in this case it did go off. There was a round in there, and it went off as he pulled the propeller through. It is synchronized to miss the propeller, and therefore had to be time to the propeller. So the movement of the propeller fired one right into his head. He was about eighteen I think. That's the one thing I remember that is kind of tragic and kind of a funny one is: One morning, we used to run four hour duty periods. We were in port at Pearl Harbor. I think we were in dry dock at Pearl Harbor. I

went to relieve the forward Brow Watch. As I walked down the gangway early one morning, he was so eager to get relieved. He was so sleepy. As was the custom he went to inspect the pistol turning it over to me. He pulled back the slide. Looked through the end of the chamber, put the clip back in and let it go forward and fired one just as I came down. It is supposed to be just a "Click". But, he fired one off just as I got about ten feet from him. I just turned around and headed back up. I thought he was after me. The Officer of the Day just went into orbit. (OD) Ensign on the Quarter Deck and he just went round and round. He was blowing his whistle and everything. It was soon calmed down. I don't think they even penalized this fellow. They just said go away.

[What about the incident of this that you mentioned about being on the deck that you mention just a minute ago?]

Oh, the 20MM thing.

[Right.]

Back there after the port side, I was on a group of three 20MM gun. *SOUTH DAKOTA* was alongside firing at I think it was sleeve? Yes. Total sleeve? I believe it was the only place that the round could have come from. I believe it was a 20MM round. It went up and then the trajectory brought it over the *NORTH CAROLINA* and apparently straight down in the bottom of the 40MM tub and that area. I heard the crack like of course louder than a rifle perhaps more like a shotgun. I looked up just in time to see this fellow go. It just looked like he went about nine feet in the air, and screaming and he took off down the deck in smoke of course, was coming up from the tub. So, several of us ran over there and looked in the tub. Another fellow was in there snooping down grabbing one foot. I think it was just one foot where the shoe was almost completely cut

from his foot. It looked like someone had taken a razor and made multiple cuts in his shoes. Of course he was bleeding quite bad.

[This was due from the concussion there?]

From the Strapnel from one 20MM. When it dedinated on impact the TNT and of course the gunnery call trajectoral of course was about two inches long. Of course it was a 20MM that was packed with TNT. It came apart. It was unscrewed, and in there was the TNT. I think we used to take them apart in training they showed them. Of course, that fellow went to sick bay. And, as I recall he returned to duty in a couple of weeks. The other one I never did see again. I only got a look at him from the rear, and he may still be running. I told that story often through the years, and he may still be going North or whatever way he was going. I never saw him again.

[How long were you on the *NORTH CAROLINA*?]

Just about an even two years.

[So, you left in 1944?]

Got on in Pearl Harbor in 1942 when she was in for the torpedo hole repair. *SARATOGA* came in one day with a torpedo hole aft of starboard side. The *ENTERPRISE* came in a day or two later, I think, with two or three bomb hit on the flight deck. That left zero carriers in the Pacific. Zero. The *NORTH CAROLINA* came in a few days later returning from the same action with a torpedo hole forward on the port side.

[Now you were on board during the Gilbert Island, Marshall Island Campaign were you not? Do you remember any particular incident stemming out of those particular encounters?]

Well, I have the whole thing in my diary out there. I mean the things that could stimulate my memory. I remember feeling guilty when we heard how bad Terrell (?) was. We were off from Macon, and they all are right together there. The Army had a fairly easy time of it at Macon. Of course the Marines were getting slaughtered at Teraya (?), Mark Island?? Beach, and you know that story. We as Marines...you know every Marine is trained in basically an infantryman. I remember feeling guilty about this. This may be the psycho indication, but that's just what came to mind.

[You thought that you should have been on the beaches instead of aboard ship.]

Yes. Many of my friends were killed there I found out later. I found out this after the war through reading. The submarine that fired the torpedo in the Coral Sea in the *NORTH CAROLINA* was sunk by a destroyer off Macon just a few miles from the *NORTH CAROLINA*. The I-19. I got that out of the books after the war when they got the Japanese records. Was it the Gilbert operations of *LISCOMB BAY* was sunk. I remember seeing it on the horizon, but it can't all go together. The *LISCOMB BAY* was sunk with nearly all hands. Kind of like the *INDIANNAPOLIS*. Similar. Out of a relatively small crew of 800 some 700 were killed. I'm not really sure of the number.

[You didn't observe that did you?]

Yes. I did just with a plane. There she was burning on the horizon. I think I was around when the Gilbert operations were going on in the Islands.

[That was in fall on 1943. November.]

November of 1943 was the Gilbert Islands operations.

[Right]

I'm not sure about that. I must have been very inflamed from where she went down. She went down just like that.

[Did the *NORTH CAROLINA* attempt to rescue anyone from the ship?]

No. We were further away and of course being a capital ship, they were not that close. It was like an horizon flame. By that time, things were building up pretty good by then. Many destroyers and everything. Of course, the *NORTH CAROLINA*, being a capital ship didn't stop for anybody.

[What about the officers aboard the *NORTH CAROLINA*. Were there any particular officers or any of the captains that made any impressions upon you?]

Striker. Striker made quite an impression on me.

[How is that?]

Oh I orderlyed for him. He was all business. That's the way I remember him. Of course, he probably wasn't really. Of course, if you were a marine like that standing at attention outside the door there, half scared to death for most of the time anyway. I remember he used to say "buzz-water". Go get me a "buzz-water". He meant to go get him a soda from the gallery. I think that's what he called them. I remember the food got really bad at one time. We had been at sea for 73 days I believe, and somebody threatened the supply officer. Have you ever heard that story?

[After a fashion. Go ahead and tell it?]

Seems that somebody put tin can in his bed. They left him a note that if the food didn't get better, he is liable to find himself swimming or something like that.

[You had no idea who did it?]

Gosh, no. They put out a notice that the man must come forward. Oh, the captain was mad. I don't remember who he was at that time.

[Was it Ward or Thomas?]

Seems like it was Thomas. I remember Thomas. I orderlied a little bit for Thomas too. I think it was Thomas, and I don't remember the supply officer's name. A Lt. Commander. The food was really getting bad. Everything was dehydrated . . . but as a matter of fact, the food got better. He put some taste into it somehow.

[I imagine that they worked with the same menu day after day, did they not?]

Yes, you know after that long at sea. The food was always quite good for a month. It would start to get bad and we'd run out of fresh food. It was much better than smaller ships. The food wasn't really all that bad.

[Some of them had been spoiled.]

Christ, we used to make a lot of remarks about it, but it wasn't that bad at all.

[There was a plentiful supply of it anyway.]

Oh yes. They had butcher shops, and cold storage and everything. Fresh milk . . . powered made to taste like fresh. The longer you used it the better it tasted. There was a process that they made it cold and the put butter in it I believe.

[This was a milk making machine.]

Yes. Back aft. Midship's aft one deck down, they used to have a mechanical cow back there. They used to make it really cold and mix butter with it. I don't know what all. It would taste just about like milk.

[I've heard them brag about it and all.]

They had the laundry and all back aft. I was on another ship after the *NORTH CAROLINA*, so I don't want to get things mixed up.

[Where did you go when you left the *NORTH CAROLINA* in 1944?]

From the *NORTH CAROLINA*, I went to *TREASURE ISLAND*. I got off at Barrington??, Washington. I went on leave right away, and then came back to Barrington?? and did about another month to the ship. Then, I got transferred to the *TREASURE ISLAND*. I stayed there ten months and then went on the *BEN SIMMS*. The *NEW BEN SIMMS* as we called it. As you know the other one was sunk at\_\_\_\_. It was a “Mr. Roberts” ship . . . that one was. We had command of the South Pacific. We made a tour through the whole south Pacific securing for return of civilian control for the government of Cemon (Query the spelling of Cemon sounds like Se-mone).

[This is the end of the war?]

Yes, it was after the V-J Day. I was in San Francisco. That was the story, but it was really “Mr. Roberts” stuff, or Game Mutiny stuff. It was really funny. The Admiral went fishing a lot. We were just doing the same thing we were always doing. We would just sit around in the heat and go and get a few beers and play baseball. But, he was fishing. Of course that’s another ship . . . another story. It was an interesting six months. We did that for six months. We went to virtually every island down there. All the Solomons and down to New Zealand, back to the Maya?? where we spent half of our life on. On the *NORTH CAROLINA* anyway. Many weeks in New Caledonia?? (sp)

[During the 1942 to 1944 period, can you think of any other personal incidents of perhaps a humorous nature or activities that involved you or any other members of the crew that you were personally involved with?]

Perhaps I should tell about Charlie Pavlok. Have you heard that name? He was a marine . . . an exceptionally marine . . . an exceptional man. Polish. He could do the work of five men. Nobody every crossed him, he was mild mannered and easy to get along with, but he was a real man’s man. But the only Marine in my memory who was



ever asked by the deck force to joining their tug-of-war team. They used to have these below deck centers for exercise and recreation. They'd get a sort of play day going. The big thing on the ship was tug-of-war. So they would get this big line, and all deck force on one end and the black gang on the other end. The only marine they ever asked to get on that was Charlie Pavlok. He was the type that you would think would do it. He would tie the rope...he was anchor man . . . he would tie the rope around his waist, and they'd go. They never lost. I've seen him . . . he had hands about twice as big as mine . . . and I've seen him tear up a teak wood deck with his finger nails. Actually tear up the teak wood deck with his finger nails. He was a fantastic man . . . they never lost.

[What else did you do for the diversion?]

We had Shangri-la one and Shangri-la two-three-four- and five. Everywhere we went there was Shangri-la. That meant a couple of cans of beer and baseball.

[Was this aboard ship or on some island?]

All these were . . . of course one big one I remember . . . of course we had one at the Maya . . . that was a big one. We moved to Havana Harbor in the Hari's. I forget the name of the island, but they call it "Havana Harbor". In the New Haberdi's. They have one there. That there was a good one. They had a compound that had been constructed for POW on the island. Because there were no prisoners or very few, they didn't need it. They made a PX Supply dump out of it. We got the duty to guard it. It was right next to Shangri-la. I was in charge of a contingent for one week or possibly two weeks. Our ammunition was heavy aviation ammunition. One of the big things we were guarding was the beer. The fence was all broken down. We had mounds and mountains of Coca-Cola in big paste board cartins and inside there would be several cases. Under each bunk were five gallon cans lined full of ice and beer at all times. A whole river of the tents and

needless to say, the...not only the ones off duty, but the ones on duty was about half smashed all the time. You could hardly get around the compound just part of the time. There was a Jewish store keeper ran the warehouse where they kept the beer. He was really nice guy. We were entitled to one gunny sack per hut per day, but while he had his back turned these would get more. At times, he'd say, "Isaw that, Isaw that!!!" He'd got after this guy, and another one would grab one, and so, you see we would go out of there with several. If we didn't have enough, then there was a hole on one side of the warehouse. You could go in there anytime through the hole and get what you wanted. So, anyway that went on. Then a little entertainment on the side, a little cruel actually, but we thought it funny at the time being kids. We'd watch the sailors coming over from the ball park to steal a coke. The coke pile was undermined at the time with tunnels. It actually had tunnels through it where they'd go in and get their coke. All they were after was warm coke. Us drinking that beer, we thought it would be funny to send a round over their head and scare them, and make them run. You know, gyrate?? (or gyrines, a slang word given from some three of the services to dumb acting marines or just DA's). Another thing that happened, one night we decided to do a little shooting, and we didn't realize that there was a village over somewhere in the direction of which we were shooting. We were shooting tracers. We'd had a few. We saw the OD coming (OD is Officer of the Day). He was in his weapon carrier. So, a bunch of gaily drunk kids...we rushed in the camp, put out the lights. I don't know how he knew, but he walked into that tent, turned on the light, and turned right to me, and said . . . I was one of the two . . . and he said, "What the hell are you doing?". He really dressed me down. I'm out of the bunk, you know. He let it go.

[He didn't write you up.]

No. I think he was a Sea Bee Lieutenant. (Sea Bee are the engineer corps of the navy that build anything.) we could do no wrong with the Sea Bees. In fact, that's where we were getting the ice.

[This was still at the New Haberdi's.]

Yes. Euphati was the name of the is . . . for the top Sergeant.

[A case of beer.]

Yes, you know the little office down the top sergeant office is a marine compartment. We brought a case back for him. The First Sergeant. You know you were supposed to be . . .

[You weren't suppose to have alcohol on ship at all were you?]

Medicinal alcohol I believe it was for the pilots. I was trying to think whether it was this ship or the other one where we had a thing with nurses. It was this ship. I can't remember where it was, but they had a party and decided to . . . it was nearly a mutiny. I think all it would have taken was to have a leader. He'd would have had to have been a pretty strong leader. But, the officers had decided to bring on all the nurses aboard. Have you ever heard this before?

[no]

I hope I don't have this mixed up with the *BEN SIMMS*. I think it was this one. All, the enlisted men were milling around, and they came aboard and making wise remarks and everything. Then of course the officers were all chasing around in the dark, you know . . . Anyway, the next day as I recall the executive, and probably Striker put out note saying that they realized they made a mistake yesterday, but there will be no apologies.

[They brought the nurses on board for the officers, and they . . .]

Yes. They were in the war zone . . . they were in the War room, and they had dinner and the whole spear. These guys had been overseas . . . some of them two oh possibly three years. No girls, and they considered it an insult. They had the enlisted men roped off, you know, like hands off the . . . you know keep the troops away. They are the girl watchers. But, then the officers instead of going right to the war room, they had them all, they were groping around in the dark with them all up in the counting tower and what do you call the not the counting tower . . . but what do you call the . . . mast. The forward stack where you can go up. They had them up in there, and everything, and it got pretty funny.

[When you think of the *NORTH CAROLINA*, what was your impression or feeling for her as a ship?]

We were really proud of it. You know this is the Showboat, or the Admiral Maker, and all those names. Of course, being a Marine, we were possibly not like the sailors because . . . I think we were darn glad we were here for the comfort. It was questionable whether it was safer or not. A target like this isn't too safe out in the ocean. But, it was cleaner than our buddies were getting.

[Did you think you were losing some of your glory as a Marine??]

Yes. I think we were probably glad that we were here in that it was considered safer. That's debatable. I always had a feeling that I wasn't doing what I was really trained for, even though I had gone through the Sea School to train you to be a ship bound Marine. It was supposed to be quite an honor; you know to be chosen for that. At least that is what they told us. I thought they may get you because you were tall. They like tall kids.

[You mentioned being on guard duty and on duty at the brigg. It brings up the question of discipline aboard the ship. Was the brigg very heavily used?]

No, not heavily. But of course, every time we got into port. It was rarely used at sea. But, in port, there was always somebody who would get a little too much to drink. You know when you've gone to sea that long, there is always somebody who will get in trouble. I remember a couple of fellows by name . . . Baronowski . . . I'll never forget Baronowski. He was in there all the time. He would be up one day and down the next in rank the. He is the only one I can remember by name. But it wasn't used too often. I remember one time that we were down . . . I'm afraid I'm going to get these mixed up . . . so much happened in six months on that *BEN SIMMS*, and it has been so long that I tend to get them all on one.

[They all blend together.]

I get one mixed with the other, and i have to be careful that...I was thinking of a Marine that was working in the laundry that was going to kill everybody one day. That was the kind of a man that you'd have to take his rifle and slap him around a little bit. You would put him in the brigg for a few hours. I remember a funny one that happened in Phoebe with Baronowski. Maybe you'd like to hear that. They have a bar in Phoebe designed so that the sailors couldn't take back their money when they got drunk. They were feeding them Bush Gin of some kind like apricot or something or another. The bartender who was a fuzzy-wuzzy with a skirt on was in this bamboo cage with bamboo about that heavy and had just a little opening here. It was designed so they couldn't take back their money when they got drunk. Baronowski got drunk in there, and he started pushing people around. They called the Shore Patrol. A couple of average size shore patrol men came in, before we knew what had happened Baronowski had them by the

throat . . . one in his right hand and one in his left. He had them that far up the wall, and their feet were off the ground that far. They were turning blue as they stuck him in the head with their clubs slower and slower as they turned blue. It apparently didn't even phase him. They couldn't hit very hard, because they were about to pass out and then some more shore patrol arrived and pulled him off. They threw him in the brigg. We had him the next day, and then bread and water for ten days, or whatever it was. This thing is not funny, but I'd like to tell it because of the way it happened, and may have not been told the way I saw it before. I don't remember just where it was, but it seems to me I think it was around the Marshalls or somewhere. We were having a lot of air activity out at night. We were told to hold out our fire because there were snoopers out. They slowed down, they actually slowed the ship down, so that the wake wouldn't be heavy. All of a sudden . . . I was back here aft of port side . . . all of a sudden at once, there was one twenty millimeter going off on the starboard side of the bow. I think it was joined by another one. No more than two. Later this fellow named Morgan . . . a Marine . . . said that he just had to fire, because he was almost looking a pilot in the eye. They determined that a Mavis had burned . . . gone down the side. It was a Mavis flying boat...one of those big four engine flying boats right on the water. He said, that he was standing there ready and it was there, and he got it. I think the other fellow helped him a little bit. With one 20MM gun. Has that ever come out?

[No.]

We didn't know whether Morgan was going to go to the brigg or get a medal. The gunnery officer talked to him for about an hour. They did nothing. The guy turned out to be a hero. They didn't cause any further damage . . . I mean they didn't allow anybody else to get in on it I guess. So, maybe he did good.

[I imagine that was more a gut reaction on his part. He had been trained to fire.]

Everybody was standing at the ready, but hold your fire don't fire. This fellow Morgan was a Scandinavian. We really thought he had had it. He was in bad trouble. (Query the name Morgan, it may be something else). He popped right out. A couple of things that I remember, you know it was quite an active day . . .

[Marianno thing.]

Right. The first thing (one sentence deleted cannot pick it out.) I had two guns at that time up by the signal bridge . . . one on this side and one on the other. I had mess attendants loading for me in the ready room . . . a closed ammunition room. We were really firing hot and heavy and we were even changing barrels. Airplanes all over the place. Two things happened that day I remember. This fellow . . . I was talking and supposed to be directing these two guns and listing to sky control . . . and the gunner in the one on the port side happened to be a high school chum of mine. I didn't think he was doing a very good job. His tracers were going out here and the airplane was over here. So, I relieved him by pulling his strap. You know those things were designed whereas if a guy got hit, you could just pull on this strap and drop him, and put another on in. I just dropped him out and took over myself for awhile. I probably didn't do a bit better than he did. I got so excited when I took over. Another thing I remember every time I'd open that door, and scream for more ammunition . . . they were loading as fast as they could. They were all hand loaded. Those magazines were 60 rounds, and they were hand loaded. It was dark in the room. There were no lights in the room, except for the blue light. Don't ask me why. I know that it was . . . the light was on when the door was closed and when you opened the door, it was just a blue light. You know, they did that for night operation. When, I would open that door, the light would be out, before I could

get it open. All I could see was white teeth and their eyes . . . their eyeballs. It was so dark in there, and here were these black fellows, and boy they were working their heart out. That's about all I remember. I remember a lot of airplanes that day. We shot down two or three ourselves. What did they shoot down for total...about three hundred and fifty. I know it was scary. They were coming at us from all directions. The fighters got all I would estimate all but 35. No more than 30 or 35 were actually got by the force. That day they had the radio piped into our PA system. I heard one "Blue" leader call for a target. He called the base for this target . . . the carrier. They gave him a target. He was back asking for a target in about 5 minutes. The target was flying approximately 30 believed to be torpedo planes. He was back in 5 minutes asking for a target. The base said, "I gave you a target. I gave you this . . ." He repeated it. The leader said that target has been eliminated. Requesting a target. Just that quick. About thirty of them in five minutes. It was really a turkey shoot. So, what with protection like that . . . you know as I said before, I think, why when I got to Pearl Harbor there, the two carriers came in and left us with zero. Then it seems like we only turned around, and there were carriers all over the horizon. And, every other kind of ship. It was really amazing the ways that old production took off. The sky was black with airplanes all the time. It looked pretty grim for awhile, with all the ships gone. Actually, I got on the thing just about at the turning point. Midway was June, and I was in training at that time. That lasted to October. It was past the turning point. Again, I think it was kind of tragic, but funny too. A fellow came back drunk when we were tied up at the pier at Pearl Harbor. It could have been the Maya. No, we always anchored at Memaya at that time. He thought he was stepping on . . . the brow . . . he was so drunk . . . he thought he was stepping on the brow. But, he went head first down in the water with only those



telephone poles there to keep bumpers. Anybody else, it would have killed them, but he was so drunk, all it did was take all of his front teeth out. You know, it mangled him up pretty bad. They fished him out and sent him to sick bay and he was out without any teeth in a day or two.

[That had the potential for really mashing him up.]

Yes. It could have killed him. Hitting his head like that, but like drunks, they get away with murder. (The word that I have been using as Maya now sounds like Memaya) A couple of months ago I was talking with Gill who was the rear seat man for Lieutenant Burn in the famous rescue at truck. He just retired from the fire department. The one that Lake Herald had for awhile. I tried to get him to come back here. I think that Lieutenant Burns got killed a year after that happened. This morning I heard that our other pilot during most of the time that I was on, committed suicide. I don't know whether this is a fact or not. The guy was named Donald.

[I didn't ask you where you lived now.]

I live in Los Angeles.

[So, you had quite a career.]

I'm an airline pilot. I was trying to get in to navigation all the time I was on here. That was another reason that I was a little unhappy the first that I was on here. The first year, I finally gave up after about a year.

[There wasn't much chance for a Marine aviation aboard a battleship was it?]

Right!! I was a kid. In fact I was under-aged. I got my mother to sign. I was sixteen, and quit high school. I finished high school through the armed force. Flying is all I ever wanted to do. I thought it I could do it in the service. A kid convinced me.

(End of Interview)

