

Basic Detail Report



Cornelius Brown Oral History

Date

October 2, 2014

Primary Maker

Cornelius Brown

Medium

MTS, MOV, PDF

Description

Cornelius Brown served aboard the submarine USS Growler (SSG-577) from 1958 to 1960, as an engineman

second class (EN2). The Intrepid Museum recorded his oral history interview on October 2, 2014. See transcript for complete interview. Below is a summary: Cornelius Brown began his interview by discussing his childhood in Washington, D.C. He recalled the recycling drives that he participated in during World War II, as well as V-E Day and his many visits to museums throughout the area. Brown also explained how his parents' jobs had influenced his interest in the Navy. He joined the Navy Reserve while still in high school, and he discussed the difference between active duty and the reserve. Brown also noted that his time in the reserve, which was spent on a decommissioned fleet boat in Washington, DC, had prepared him well for active duty. As the interview continued, Brown discussed his experiences aboard his first submarine, USS Redfin (SSR-272), a radar picket submarine. He then explained the role of radar picket submarines during the Cold War, before recalling his jobs as a non-qual aboard Redfin: mess cooking and standing lookout. Brown stated how long it took for him to qualify and noted his initial duty as an engineman, working as an oiler in Redfin's after engine room. Brown then explained that his desire to travel and see the world had influenced his decisions when choosing which submarines he would prefer to serve aboard in the future. He stated that his next submarines were USS Archerfish (SS-311), which was home ported in Key West, and Growler, which was being built in Portsmouth. As the interview shifted to Growler, Brown discussed the boat's construction, noting that the crew's role during construction was to stand fire watches and security watches. He also recalled that, while on watch inside Growler, he used the boat's antennas, radios and a reel-to-reel tape recorder to record music for the crew to listen to while on patrol. Brown then briefly noted Growler's christening, before he discussed sea trials and the experience of taking a new boat down to its test depth. He also stated that they did not fire any missiles during sea trials, only a test sled that had similar characteristics to a Regulus missile. Being an engineman, Brown also discussed Growler's engines, providing background on the engines and stating what had to be done in order to make them perform better. The interview then shifted to life on board the submarine, and Brown noted that the crew's camaraderie was good. He described the proximity of their bunks, yet explained that Growler's bunks were much better than the bunks he had previously slept in aboard other submarines. Brown stated that the only distinction among the crew was between the qualified and non-qualified crew members. He described

how non-quals were treated and compared their treatment to a crossing the line ceremony, which led to a discussion of the crossing the line ceremony Brown experienced when he crossed the equator on Archerfish. The topic of crew interaction also led to a discussion on race. Brown, who is Black, stated that he never had any racial issues on any of the five boats he served aboard. He also explained that a crew member's treatment was determined by whether he was qualified or non-qualified, as well as by his rate. Brown stated that when you first go aboard any ship and you are the lowest rate, you will be given the dirty jobs, so you have to work toward advancing in rate, and in the case of submarines, qualifying. He also noted that qualifying was especially important because the crew knew they could rely on a qualified crew member if an emergency occurred. "So, you don't look at it from a racial point of view, you look at it from a what's your station in life." The interview then shifted to lighter topics. Brown recalled a memorable swim call, as well as other forms of entertainment, such as playing cards and watching movies. He also noted bringing a collection of books to read. Brown then recounted Growler's transit through the Panama Canal, before briefly describing life in Hawaii and recalling some of the other ports he visited throughout his career. Brown next discussed his experiences in the Navy after his time aboard Growler, stating that he served aboard USS Scamp (SSN-588) before leaving the Navy in 1961. He became a pipefitter at Mare Island Naval Shipyard and remained in the reserve. Brown recalled that USS Gudgeon (SS-567) came to Mare Island for a retrofit while he was working at the shipyard. He and Gudgeon's engineering officer had previously served together on another boat. Brown explained that he let this officer talk him into re-enlisting, and he returned to active duty and served as the leading petty officer in Gudgeon's engine room. This led to a brief discussion of his time aboard Gudgeon, which included the submarine's role patrolling off Vietnam. Brown then explained that he once again left the Navy and returned to Mare Island Naval Shipyard, before he began working for the Berkeley School District. He was hired to be an operating engineer in the steam plant at the high school, and he eventually worked his way up to operations manager for the entire school district. The interview then ended with Brown discussing his thoughts on Growler's current role as a museum. Extent: 9 video files, 22 page transcript

Dimensions

77 minutes