

The Showboat Podcast: Episode 1 Transcript

[Music]

Welcome to Showboat, a series of podcasts from the Battleship NORTH CAROLINA in Wilmington. I'm your host, Mary Ames Booker, ship's curator.

Together we'll discover the stories of an extraordinary ship that steamed into history, what makes her tick and keeps her going, and her vital contributions today.

Join us as we share her adventures and celebrate the thousands of men who served on the most highly decorated American battleship of World War II.

So what's in a name?

The North Carolina, BB-55, was commissioned on April 9, 1941, at the New York navy yard and declared the world's greatest sea weapon.

But where did the term showboat come from?

There are various answers.

A ship undergoes months of sea trials testing the equipment before being assigned to active duty. New York journalist Walter Winchell said the battleship was not worth the taxpayers money. It is nothing but a showboat cruising in and out of New York.

North Carolina's sister ship, the Washington, was also undergoing sea trials but she did not get the same publicity. That rather annoyed them. Both ships were assigned the same test crews in early fall 1941.

As the North Carolina approached the Washington, their band struck up "Here Comes the Showboat" after the revival of the Broadway musical.

The name stuck.

Or perhaps it was because the Navy made her the Showboat.

They were proud of its new Man of war and eager to get appropriations for more ships, so it was on show for reporters, politicians, shipbuilders and the general public.

Regardless of where the name came from, by war's end in 1945 the North Carolina had definitively earned the right to be called Showboat.

We asked Admiral Ron Henderson to introduce you to our remarkable battleship:

Well, hi. Good afternoon, everyone. The Battleship North Carolina when she was commissioned, when she was laid down, built in Brooklyn, New York, and commissioned she was the first U.S. battleship that had been built in over 16 years.

She was at the time of commissioning the most powerful warship in the world, and she started out by operating in the Atlantic fleet before moving to the Pacific fleet as it became apparent that the Japanese threat in the Pacific required her services to escort carrier battlegroups so she transited to Panama and arrived in Pearl Harbor on the 7th of July 1942 and then began to fight in basically every other major campaign in the Pacific in World War II earning 15 battle stars, a very distinguished record.

Her baptism of fire so to speak was the Guadalcanal campaign, the Battle of the Eastern Solomons, where she also sadly suffered her first combat casualty when George Conlan a young seaman, was killed by a strafing Japanese airplane attacking the carrier strike group. She went on to bombard the islands and participate in all the invasions -- all the ones, the famous ones you've heard of: Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima, Tarawa, Battle of Okinawa, all the major battles of World War II.

She was a key player in all the events that took place there. She was in many, many fights: A total of nine shore bombardments, including a bombardment of mainland Japan.

She was attacked by kamikazes off Okinawa, and she also managed to shoot down a significant number of Japanese airplanes during the war and during her engagement.

She earned credit for 24 Japanese airplanes shot down. This is a very conservative number because in those days you only got credit for shooting down an airplane if you were the only ship shooting at it. Since North Carolina was rarely alone in her combat experience, that was a difficult thing so to get 24 on her own was quite a feat.

She was there in September 1942-45, at the end of the war when the Japanese surrendered and shortly thereafter she transited home and returned to the United States.

The policy in those days was that the ship who'd been there the longest was the first to go home. North Carolina certainly qualified as one of those. So a very distinguished war record for the Battleship North Carolina.

After World War II she served as a training vessel for a short time and then was decommissioned, as were all the U.S. Navy battleships from World War II in the post-war period. But our ship was a powerful symbol in World War II and a huge asset to the war effort.

In June 1947, the battleship was retired to the reserve fleet in Bayonne, New Jersey, to serve another day. In April 1960, however, the Secretary of the Navy announced that the feigned battleship would be dropped from the Navy and sold to the highest bidder up for scrap.

Two Wilmingtonians proposed to rescue the ship so she could serve as the state's memorial to the 11, 000 North Carolinians who died during World War II.

Noted North Carolinian Hugh Morton explains in an early 1960s television interview:

Well of course the original idea was not mine. Jimmy Craig, a member of the American Legion post here in Wilmington, it was his idea and he came to me. I was then a conservation and development member and he wanted me to help him get the powers that be in Raleigh and Washington to do something about it.

So I went to work with him and with other people in Wilmington and across the state to get it done but it was not my original idea. I just worked with other people to get it done.

What were some of the difficulties involved in bringing this vessel here?

Well to begin with we had to raise the money. There was no state funds for the purpose and we raised three hundred and fifteen thousand dollars. About sixty thousand dollars of it came right from here in Wilmington, but when the rest of the state saw that Wilmington was supporting the project why of course they kicked in too and we had a county chairman in every one of the 100 counties of the state and the whole state participated in it.

And another delightful thing about it, 700,000 school children -- we didn't have but a million one hundred thousand school children in the state at that time -- but seven hundred thousand of them gave ten cents each to help bring the USS North Carolina home and it was really a wonderful statewide project.

Do you think it's significant to save these old war vessels for future generations to see the past of America's fighting men?

Well I, I don't speak for all ships but I do feel that I can speak for this one and this is the greatest ship that the Navy ever floated. You feel that i'm prejudiced in the matter and I admittedly am. North Carolina was in every offensive naval engagement of the Pacific war, everything from Guadalcanal to Tokyo bay, and I think it's the greatest ship that that this country ever floated.

We've, we've got something to be proud of. We're just lucky that the that the greatest ship the Navy had happened to be the one that bore the name of our state.

North Carolina Governor Luther Hodges and his successor, Governor Terry Sanford, supported the plan to bring the battleship to Wilmington. Ssanford had the support of the state's teachers during his campaign for office and wanted to involve the school children. Schools across the state were issued certificates for their students' donations and each child got a ticket to visit the battleship.

Mike Wortham, former board member of the Friends of the Battleship, from Henderson, North Carolina, recalls his story of saving the Showboat:

I think we're talking 1960. I was trying to calculate ... uh I think I was in the sixth grade and I don't really remember exactly how i heard about the show um but I, I'm assuming it was in school and I do remember the story that we were asked to donate a dime and being my father

and my uncles and a lot of my family were in the Navy in World War II, I've always been surrounded by Navy, so my dad made sure we had that done and I was looking forward to it.

I'd always been interested in ships and I'd never been on one in my life so the fact that a ship was coming to Wilmington, which seemed like a long way from Henderson, North Carolina, but I was, I was glad to be a part of it.

My dad was excited to be a part of it as, as I was, and so it happened. And I think my very first visit to the ship in 1963. I believe it is.

In fact I remember my dad let me borrow the camera back when we have a 12-exposure roll and I don't know if I got all 12 exposures but I do still have black and white photographs from my very first trip to the ship so uh I wasn't very selective but I still have those pictures.

So um for us to go from Henderson to Wilmington was a treat but I do remember we did have a special trip and I'm sure my dad was behind it. I'm sure we went to Wilmington in 1963 just to go visit the ship. That was probably my initial visit, the one I remember anyway, and over the years as I got older I would go, anytime I went to Wilmington I always went to the ship.

And when my son was growing up I had pictures of him standing by a 16-inch shell by the number one gun turret, and I think I had a picture of him like three, four, five and six and seven and eight years old, so we were going every year during that period of time. So I was visiting the ship at least once a year.

This, this story is in reference to my dime. This is kind of like a personal, a personal story. When we gave our dime. I think, I'm pretty sure we got a free ticket to the ship. Well, I hang on to my ticket and I was ready to use that ticket and everything. I did use it in 1963.

But at that age it was a great thing to have a free ticket and I've always cherished that free ticket. Wish I had that ticket stub today. But um back in uh 2011 I believe it was, we had the ship's birthday in Wilmington and I think it's the 70th birthday, I forgot exactly but anyway, one of the announcements was that the uh the public would be invited on the ship for the original fee, entrance fee, and it was 25 cents. And for the life of me I don't remember it being, I thought it was at least a dollar or something. I said 25 cents, I said I've been coming to this 50 years here now so I mean it was interesting to think that I thought the ticket was worth a whole lot more but it's also interesting to know that back in the beginning evidently it just cost 25 cents to get on the ship.

But anyway I had my first trip was a free ticket

Battleship volunteer David Holloway shares his memories of the Showboat:

My name is David Holloway. I grew up in Wilmington, North Carolina. I was actually from, born in Durham, that's where my father's family was from. My family goes back to the late 1700s up in the Durham, North Carolina, area. We moved down to Wilmington when I was two years old, and I was a student at the original Bradley Creek Elementary School that's on Oleander Drive

where the New Hanover County Extension Arboretum is now. The original building actually burned down in 1982 and it was a red two-story brick building built in 1920s and the second story was added during World War II.

At the time the campaign was started i was about seven years old in the second grade and I remember an announcement was made about this battleship, this big ship being, trying to be saved and to be wanted to bring it to Wilmington and money was collected. I don't remember exactly how it was collected. I think a teacher may have had a box sitting up on the desk and we brought our dimes and nickels and dropped it in, and that's about all I remember of the actual giving when I was a student at Bradley Creek.

I have a slide that my mom took in December of 1961 of my grandmother, my father and me standing at the original, the original gangway, which was um off the port bow close to where the maintenance gangway is now, and we're standing there right at the entrance, just before you go on the ship, so December 1961 was the first time that I went aboard. My grandparents always came down here for Christmas and that was one of the first things we did when the ship was here. My grandfather was in the Navy in World War I, and he wanted to see the ship. And in fact later, in later years when my aunt and uncle would come down from Massachusetts -- my uncle had been a quartermaster on LSTs during World War II in the Pacific, so every time they visited either my grandparents or my aunt and uncle when they visited during the 1960s, we would always go, go aboard the battleship and I went.

I first went in the Navy in 1979, so every time I would come back to visit my dad I would occasionally go see the ship. One of the things that I remember growing up is when my friends and I, when we were teenagers when we would be kind of all like everybody does, you're standing around you talk about what you want to do when you grow up, "When I retire, when I do this, or when I want to do that," I was always half joking and half serious. I said when I retire if I come back to Wilmington, I'm going to paint the battleship. It's, it's ironic that when I did finally retire in 2015 and actually permanently moved back to Wilmington, that in 2017 I actually did come back and volunteer on the battleship.

And it, it means a lot to me because being from Wilmington and having served in the Navy, I actually think of it as my ship because that's when you're in the Navy and you're active duty, you always talked about, well, this is my ship, I'm serving on this ship or that ship, so I think of the battleship as my ship.

In my conversation with David, he shared another memory that is part of the saving the Showboat story:

But another memory i had which was really, it kind of stands out.

Air shows have always been big in Wilmington. Most of the time the big air shows were at during the Azalea Festival and that'd either be the Blue Angels or the Thunderbirds and there'd be a lot of planes out on display out on the apron in front of the original air terminal, which is

where the customs terminal is now. But there was a show in September 1961 that I think was based around the Golden Knights or a skydiving team, and my parents and I, well, we went out there like we always do, going to the air shows, and my mom always took pictures at the air shows using the slide Kodachrome film and my dad would put me on his shoulders so that I could see over the crowd and I remember this, the plane carrying the paratroopers, skydivers.

I remember it taking off and it rose up off the runway maybe 100 or 200 feet and then it just seemed to stop or to stall and slide back a little bit and then just fell on the runway and then slowly um I saw some fire and then the black smoke started coming up.

So that's what I remember about seeing the plane crash and later I learned it was James Craig was on board, who was one of the prominent figures in bringing the ship here to Wilmington.

Fundraisers used the new medium of television to build support for bringing the battleship to Wilmington. Hugh Morton worked with Wayne Jackson at WRAL TV in Raleigh to develop the statewide "Save Our Ship" TV program. It aired on prime time. North Carolina celebrities Andy Griffith, Jane Morgan, and David Brinkley participated locally. Jim Burns helped raise funds on his WECT TV program.

Battleship programs director Danielle Wallace explains the Grandmother's Club:

Thank you, Mary Ames, for having me talk about the Grandmother's Club because I think that this is a true little gem that not a lot of people know about, and I first became aware of it as an intern, a public history graduate intern at UNCW. I was not even working for the battleship at the time and chose this subject for a virtual class that I was doing.

I had to do a virtual exhibit and so I met both you and Kim Sincox, the museum services director, and got to go through these fascinating letters and what I learned is that WECT was very integral to Southeastern North Carolina in the early 60s and the reason for that was because it was really the only television station in the area. And Jim Burns was a popular news anchor with WECT, and then he also had a television show called "The Variety Showcase."

He started the grandmother's club and encouraged people to donate, just like with the school's milk money. It was for the grandmothers to donate quarters and dollars for their grandchildren, so that these names would then be placed on a scroll that would be read on board the ship in a special ceremony.

Now I cannot determine, or was not able to determine, whether or not this ceremony was broadcast or not, but regardless it was very important to these grandmothers to have their grandchildren's names on the scroll as we will see by these charming and wonderful letters that we have.

The first one that I picked says, "Dear Jim, I love your program. You have a charming personality, and your program is one of my favorites. I am enclosing three dollars for the ship

fund for my three grandchildren. Their names are [she lists the names]. Best wishes, Mrs. John F. Powers.”

Wonderful, cute little, cute little note here.

We have another one that says, “Mr. Burns, Here is my [quotation marks] little bit. Hope you get many more quarters for the battleship fund.”

Now this letter really struck me because I loved the idea that she quote she put in quotation marks “little bit” and I ended up naming my virtual exhibit “Every Little Bit,” because like the Battleship’s milk money campaign, this grandmother's campaign I felt was very grassroots and it created this sense of community regarding the battleship that every little bit helped. The dimes, the nickels, the quarters, the dollars. And because people gave their money to the fund, it brought out, I think, a sense of ownership that the people of North Carolina have towards the battleship that I think is singular in the historic ship community because I've not been able to find where another historic ship had such a grassroots effort in saving it.

“Dear Jim, I am sending some money for my grandchildren, and I would like to do a little to bring the ship here. I am a World War veteran, World War I veteran, wounded in Germany in the first world war and lost a son in second world war. I think the ship will be history for the young people. Please put my grandchildren's name on the scroll.”

They felt very much that this was their ship. They were doing their little part. They wanted, because they put their dollar for their grandchild, they felt that they owned that battleship, and it became part of theirs and that is a legacy, I think, that continues to this day.

[Music]

Thank you for listening to Showboat, a series that podcasts on the Battleship NORTH CAROLINA in Wilmington, North Carolina. Visit us online at www.battleshipnc.com.

The Showboat welcomes visitors daily.

in 2020 the Battleship NORTH CAROLINA received a NC CARES Humanities Relief Grant from the North Carolina Humanities Council, www.nchumanities.org.

Funding for NC CARES has been provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities as part of the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act Economic Stabilization Plan.