

EAST CAROLINA MANUSCRIPT COLLECTION

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW #24.064

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Independence, Missouri (originally of Oklahoma City)

USS *NORTH CAROLINA* Battleship Collection

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Interview #1

[Interview by Donald R. Lennon]

[Joe, if you will, tell us a little bit about when you entered the Navy, and when you were assigned to the USS *NORTH CAROLINA*.]

I think it was in September, September the 7<sup>th</sup> when they bombed Pearl Harbor.

[December 7, 1941.]

Well, it wasn't very few weeks later they started drafting people. I went to San Diego and spent nine weeks there. I took all my shots there. They had certain days when you went up there and took a test and everything. I was one of the unlucky ones that didn't make the grade to go to school. It didn't make any difference where they sent me. I've got my picture of my boot camp at home--432.

[You did take boot camp at San Diego?]

Yes, for nine weeks. After I finished the nine weeks...at first I didn't exactly like boot camp. The division officer said, "Well, I can get you out."

I just said, “Naw, I’ll just stay in there and toughen it out.” We had liberty after we finished the boot camp. They went from ship to shore and there I was in my blues and I took my pea coat. And, oh, along after dark it gets pretty cool there. Well, should I go back and tell you more about my training?

[Forward toward your battleship phase, if you will.]

Then, I went back . . . well, we went in there, and they called a different bunch of guys. We went on the *LURLINE*. That’s a big, big transport. I couldn’t tell you how many thousand people could get on there. So our leading chief . . . you see each group of them had a chief or a petty officer.

[Right.]

They went over there, and I couldn’t tell you exactly how many days it took to go across, from San Diego to Pearl Harbor. So, they went around and got different guys to work in the galley to clean up after a meal. They’d let us roam through the *LURLINE*, this big transport, to see where everything was. We had one section where they kept boats, and we kept our gear there.

[When did you arrive in Pearl Harbor?]

That was late 1942. We stayed there for two days, before they called our names out. They said, “Well, get your gear and put her down there.”

That was in the afternoon. I didn’t know where I was going. A chief called all the names out. You know me; I fell in wherever they told me to go. I had my sea bag . . . well, I had the hammock, and the sea bag, and then we had to tie it all up. They put us on a big, old truck. I didn’t know where we was going. Pretty soon, we seen a big, big battlewagon. She was in dry dock.

[This is when she was being repaired from the torpedo hit?]

Yes. They told us where to go. They told us to go back there on the fantail. So, I put my hammock and sea bag and everything down there where they told us to. In morning, evening, and night they'd have a roll call. I think this went on for about two days. Out of the bunch they brought aboard, I don't know how they selected each man for the Division. They chose me for 6<sup>th</sup> Division. So, I went down there and slept in the mess hall until they had a place where I could put my hammock. Inside the hammock we had a mattress. So, they assigned me a locker and a bunk. I was the last one in the pay line, and the first one to get a working party. It just goes to show you. I served in the mess hall, and then they brought me back up topside, and they made me the leading seaman of the gear locker, more as the leading boatswain in there.

[Concerning when you were a cook in the mess . . .]

Mess cook.

[Mess cook. You mentioned something about keeping the fruits and things stored away for the crew. Elaborate on that a little bit.]

In a locker. Morning, afternoon, or night you see, they'd have big boxes of fruit. They brought huge fruit and vegetables. There is one thing you can say about the Navy, they always have cooked for the men. So, when they had apples, I'd generally get three or four of them and put them in my locker. If they'd have any left over, we'd just take them up there. That goes good when the men had a watch or something and they were hungry. The old beans you'd have, I think it was on Mondays, Wednesdays and Saturdays. It didn't matter if it was a holiday. You'd still get your beans for morning. Somehow they'd put ketchup in it and bake it. You'd have it for dinner and supper too.

[So all three meals?]

Yes, until they get rid of it. If it is a holiday, you get the trims. You get everything. You have turkey, dressing, peas and cake. We had our own bakery on there where they baked bread, cake and everything. Then we got an iron cow. For that, you take powdered milk and mix it with water, and take it down in the freezer and chill it. It took a few days to get used to powdered milk. But, when you chilled it, it was really good.

[The men liked that?]

Yes. We had cereal. We had eggs, and some of them said they was powdered eggs. When I was at sea, I always had a full stomach. I never did get seasick. I seen three big typhoons and I never did . . .

[You were aboard during three typhoons?]

Oh, yes!

[Tell us about them.]

Water just roars and the first thing you know your ship would go that way and then go back the other way. The ship has got three sections. You'd think that the ship was going to break in two. The captain would pass the word; there would be nobody on main deck on the count of it would wash you overboard. After I left the mess hall, they got me down in the magazine. They asked me if I'd like to be a powder man.

I said, "I don't know nothing about it, but I'd be more than glad to learn about it." They sent me up there in mount six. They showed me how to . . . they closed the bridge and put the powder and shell in front. We went out and had a few practices shooting at drones that another plane would pull behind. We got pretty good in knocking them down.

[Now, you were aboard ship during the Gilbert Island, and the Marshall Island Campaigns were you not? Do you remember any particular aspects of that?]

New Caledonia, that's the first island that we went to shore duty. Oh, I guess you'd have to walk just about five miles to the town or whatever you want to call it. They had Navy people over on the Island. In some of the islands when we drew liberty, we were allowed so many cases of beer.

[This is what they call the Shangri-la's?]

Yes. Them boys was stationed over there and their money wasn't worth two cents to them. They'd give you as high as five dollars for a can of beer. I think we got three or four more cans of beer than what you asked. You see, they wasn't stingy with their beer. You see, we had a first class, and then we had an officer to go and keep peace on the beach. The guys would bring coconuts back and bananas and anything like that.

[Well, you said you had to walk five miles into town there at New Caledonia. There was no transportation--no buses or anything at all--available?]

No, they'd just take off, and then they'd come back. They just wanted to sightsee.

[Stretch their legs probably.]

The officer who was in charge of us, they didn't care. Then, they went back aboard ship. They'd make sure that all the crew that went to shore was accounted for; they didn't want to leave anybody.

[When you were a mess cook, what was your combat duty station when you went to general quarters?]

Mount six. You see, that was down in the magazines. After, I left the mess cooking, that's when they put me up in the mounts. Everyday is different. There was three groups. You'd have a morning watch, and an evening watch. Then, you'd have a swing shift. You have the evening shift, then you'd have the midnight shift. The one that had the midnight, I think you'd stay on the phones for an hour. We had a captain in

there. Just up there on the top of the mount where the hatch was at. They had scopes where you could turn it and see. At daylight you could see miles after miles. At night, you couldn't hardly see anything, but you could see the blue water. We'd have six in each mount on a watch. Then they'd select one of you to go down in the galley and get a big pitcher of coffee. Then you had these white cups with no handles. The sugar and cream--I don't know where they kept that, I forgot. The coffee, when you first started drinking it, it was strong enough to pick the paint out of the waterway. The boatswain's mate got after the guy that was at the mount for pouring coffee in the waterway.

[We interviewed a boatswain's mate last year that was complaining about that very thing; the pouring coffee in the waterway.]

You see, you're not supposed to do that, you're supposed to pour it in the bucket used to sweep the floors. When you sweep the floors, you are supposed to sprinkle water. You have three or four of them come calling you. That's what you call "clamping down." You'd sweep down and then you'd run the mop--"swab" is what they called it. They pass over the \_\_\_\_ (?). Clean down fore and aft, then you sprinkle water. Three or four of them had to swab. The guys that had the evening to midnight watch, did have to be the ones to work all day on deck. Then at four o'clock or whatever time chow is supposed to start, they'd go to the head of the line so that they could go up and relieve the ones on four o'clock. The ones on four o'clock would move up to midnight. They would just rotate. We had seen several boats out there in the water. While I was standing a watch, one of the carriers came along and one of the Jap planes was coming in. They sounded general quarters. We went to our battle stations. You couldn't leave the mount until somebody relieved you. I always took mount six. I think the gunner's mate is the one that will operate the phones. We had two to operate the mount. We had a trajector, a

powder man, and one to catch the powder can. He is the one that had those long sleeves on so that he wouldn't burn his self. He would put this out in the hatch in mount six. Well, during the time, we were cross firing. There were two or three ships. We received a five-inch shell hit in turret Sky Two. For a few seconds, we lost control. When they got hit, that throwed us out of commission. Then, Sky Ten took over.

[Sky Two was controlling your mount?]

Yes. They would tell us when to fire the gun. Every time we'd come in harbor, they would have a detail to scrape the stack down. Then, the boatswain mate just knew that I couldn't take that stage. So, the coxswain went up the steps to hang the boatswain chair. He came down and hooked the stage. They went up and got on the stage and pulled themselves up. I tied it--I can't tell you what I tied the stage line to. They had soap and clear water and they scrubbed it down. The Sixth Division got about half of it and the Fifth Division got the other half.

[What about the officers aboard the *NORTH CAROLINA*? Did any of them particularly stand out as either good or bad or indifferent?]

Well, each division had one 'bar,' a lieutenant with two bars--he's the head one. They were really nice. That's the one that gave the details to the division boatswain what they want the crew to do. I used several buckets of fresh water just scrubbing down. They would come around and check to see that the seamen had cleaned and swept down fore and aft the waterways, the clamp down; you had two of them with buckets of fresh water that they would sprinkle on deck. Then there were more that followed with swabs. That is what you call "sweep down fore and aft."

[When did you leave the *NORTH CAROLINA*?]

In 1944, about time the points system came out. They dumped me off in Pearl Harbor. I stayed there for two days and didn't know how I was to get back to the States. I went aboard the *NEW YORK*. They were taking her back to the States and going to cut her up to use for scrap. Boy I can't tell you how many days it took to get back to the States.

[So you came back to the States.]

Right, but meanwhile, they got me on that ship. I was washing trays--mess cooking again. So, I had a chance to go topside.

One of the boatswains said, "Do you know that you are going up over the mountains?"

I said, "You're joking."

He said, "No, I'm not joking." Pretty soon we came up through the harbor. Here you could see the locks where they'd open the gates and you'd go in and they'd flood it. Then, you could go up over the mountains. That took all day.

[This is the Panama Canal?]

Right. That took all day for that ship. They told me the *NORTH CAROLINA* went across. But, it didn't take all day for her. But, the Captain, the officers and the chief in charge of the locks were awful cranky. You had to do what they told you. But, getting back to the *NEW YORK*, they let you have fresh water twice a day. They wouldn't take your drinking water away from you; they just didn't have fresh water like the *NORTH CAROLINA* did. They didn't have big tanks like *NORTH CAROLINA*, but I left that out. Do you want me to go back and tell you about a time on the *NORTH CAROLINA* when they had a crew go down there and take the bolts off the lid to clean the tanks out?



[Were you involved in that?]

Oh yes! You had to crawl through there to clean them. You didn't know where you were going. They had an extension cord where you could go down and clean the \_\_\_?\_\_\_ out where they stored the water, but we never did run out of water.

[That's a kind of frightening experience being down there in that closed compartment, wasn't it?]

The second class would check to make sure you did the work the way they wanted you to. When we closed up, we had some grommits that they would put in that red lead and put on these bolts and then they'd tighten it down. That is the way to seal these tanks up.

[Make them watertight.]

Getting back to the *NEW YORK*, they'd give you some water early in the morning to wash clothes or take a shower. In the evening they would turn the water on for you. When we came into Panama, they went 'hog-wild' over the fresh water. They just washed everything down on the *NEW YORK*. Every night after the speaker would say how far we were from the States, we would have a movie.

[What was your opinion of the *NORTH CAROLINA*?]

She was really nice. Some days I got kinda disgusted, but I never did give anyone any trouble. When I was in the mess hall, they would bring the guys out of the brig. They would get meals every third day. That's when they did something they weren't supposed to and they had to be punished. Some of them went over the hill and then came back, so they had to be punished. They couldn't get the \_\_\_?\_\_\_. The captain had to carry out.

[Were there many of them?]

Some of them did the wrong thing, like they went over the hill, and some of them did something what they wasn't supposed to do. You'd have to go up in front of the Captain, Captain Mack. He'd punish them depending on how many days they had them in the brig. Some of them when they went in harbor, they had to go down in the brig. They were allowed to go up on topside.

[When they were at sea.]

I don't think they . . . they had some down there when we were out to sea. The ones that were punished more, they had to work up topside. When they came into harbor somewhere, they had to go check in with the Master of Arms. Then they had to put them in the white uniform like they used in the mess halls. They had "P" on the uniform. That stands for the brig. They had some Marines, one in front and one in the back. They wouldn't let you get close to them. They would let you know when they was coming through the counter. They wanted you out of their reach. I carried buckets of water and some bread down to them down in brig. I can say one thing. As long as I was on there, I never got took up there to the Captain.

[The only time you went to the brig was to carry bread and water to someone else?]

It was awful hard to make sure you got back aboard the ship at midnight. In Pearl Harbor, we'd get an overnight pass. They'd give you a certain time to get back aboard ship that next morning. I came out with a good conduct medal. I was really proud of that.